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# (Re)Affirming Eco-Citizenship: Queer Ecological Reading of Philippine and Ugandan Trans Docu-Narratives

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The exclusion of the trans community from the mainstream discourse has resulted in the members' ongoing battle for their right to eco-citizenship – an assertion of equal opportunities in the natural-social space. Through the framework of queer ecology and by means of gender-discourse analysis, this paper examines two docu-narratives – *Pinoy Transkings* (2015), an advocacy documentary film directed by Dean Airo Salvador E. Dancel, and *The Pearl of Africa* (2016), a webseries documentary film written and directed by Jonny von Wallström – centering on the trans lived realities against the complex socio-religio-political backdrop of two countries, the Philippines and Uganda, respectively. The docu-narratives illustrate the dislocation/displacement of trans individuals from the ecological-social space – a place where they imagine coexisting equally with the hetero-society – caused by gaps in health care services, absence of comprehensive anti-discrimination policies, and dominant religious influence. But the way trans individuals rose to the challenges thrown at them as narrated in the texts implies that they have bravely navigated the social and structural contours of the restricting hetero-ecologies, and that they have remained steadfast in (re)affirming their eco-citizenship by closely examining their current corporeal location, acknowledging the presence of their life partners, and embarking on inward/outward journey leading to self-fulfillment.

**Keywords:** *queer ecology, trans ecology, ecological citizenship, queer environmentalism, trans docu-narrative, gender-discourse analysis*

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## INTRODUCTION

The emergence of trans communities (as well as the lesbian, gay, and bisexual [LGB] communities) could be viewed from historical, cultural, political, and ideological angles. Ancestral narratives about non-binary gender expressions (Robinson, 2019) have been pivotal to our current understanding of contemporary transgender identities and the construction of the contending and conflating gender/queer theories (DeVun & Tortorici, 2018) that attempt to explain the phenomenology of genders – including their spectrum, dynamics, and complexities. Many literary, cultural, as well as socio-historical texts across the world have (re)presented, portrayed, and documented characters and personalities that manifest gender crossing behaviors (including queerness, same-sex erotic attraction, gender androgyny, gender-bending, cross-dressing), such as in theatrical arts (Zeitlin, 1981; Ferris, 1993; Thowok & Ross, 2005; Chiang, 2017), folklore, myths, and legends (Davis, 2002; Calimach, 2002), novels, short stories, and poems (Mengay, 1992; Gustafson, 2002; Boehrer, 2002; Harpring, 2007; Zabus, 2013), auto(bio)ographies and memoirs (Buckton, 1998; Belcher, 2016; Smith, 2016; ), music and films, (Saito, 2014; Inton, 2017), and socio-historical texts (Roden, 2002; Garcia, 2004; Damm, 2005; Quintos, 2012; Sanchez, 2013; Hinchy, 2022). These texts in myriad forms – oral or written, personal or collective – with (re)presentations, portrayals, and/or accounts of subjects with gender-crossing behaviors have greatly contributed to the increasing awareness about the development of trans communities around the world. Moreover, the trans oral history projects – efforts dedicated to the collection and sharing of the diverse oral, written, and digital trans archival materials (narratives, biographies, artistic expressions, activities, among others) – have been instrumental in making the fragmented and collective narratives of trans communities visible in trans oral history scholarships and endeavors (Murphy et al., 2010; Brown, 2015; Knan & Hakuba, 2020).

The foundation of trans communities has also been closely tied to social movements and activism that have been either critical of or progressive about the trans people. While most of these pioneering advocacies for transgender people were concentrated in the West: for example, the Scientific-Humanitarian Committee (S-HC), a Europe-based political organization founded by Magnus Hirschfeld in 1897 to promote social justice for and improve the lives of the LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual,

and transgender) communities (Stryker, 2004), and the Street Transgender Action Revolutionaries (STAR), a U.S.-based organization started by Sylvia Rivera, Marsha P. Johnson, and Bubble Rose Lee in 1970 (after the 1969 Stonewall riots – the pivotal period for the US liberation movements) to provide shelter for homeless young transgender people living on the streets (Evans, 2015)–there have also been accounts that showed similar NGO (nongovernment organization)-initiated advocacy efforts in African and Asian regions in recent years (Thoreson, 2013; Khubchandani, 2016).

Trans struggles against the socio-political structures whether in local or global context have always been the main discourse of trans communities that are not only grounded on ‘trans sisterhood/trans brotherhood’ (Phillips, 2020; Kichler, 2021) to build and show support and coalition with one another (Chamberland, 2015) and to move forward the trans equality agenda (Stryker, 2006), but also the trajectory of this sense of community is constantly geared towards ending human rights abuses and violence against and criminalization (due to gender expressions) of the members and of the community as a whole. In this sense, trans communities can then be aptly seen as a social movement, an activism in itself because the efforts of their members are “responses to centuries of persecution by church, state, and medical authorities” (Morris, 2019, p. 2). Trans struggles have not been addressed specifically because institutions look at trans people as belonging to the collective LGBT communities and that trans people’s own narratives of struggle are always assumed to be not exclusively theirs but rather part of the larger LGBT discourse. While it is true that issues concerning trans communities intertwine with the complex gender spectrum, it must be understood that trans people have specific needs such as access to medical care services (mental health as well as psychosocial and trans-affirmative care) especially during transitioning (McCann & Sharek, 2016; Carroll & Mizock, 2017), and legal, economic, and employment services (Poteat et al., 2017).

African and Asian trans people’s realities are illustrative cases of these social and structural attacks. Scholarship has shown that trans individuals from these regions, despite growing visibility both in the physical and virtual environments, remained marginalized, discriminated, and oppressed on many different levels: from family, to cultural, to religious, to political power structures, which espouse the heteronormative categorization of sex as

female/male as natural and, therefore, acceptable. Although legal measures have been endorsed to provide safe and equal space for the trans people, most of these local and national policies are “isolated, non-systemic, and insufficient” (Divan, 2016, p. 4). While there are already countries in these regions that lean toward building trans-inclusive societies, there are still that remain with “national laws criminalizing same-sex [conduct and/or] forms of gender expression that target transgender and gender nonconforming people” (Human Rights Watch, 2019, para. 1).

In Ugandan and Philippine contexts, for example, trans individuals are placed at a disadvantaged position because of Uganda’s anti-LGBT law and the Philippines’ lack of a national legislation meant to protect LGBT rights. Structural violence, discrimination, and hate crimes leading to social injustices against and, much worse, killings of trans individuals and other gender variant people have been reported in these countries (Myles & Lewis, 2019; Kritz, 2021). Ugandan trans individuals have long been victimized by political and social violence and abuse, exposed to higher level of risk of human immuno-deficiency virus (HIV), muted in collective health discourses resulting in their lack of access to treatment and care services (King et al., 2019), and subjected to social exclusion, rejection, condemnation, and displacement (Thapa, 2015; McGuirk & Niedzwiecki, 2017). Similar lived realities are evident among trans individuals in the Philippines wherein they have experienced self-stigma and internalized transphobia (Reyes et al., 2016), dilemmas posed by the lack of legislations that should have served as their support as they go through the usually complex process of transitioning (Castañeda, 2018), and limited health care facilities that would have provided gender-affirming services as well as basic treatment and care specially for trans individuals living with HIV (Restar et al., 2020). Such lived experience of social and structural discrimination, oppression, and inequalities usually resulted in their complex dislocation from the natural-social space and eventually in their loss of eco-citizenship.

Looking at trans as displaced/dislocated bodies/communities due to social and structural abuses and violence (Munir, 2019), this paper examines selected documentary films (henceforth, docu-narratives) that present the lived experiences of trans people in two countries Uganda and Philippines – the former having institutionalized anti-LGBT policies while the latter having no comprehensive policies that would safeguard trans

rights. Although trans lived experiences in these countries are not one and the same nor representative of the total trans population in this individual nation or even the world at large, the purpose of this paper, however, is not to show the contrasting realities between Uganda's and Philippines' trans narratives but to bring to the fore how trans lives are sewn together in the complex threads of socio-religio-political realities. Guided by Mortimer-Sandilands and Erickson's (2010) view of ecology as environmental politics, this paper looks at the lives of trans individuals as dislocated/displaced queer bodies as narrated in selected documentary films *The Pearl of Africa* (2016) and *Pinoy Transkings* (2015) – questioning further the well-established pattern of heterosexist environmentalism as a politicized and hegemonized landscape rife with normalized and institutionalized stigma, rejection, and discrimination against trans people. Specifically, this paper – with special attention is paid to the narrative element (textual aspect) of the materials – attempts to draw common issues confronting the Ugandan and Filipino trans individuals which have deprived them of their right to eco-citizenship and, at the same time, have prompted them to continue to (re)affirm their rightful place in the ecological-social space. As a limitation, this paper does not look at documentary films as genre but rather focuses on the textual representation of dominance-subjugation embedded in the trans docu-narratives. Furthermore, in this discussion the umbrella term 'transgender' includes the "full range of people whose gender identity and/or gender role does not conform to what is typically associated at birth" (American Psychological Association [APA], 2015, p. 7). Meanwhile, the term 'transexual' refers to "individuals who desire medical interventions to align their anatomy with their gender identity [and] has been used synonymously with transgender" (Turban et al., 2017, p. 5). The more encompassing term 'trans' is widely used to refer to both transgender and transexual individuals. In my discussion the terms 'trans' and 'transgender' are used interchangeably and mean one and the same.

## **Queer Ecology and Trans Lived Realities**

The pairing of queer theory and ecology is not a new direction on the intersection of sex and nature (natural spaces and ecological practices) because, historically, gendered ecology had been acknowledged as a potential

site of queer resistance and exploration (Mortimer-Sandilands & Erickson, 2010). But to bring in new insights on the longtime (but silent) relationship of queers and nature, Mortimer-Sandilands and Erickson countered the view of ecology as science and, instead, put forward the notion of ecology as ‘environmental politics.’ The suggestion of queer ecology, then, is that there must be alternative ways to understand ‘ecological knowledge, spaces, and politics’ and how these can be used to challenge ‘hetero-ecologies’ from the perspectives of gender-nonconforming positions. One of the main functions of queer ecology, therefore, is to examine the intersectionality of sex and nature by developing a paradigm on sexual politics inclusive of the ‘natural world and its biosocial components,’ and on environmental politics reflective of the practices wherein “sexual relation[s] organize and influence” the interplay between “the material world of nature and our perceptions, experiences, and constitutions of that world” (p. 5). In short, queer ecology endorses not only the concept of queerizing ecology but also more significantly the idea of “greening queer politics” (p. 22).

Along this line of thought, Anderson et al. (2012, pp. 83-84), in a roundtable discussion, explained that queering ecology includes, but is not limited to, the “challenges to notions of normalization/naturalization and redefinition of queerness and other sexualities; and establishment of homes, spaces, and/or ecosystems as queer-friendly or at least productive of non-heteronormative lifestyles.” To respond to the systemic violence against queer bodies in the ecological space, for example, Sbicca (2012) reimagined ecology as having unstable ‘spatial boundaries’ which makes its structure vulnerable to changes; thus, Sbicca introduced the concept of ‘eco-queer movement’ to deconstruct the existing ecology of the straight society as well as to build an inclusive and fluid environment where personal and collective transformations occur. Such reimagination of ecology is also echoed in the work of Gray (2017) which suggested that any ecological structure can be free from its natural components by acknowledging the right of queer people to sustainable living and their shared responsibility in protecting the environment. Questioning the urban ecological structure is central to Heynen’s (2018) idea of feminist and queer ‘urban political ecology’ positioned side by side with the development of unequal urban nature. For Heynen, it is imperative to build a wide-ranging form of ‘heterodox’ positions in order to abolish the current understanding of and the politics

within the ‘uneven urban nature’ that continues to breed complex problems specially among women and queer city dwellers.

By challenging hetero-ecologies, the ‘green queer politics’ opens possibility for various ecological-social spaces to be more welcoming, encompassing, and accepting of gender non-conforming individuals. The conceptual understanding, then, of the term ecological-social space (henceforth, natural social space or eco-social space) in this paper means any natural (or human-made) landscapes, contours, and structures which are both accessible and habitable (domicile ecology) for both queer and non-queer people to perform social, cultural, religious, political, among other human acts and practices. Thus, spaces such as the homes, schools, communities, nations, etc., are also referred to as ecological-social spaces because, although they are human-made structures, they provide ‘biosocial’ affordances to humans. However, when these ecological-social spaces are governed by power-knowledge structure, dominance-subjugation relationship occur (Foucault, 1980). For instance, when heteronormativity takes control a system, sexual/gender minorities are relegated to society’s periphery, losing their opportunities to coexist equally and perform their biosocial capacities with the rest of humanity.

The heteronormative assumption, then, that what is natural is right and acceptable, blurs what relationship there is between nature and gender-nonconforming (gender variant) individuals or those people whose ‘gender expressions’ do not comply with the female/male or woman/man binary (Turban et al., 2018). To be queer therefore is deemed unnatural, and queer individuals are undeserving of the natural space. Expanding from this assumption is my own interrogation of the subtle, if not outright, dislocation/displacement of trans individuals in the hetero-ecological space where they are mostly rendered as present/absent, included/excluded, visible/invisible, among other binary oppositions describing the polarized trans lived realities.

### **Trans Lived Experiences in *The Pearl of Africa* and *Pinoy Transkings*: Method, Analysis, and Discussion**

*The Pearl of Africa*, written and directed by Jonny von Wallström, is a 2016 documentary film, which was shown at the Hot Doc International Documentary Festival in North America and at the Joburg Film Festival

in South Africa in the same year. The 90-minute film centers on the life of Cleopatra, a Ugandan transgender woman who was born male but transitioned into a woman despite her country's hostile political and religious sentiments against lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender (LGBT) people. The film follows the personal and social challenges of Cleopatra and her fiancé Nelson as both confront their country's anti-LGBT policies and prepare for Cleopatra's gender reassignment surgery overseas. Meanwhile, *Pinoy Transkings* (2015), directed by Dean Airo Salvador E. Dancel, is an advocacy documentary film produced by M.A. Media Studies major in Broadcast students from the University of the Philippines. The 50-minute long film highlights series of interviews with Filipino transgender men like Nil (the founder of Transman Pilipinas, an advocacy group) and Aiza (a celebrity and trans advocate), and several other trans men whose narratives lead up to the much anticipated 'King of Trans,' the Philippines' first ever trans man pageant.

In *The Pearl of Africa*, the story is told through first-person narrative structured in non-linear cinematic rendering, giving the viewers a lens to magnify the complex personal life of the narrator. In the same way, in *Pinoy Transkings*, the personal stories of Filipino trans men are unraveled through first-person narration but only through a series of individual interviews, which in turn transformed into a collective storytelling text once narrators reach the semblance and connection in each other's experiences. It is through this first-person storytelling and interview format, respectively, where trans narrators are provided a space to express and embody their own experiences. In other words, their narratives are a voice that echoes their current situations in and sentiments about the hetero-ecological power structures which prescribe norms that exclude them from the mainstream discourse on equality. Foucault's (1980) power/knowledge relations may be invoked to explain that as long as heterosexist environmentalism exists, trans individuals will be left with no choice but to stay at the periphery of the hetero-society while enduring the issues confronting them, such as inequalities in the political, economic, and social spheres, and denial of opportunities to reach their full potential as human beings.

To reveal such issues confronting trans individuals in the two documentary films, critical gender-discourse analysis was helpful in the process of tracing the "structural relationship of dominance, discrimination,



power, and control” (Martin & Woodak, 2003, as cited in Caballero-Mengíbar, 2015, p. 39) vis-à-vis gender as constructed/reflected or negotiated/performed, or produced/reproduced (Paltridge, 2013) in the selected docu-narratives. As an emergent paradigm under the rubric of critical discourse analysis, gender-discourse analysis (Joachim & Schneiker, 2012) here is used as a queer method (Brim & Ghaziani, 2016) replete with its own nuances and constraints, with the analysis and discussion of the textual meanings shifting from the normative to self-reflexive process (Knoblauch, 2021) – acknowledging my own subjectivity as “fluid rather than fixed” (Nicholls, 2009, p. 118). Thus, to filter my own subjective textual interpretation, I relied heavily on the study’s theoretical framework and used relevant literature to validate the discussion. However, this process sometimes blends my own observation with that of the relevant literature used, an unavoidable consequence of any queer analytical method. As a gender-discourse study, this paper examined the two documentary films by highlighting the materials’ narrative as social text, following the suggestion of Grant and Sloniowski (1998, as cited in Sapino & Hoenisch, 2011) that documentaries – other than its aesthetic and filmic elements as a work of cinema – shall be read as documentaries because despite their “creative treatment of reality” (Umobuarie, 2008, p. 1), their storytelling remains a representative whole or segment of the subject’s personal and social life presented in a world of words. Thus, in reading documentaries, it is important to navigate how the narrative’s textual context (Huisman et al., 2006) shape and embody the lived experience of the narrated subject. This conceptual understanding of documentaries, then, helps the analytical delimitation of this paper. Meanwhile, the use of only two materials for analysis is another delimitation in the sense that most critics of discourse analysis would demand for a large corpus of texts, albeit a “misconception” (Taylor, 2013, p. 68). Since this paper’s main aim is to interrogate the lived realities of trans people within possible time and space using a critical theory (i.e., queer ecology), two docu-narratives could still be a potential site to ‘build, support, and theorize new arguments’ (Taylor, 2013).

Moreover, the interpretive-analytical strategies involve basic coding questions as suggested by Titcher et al. (2000, as cited in Keller, 2012), such as (a) open coding which centers on the text itself and what it implies, and (b) axial coding which extracts the actions/interactions of the narrators/

story tellers and the time and space these actions/interactions are performed, and how such shape the events. These strategies involve analysis from the word level to sentence sequences and their references to the “reality of the world” (Keller, 2012, p. 119) of the narrators, and supplemented with related literature.

The analyzed docu-narratives reveal socio-cultural and religio-political issues confronting trans communities in Uganda and Philippines, which can be thematically summarized into (a) gaps in health care services; (b) lack of legislation meant to protect trans rights; and (c) religious stigma that questions their potential as humans.

The first issue is the gaps in health care services. The transgender communities remain “underserved and stigmatized,” resulting in their health being largely neglected. Thus, most of them resort to self-medicate hormones at a young age, and this usually places them at greater health risk (World Health Organization [WHO], 2016). In *Pinoy Transkings*, the Filipino trans men narrated how the country’s lack of health care services for the trans community pushes the members outside the border of health and safety. Nil, an advocate of trans rights and one of the subjects of the docu-narrative, echoes how the limited access to professional health care services had led trans individuals to acquire hormones from the black market and self-medicate hormones without proper support from health professionals: “*We used to get testosterone from the black market 3 years ago. We never had proper guidance before. There were no trans-friendly doctors, no endocrinologists, no gynecologists focusing on trans men.*” The same health care issues, such as ‘limited funding and resources, professional training and research, and facilities that impact rural trans patients’ were faced by African trans communities (Wilson et al., 2014). In *The Pearl of Africa*, Cleopatra, due to her country’s lack of inclusive health care services for trans individuals, was forced to go overseas to seek professional medical support for her transition: “*I’ve always known that Thailand is haven for transgender people... They have these nice, relatively cheap doctors that can go for transitioning. For having surgery and all that.*”

The lack of legislation meant to protect trans rights is the second issue facing trans individuals. In both the African and Philippine contexts, the transgender communities have become increasingly visible both in the physical and virtual space, presenting to the public their lived identity.

But such visibility does not necessarily translate to total acceptance of the trans individuals since cases of discrimination and oppression based on their gender are still rising (Thapa, 2015; Kattari et al., 2017; McGuirk & Niedzwiecki, 2017; King et al., 2019). In *Pinoy Transkings*, the trans men have been marginalized in various social spaces due to the lack of legal protection. They were not only displaced in their workplaces, parks, gym, etc., but have also been continuously subjected to misgendering because there is no law that would support their lived identity. As disclosed by Nil: *"Not everyone understands, and you have to explain all the time and they say, 'You're still a girl, right?' It's hard to explain especially to close-minded people or those who don't know anything about it ..."* Echoing almost the same sentiment was Prince, who described the challenges he encountered with his official documents in applying for a job: *"But once I try to find work locally or overseas, my gender would be questioned. I don't seek jobs for female but only for male. My [official] documents pose the most difficulty."* Even in places such as the gym, transmen still feel uncomfortable because of stigma. They are anxious about other people finding out they are trans men. Nil narrated that he tried using different names in various places just to avoid discrimination: *"I'm on 'stealth' at the gym. They don't know I'm trans...I want to avoid discrimination... That's why sometimes I change names, depending on the place where I go. I don't do it just for myself, but also for my family because it's really difficult."* Another trans man, Popoy, explained why trans men prefer to go 'stealth' and why it is important to their identity: *"Stealth is being seen as a cisgender male or biomale since birth. You don't want to be known as a transgender male. You hide because you don't want to be outed as a trans man by everyone."*

The same form of discrimination reverberates in *The Pearl of Africa*. It is clearly shown that Uganda's unacceptance of the members of the LGBT community is outright political and systemic. In a video snippet, a reporter can be heard saying: *"The anti-gay protesters shouted and waved placards ... It was the biggest demonstration against homosexuals in Uganda since the Bill was introduced..."* Moreover, many trans individuals lost their jobs (or have difficulty land a job), compromised their relationship with friends and families, abandoned their homes for a safer space, and even remained hidden behind the visage of their own identity because there is no law that would uphold these rights. Cleopatra was dismissed from work and was forced to

leave her country after she bravely appeared on the cover of a tabloid with the caption that reads *"How We Become Homosexuals."* As she recalled: *"...I was on the front of the page of the Red Pepper. I officially lost my job and several of my family and friends, fearing for their safety abandoned me... [W]e've been living behind a closed gate. Closed windows..."* Securing her safety, she left her country to seek temporary refuge in another place: *"I have left Uganda knowing that oh I will come back in three days, or four days, or one week. And here I was leaving, and I had no hopes of coming back. It was sad because I boarded the plane alone. I had left my boyfriend home. You know, it felt final."*

The third and last issue is the dominant religious influence. Religious doctrines are usually critical of transgender people by denouncing their gender expression as 'unnatural' act and a 'sin' (Capaldi, 2020). The trans narrators in the selected docu-narratives viewed religion as an influencing factor that hampered them to attain their full potential as humans. In *Pinoy Transkings*, a video snippet showing a pastor leading a group of protesters exclaimed that: *"We're here because we have a concern for the homosexual community. We are concerned about the gay and tomboy community [...] We believe that through Jesus Christ a homosexual can change..."* The messages on their placards seem to condemn the members of the LGBTQ community: *"Sexual immorality; the road to AIDS and Hell!" "Only Jesus Christ can save you from sin and hell!" "Thousands of Ex-homosexuals have experienced the life-changing power of Jesus Christ." "Turn from sin! Turn to Jesus!" "Warning! God will judge the sexually immoral! Hebrew 13:4."* Similarly, religious doctrine is one of the key drivers in Ugandan political decisions "with biblical referencing and politicians publicly associating with ecclesiastics" (Regan, 2014, p. 10). Such religious power/control impacts how members of the LGBTQ community are viewed as deviants from the moral norm. In *The Pearl of Africa*, a video snippet showing a protester supporting the Anti-Homosexuality Bill can be heard saying: *"I have read the Bible, in Leviticus... It is said that homosexuals should be put to death..."*

These narratives of social/structural abuse and violence in the two docu-narratives are unique to every trans person, but such individual experience amplify the collective struggles of trans people in Uganda and Philippines, respectively, as well as around the world.

## Positioning Trans Struggles in the Context of Queer Eco-Citizenship

Trans ecological rhetoric showed that trans people are always in an intimate connection with environment and nature (Vakoch, 2020). Trans ecology comes in different tropes: trans and road narratives (road being a landscape that allows for introspection) (Seymour, 2016); trans and wilderness (escape from the imposing structures of the urban life) (Meyer & Borrie, 2013; García Zarranz, 2019); trans and urban landscapes (potential space for belonging and visibility) (Doderer, 2011). However, much of the discussions about trans ecology illustrate trans people's dislocation/displacement in spaces where they are supposed to be freely performing their gender identities. This is so because their being trans "have been frequently and historically" associated to being "unnatural" like how it is illustrated in the two analyzed docu-narratives (Vakoch, 2020, p. 1).

The structural relation between heteronormative environmentalism and trans individuals is evident in the two docu-narratives, *Pinoy Transkings* and *The Pearl of Africa*. Issues such as the lack of legislation, gaps in health care services, and biased religious influence have displaced/dislocated the trans individuals in the ecological-social space. This experience of spatial alienation by the trans community in the hetero-ecological settings sprang from the notion that they are unnatural, vilifying further their ecological citizenship or the recognition of the "universal principles in relation to environmental rights" (Christoff, 1996, p. 161), rendering them as 'second class citizen' (Moody, 2019) whose 'natural' existence has always been a subject of criticism and questioning by the hegemonic and transphobic thinking which espouses the notion that the world operates only through heteronormative system – as the 'natural standard' – and that all other forms of sexual orientations/gender identities/expressions outside the female/male binary do not count as valid, acceptable, or natural. But once trans right to eco-citizenship is recognized, only then can they enjoy equal opportunities and perform shared responsibility in "environmental space" (Dobson, 2007, p. 282) – although, for them, such right remains elusive.

Trans people's experience of displacement/dislocation in ecological-social settings opens up space for discussion on 'greening queer politics' (Mortimer-Sandilands & Erickson, 2010) by challenging heteronormative

expectations (Anderson, 2012), dismantling eco-spatial boundaries (Sbicca, 2012), acknowledging queer people in collective responsibility of environmental protection (Gray, 2017), and listening to heterodox positions (Heynen, 2018). Showing semblance with what ecofeminists term as 'feminist ecological citizenship,' which advances the notion of connecting women to nature (e.g., equal participation in society) (Macgregor, 2010), trans ecological citizenship acknowledges not only the relations between the trans individual and the state but also their relations among trans themselves, and the rest of society (Jagers & Matti, 2010). This means that ecological citizenship looks at the complex locations of trans citizens in relation to the various spaces where they move and make sense of their lives. These spaces can be the nation that designs laws which govern the actions of its citizens, the private/public spheres, or individuals as citizens, etc.

### **(Re)affirming Trans Eco-Citizenship**

Despite experiences of displacement/dislocation in the ecological-social space as revealed through their individual nation's anti-LGBT policies and lack of comprehensive legislation meant to protect their rights, the trans individuals in the analyzed texts persistently rose to both personal and social challenges by (re)affirming their eco-citizenship in their own terms, specifically through close examination of their corporeal location in relation to the ecological-social space, acknowledging the presence of their life partners, and taking personal and collective (inward/outward) journey toward self-fulfillment.

In *The Pearl of Africa*, the documentary opens with a biblical verse which reads: "*There is neither Jews nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus - Galatians 3:28.*" Then, the text fades slowly ushering in the next scene showing a woman lying on the hospital bed. A man is watching by her bedside as the medical persons are attending to her. The next scene is an abstract rendition of an animated human silhouette striding in high heels and eventually beaten up by another human figure. A few seconds later, a series of visual frames introduce a woman putting on make-up; men riding their motorcycles in the countryside; and a couple walking gleefully under the Ugandan sun. The soundtrack in the background plays languorously as one frame

changes onto another until the song dissolves slowly. What grabs the screen next is the word 'Uganda' spread in capital letters against the backdrop of a glimpsing sun streaming its rays across the African natural landscapes. Finally, a human voice throws the first few spoken lines in the film, which compellingly begins with I: *"I was born here, a land with beautiful mountains and the deep tough forests, onto wild animals... the golden lions, and elephants great. A country ... rich in diversity, ethnicity, gender, flora, and fauna. In all its richness – as a people and as a nation, we still struggle to ... and appreciate this diversity. Instead, our people have left all these..."* The voice belongs to Cleopatra, describing in total awe of Uganda's natural wonders as revealed through its mountains and diverse ecology of living things. As she speaks these words, she might as well be reexamining her own relationship with the natural world because after all she *"was born here,"* and thus invoking her natural right to eco-citizenship. Living a life as transgender, she never had the chance to fully navigate the ecological-social space free from discrimination and rejection because of her identity. It can be assumed, then, that by this close examination of her physical location in relation to the Ugandan natural landscape, Cleopatra comes to the realization that she – being both "biophysically and socially formed" (Malone & Ovenden, 2017, p. 1) – also rightfully belongs to her nation. Meanwhile, Cleopatra and her partner, Nelson, frequently escape out to an open field, an idyllic place away from the hustle and bustle of the suburban life. This piece of land as a natural space affords Cleopatra (and Nelson) an opportunity to discover solace from the beautiful view of the Ugandan landscape and its natural environments. But more importantly, the space also functions as a sanctuary of freedom, a safe abode where they can unrestrictedly talk about their country's stand against homosexuality, their aspirations as partners, and Cleopatra's plan to go through medical transition. Highlighting the freedom of 'naturalness' experienced by Cleopatra and Nelson in that empty tract of land (rural) versus the restricting anti-homosexual policies imposed in the nation (urban) might be viewed as part of the larger "simultaneous examination of multiple dichotomies [of queer ecologies]" (Schnabel et al., 2016, p. 321) – nature/culture, human/animal, rural/urban, and heteronormative/queer.

The way trans individuals (re)affirm their ecological citizenship is also revealed through the voices of their life partners. In *Pinoy Transkings*, Aiza (who later went by the lived name Ice), a celebrity and advocate for LGBTQ



rights, claimed that his wife had completed him as a person: “*Liza made me live myself more. There are times that I don’t want to look at myself in the mirror. I’m impressed with her... Liza said: ‘I never saw you as a woman ever since we got together, this is what I saw in you.’ ... In terms of the lovemaking, of course I have insecurities in that aspect. She makes me feel it’s not just about that. You can make passionate love even without that. That’s what makes me happy.*” Aiza’s sheer insecurities in terms of lovemaking with his partner could be framed within the context of ‘nature-nostalgia’ as a form of queer melancholy which, according to Mortimer-Sandilands echoing Judith Butler, is crucial for “queer attachments and politics [wherein] melancholia concerns the ways in which compulsory heterosexuality institutes gender itself as a melancholic condition” (Mortimer-Sandilands, 2010, p. 339). It can be assumed, then, that this ‘melancholia’ of insecurities in lovemaking experienced by Aiza springs from the claim that sex among the gender-nonconforming individuals is seen as taboo and unnatural in the hetero-ecology because anything queer disrupts the ‘naturalness’ of gender/sexual norms. This has resulted in transgender individuals to lose their connection (dislocation/displacement) in the natural world. Thinking these internalized insecurities as a melancholic condition, the transgender man grieves for a fact that he could not sexually satisfy his partner during lovemaking, which in the heteronormative claims is a naturalized exclusive heterosexual act. But by listening to Liza’s affirmation of his own worth as a person, Aiza in turn reaffirms his location in the ecological-social space by reassuring himself that ‘passionate lovemaking’ could still happen because Liza has seen the ‘man’ in him since in the beginning of their relationship. Such reassurance amplifies the transgender identity as natural and brings into Aiza’s consciousness that to be a trans man does not make him a little less natural or detached from the natural world. In fact, Liza seeing Aiza as he is, (re)affirms the latter’s place in the ecological-social space; thus, (re)claiming ecological citizenship.

Meanwhile, in the *Pearl of Africa*, Nelson, Cleopatra’s partner, demonstrated how his relationship with Cleopatra opened his eyes to the lived truths of the trans community in general. The romantic connection that Nelson established with Cleopatra (re)affirms the latter’s ecological citizenship: “*The transgender community finds themselves on the crossroads because they don’t conform to what the society is used to and how much the society expects of them. But this society is doing that because they have not*



*actually been enlightened... So, it's when you really get to know more and live in the community, share their lives, their experiences, their thoughts. Then you get the deeper meaning and fully understand between gender...."* Both Aiza's and Cleopatra's life partners further strengthen trans ecological citizenship. The partners' presence bears witness to the lived experiences of the trans individuals whose struggles are testimonies of their aspirations to attain an equally accepting ecological-social space.

Lastly, trans people's displacement/dislocation in the natural-social space has led them to take on either personal or collective journey toward self-fulfillment – their own way to (re)affirm ecological citizenship. Such journey may be described as moving away from one's own nation (outward) or toward into communal experience/queer kinship (inward). In the context of queer displacement, Cruz-Malave and Manalansan IV (2002, as cited in Wesling, 2008, p. 33) on a transnational framework that described the "diasporic queer subject" as a "doubly mobile or transgressive body, who challenges not simply the repertoire of localized categories but the stability of national identity itself." The trans subjects – as transgressive queer bodies – in the two documentary films disrupt the idea of a 'stable' identity of their individual nation's heterosexist environmentalism through inward/outward journey. In *The Pearl of Africa*, Cleopatra's narrative of leaving Uganda to seek refuge and ensure her safety in another place, and her ultimate departure overseas for sex reassignment both signify that, although her experience of displacement/dislocation in her home as eco-social space, it also empowers her to (re)affirm that same space as hers. Leaving her home country and her loved ones behind allows her to even fight for her rights and (re)claim her space: *"I used to get scared to get to some places, because I was scared to find the violence there. But now I don't care, I'll still go out and claim my space."*

This journey narrative is also experienced by the trans men in *Pinoy Transkings*. However, compared to Cleopatra's cross-border journey, the Filipino trans men's narratives highlight moving-toward-trans kinship wherein the act of moving away from the hounding culture of social stigma and discrimination has redirected the 'individual self' toward building 'brotherhood.' For example, their participation in the *King of Trans* which is the first ever trans man pageant in the country and their affiliation in *TransMan Pilipinas* as an advocacy organization gave them a sense of belongingness and a collective voice to inform and educate the public about

trans lives. Here the journey narrative can be illustrated by the “self” moving towards a safer space afforded by the “collective identity” or brotherhood, which they do not normally receive or experience outside these platforms. Furthermore, the metaphor of ‘brotherhood’ – as a collective voice/identity, a sense of belongingness, a home, a community – is bound to the idea of ‘communal space/communal life’ (Ünan, 2015) as evident in the social dynamics of the pageant and the organization. Popoy confesses that joining in the pageant had not only been his way to promote awareness about the lived realities of trans individuals but also along the way has helped him overcome his insecurities as trans: *“The reason I joined in the pageant is because I want to help; it’s for a cause. And my brothers (in the organization) joined too, so it seemed okay. At first, I was timid but I still went on with it to overcome my shyness. It also became my motivation to lose weight. So that’s what motivated me to join, and also to get used to facing many people.”* Angelo Ross also shared that the *King of Trans* pageant completed him being a man and gave him a sense of self-pride: *“I joined in the King of Trans because this is where I felt whole and proud that I am a man.”* Likewise, Le Andre believed that the *TransMan Pilipinas* organization empowered him to gain a positive outlook about his identity because of the strong support system he received from the members: *“When I discovered the organization Transman Pilipinas, the people who would eventually support me, that’s where I found my happiness. I found who I am. I found my home.”*

Both inward (into queer kinship/brotherhood) and outward (cross-border) journey functioned as catalysts for the Filipino trans men and Cleopatra, respectively, to (re)affirm their ecological citizenship. By finding refuge in a new land or forming new queer alliance, they also discover new ecological-social territories which (re)affirm their eco-citizenship.

## CONCLUSION

The widespread discrimination of trans individuals – whether due to institutionalized anti-LGBT policies or lack of comprehensive legislations to safeguard trans rights as in the case of Uganda and Philippines, respectively – in the natural-social space meant denying them of their ecological citizenship. Both docu-narratives, *The Pearl of Africa* and *Pinoy Transkings* – despite having been produced several years ago – remain relevant in the

current discussion of trans dislocation/displacement in the ecological-social space. This is so because the narratives they shared does not only reflect their lived realities in their individual nation but might also echo the collective struggles of trans communities worldwide.

The narrators' personal stories whether narrated individually (Cleopatra) or collectively (Filipino trans men) sketched out crucial events that constitute larger life experiences of the trans people in general, particularly highlighting issues such as the lack of national legislation to ensure equal opportunities, lack of access to health care services, and biased religious influence. Through these challenges, however, the trans people have come face to face with their lives, (re)defined what safe eco-social space is, at least in their own terms, and (re)affirmed/asserted their ecological citizenship by closely examining their personal location in relation to heteronormative environmentalism, acknowledging the role of their life partners who bear witness to their struggles and triumphs, and taking an inward/outward journey leading to the attainment of their full potential as human beings.

Both docu-narratives illustrate how trans people bravely navigate the social and structural contours of the restricting hetero-ecologies. Despite the negative sentiments they received in their individual nation, trans individuals reimagined eco-social spaces in trans-kinship, in their life partners, and in the process of transitioning. By (re)affirming their eco-citizenship, they do not only greenize the politics of hetero-ecology but also queerize the hetero-structures that are unwelcoming of the trans agenda such as advancing equality, living a productive non-heteronormative lifestyle, and making trans ecology safer, more inclusive, and habitable environment free from any hegemonic control.

Lastly, given the theoretical and methodological limitations, and the unrepresentativeness of the number of materials used in this paper, future studies on trans ecology may consider larger corpus of trans materials and explore these texts using other queer lenses and methodologies.

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