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From Aura to *Awra*: Toward a Tropical Queer Decolonial Performativity in the Philippines

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Abstract

If *dating* is to literary texts, *awra* is to queer decolonial performances. From the works of Bienvenido Lumbera and Walter Benjamin, this paper discusses the queering of the term *aura* and how it operates in tropical performances and discourses, through *beki* (gay language), as *awra*. The sign "*awra*" is resuscitated from the imperial lexis and queered by the topical imagination in the Philippine media. Three media texts expound these claims: *Awra* Briguela's song "*Clap, Clap, Clap, Awra*"; Maymay Entrata's dance "*Amakabogera*"; and the noontime TV game show "*Beklaban*," a portmanteau of *Beki* (gay) and *laban* (fight). The paper highlights moments from these media texts that deploy and perform the term "*awra*" showing how it functions as a slippery, dynamic, and exuberant queer performance. The local queer tongue of the Philippine LGBT community highjacks this word from the Western epistemology and uses it in queer tropical performances, thus providing the opportunity to theorize a queer decolonial performativity. In this case, as *aura* becomes *awra*, it is not just appropriation, nor merely reviving of the word and its sense; rather, it is a reincarnation born into new contexts and politics.

Keywords: Aura, *Awra*, Queer Decoloniality, Queer Tropics, Queer Performance, Philippines

One might subsume the eliminated element in the term "aura" and go on to say: that which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction is the aura of the work of art.
—Walter Benjamin, *The Art of Mechanical Reproduction*

Pangunahin ang kultura ng Pilipinas bilang puwersang tumitiyak sa dating ng isang akda. (Philippine culture is the first defining moment of power that secures the aesthetic value of an art.)
—Bienvenido Lumbera, *Dating*

Growing Up Queer in the Tropics

The study table in my house is next to a window that usually amuses me with everyday events. From the *magtataho*¹ vendor walking under the mango trees in summer, to the housewives loitering in the afternoon while indulging in their Halo-halo(s),² to street kids playing different games, this window offers me a glimpse into the outside world. The outside allows me to witness the performances of different cultural signs and symbols that we most often ignore for their mundanity. These performances include an instance where I accidentally witness the kids outside my house playing a game that they learned from a local TV show. On that one afternoon, these small boys are flamboyantly shaking their hips and waving their hands like beauty queens while singing “*bekla, bekla, aawra ka ba?*”³ a line from the noontime game show “*Beklaban*.”⁴ No one knows what exactly these kids think about their own gender and sexuality or how they understand these aspects of their lives, as I do not want to assume as well, but these performances are indeed queer in nature. It situates me in the front row of live queer tropical performance, a type of performance that combines elements of queerness with tropical elements or themes. Further, it is a symptom of changes that are happening on our daily lives from the most masculine and violent *Pinoy* street games that I grew up with such as *bangsak*⁵, *patintero*,⁶ touching ball⁷, and *tumbang preso*⁸. The landscape of street games for kids shifts from games of physical strength and stamina to performances that explore and shape their queer and malleable identities. The kids continue to play outside my window happily

¹ *Magtataho* is a taho vendor. Taho is a Filipino comfort food that is made of silken tofu with arnibal and sago pearls.

² *Halo-halo* is a very popular sweet iced dessert. Crushed ice is topped with evaporated milk and a variety of ingredients including beans, coconut strips, sago, taro and fruit. It is considered the unofficial dessert of the Philippines. Variations are found across tropical Southeast Asia.

³ *Bekla* is the same as *bakla*. A queer Filipino identity which is usually an effeminate gay or trans.

⁴ Combination of *Bekla* and *Laban* (fight)

⁵ A Filipino game that is similar to hide and seek but uses the term ‘bang’ when you get caught and *sak* (from the Filipino word *saksak* or stab)

⁶ Is a catch-and-block game.

⁷ Is like dodgeball.

⁸ *Tumba* means to fall, while *preso* means prisoner.

singing the song about *awra*, a queer projection of oneself in the tropics, while I try to contemplate my own childhood, and think about *awra* and its effects on my daily queer life.

The events that regularly take place outside my study space allow me to adopt a tropical lens in understanding the ways in which gender, sexuality, and other cultural performances contribute to decoloniality. From these positions, the tropical lens magnifies moments of decoloniality being articulated by language or performed by queer bodies. A tropical lens, according to Anita Lundberg (2016), is used to assess “knowledge and ideas benefiting the tropical region” (p.1). In other words, a tropical lens is a way of viewing the social, cultural, health, environmental, historical, and political issues present from the countries of the tropics. Such a lens furthermore invites “critical and indigenous thinkers, explorers of the imagination” (p.1), to magnify these issues and how they may intersect with other issues – such as colonialism, and imperialism. In turn, a postcolonial lens is a way of approaching social, cultural, historical, and political issues and their relationship with colonial or imperial legacies. There is a close relationship between the two, however, the former focuses on the specificities and uniqueness of tropical regions and the effect of these issues on the peoples living in tropical countries, or to the tropics itself in general. Further, this lens allows me to rethink the concept that surrounds gender and sexuality in a land that is thrice colonized by different countries.⁹ My access to this tropical lens also permits me to reevaluate the idea of aura as a decolonial queer performance of *awra* that conjures a decolonized notion of gender and sexuality through the local semantics of the Tagalog word *kasarian*.¹⁰ The process of decolonization, in this case, functions in two ways. The first involves the translation of Western words by hijacking and queering them, as seen in the transformation of *aura* to *awra*. The second case of translation entails resisting the translation of local semantics, such as *kasarian* or *bakla*. According to Jaya Jacobo (2019), this “untranslatability” is a means for local queer identities to assert their autonomy and advocate for their decolonial status. Additionally, queering translation serves as another method to enhance the process of decoloniality by subverting the expected meaning of words rooted in Imperial English. In this scenario, both untranslatability and queer translation complement each other, giving rise to Jacobo's (2012) concept of “homo tropicus” – a creature that embodies the time and space of the tropics. This creature can be seen as a subject of both the worldling and the indigene, unraveling colonial power and liberating Philippine queer identities like *bakla*, *agi*, *catolonan*, *babaylan*, and others.

This paper will study three Philippine media texts that explicitly convey the concept of *awra*: the music videos “*clap, clap, clap, awra*” and “*Amakabogera*”(Imma-stunner),

⁹ The Philippines was colonized by Spain, Japan, and the United States of Africa.

¹⁰ *Kasarian* is a more fluid notion of gender/sex.

and video clips from a queer TV game show “*Beklaban*” (Gay debate). These videos depict queer performances of *bakla* (gay and trans people) and women dancing and singing while conjuring the spirit of the tropics through aesthetics. Moreover, as these media texts enact tropical culture,¹¹ they also exorcise the established colonial meaning of gender through *awra* or as J. Neil Garcia argues, it is where we can discover the “palpability of bakla sensibility” (2009, p. 12)

Understanding the queer tropical term *awra* necessitates reviewing related terms such as Walter Benjamin's aura and Bienvenido Lumbera's *datíng* to theoretically explain and expand the formation and function of *awra* in quotidian experiences, literary texts, and media texts. In the work of Walter Benjamin, the term "aura" holds significant prominence. To fully comprehend the complexities and interconnection between the terms aura and *awra*, it is crucial to commence by reading Benjamin's work. He utilizes this term to explain ideas about the reproduction of art through machines and technology. Meanwhile, Bienvenido Lumbera writes about “*datíng*” – a word meaning arrive, impact, and style, to explain the uniqueness of Philippine literary aesthetics. Importantly, Lumbera (2018) notes that *datíng* is not limited to Filipino written works, suggesting that it is possible to use *datíng* for performance, media texts, drama, films, and other art works. *Datíng*, in this sense, becomes an important aspect of Filipino art since it heightens the distinct Filipino culture and context inherited from various texts, focusing on mediums, interpretations, embodiment, and meaning. Building on these two scholarly works – one Western, one Filipino – I begin by theorizing *awra* as a queer decolonial performativity situated in the tropics, a performativity in which an aura, queerly translated¹² as *awra*, is used for queer performances and contexts in the Philippines that heighten the *datíng* of performative texts. Aura and *datíng*, both speaking to the value of art and aesthetics, become sensual and fleeting in *awra*.

Thus, this paper aims to explain and theorize the locality of the queer term *awra* and demonstrate its operation in our daily lives through Filipino media representations and performances. These performances have trended online and garner attention from the public because of their uniqueness, playfulness, and humor. These direct and explicit performances of *awras* are another way to use Garcia's (2012) reading of auras as implicit queer codes. In the following, I undertake such an analysis through an emphasis on bodies and performances from the three media texts using a close reading of lyrics, movements, and aesthetics.

¹¹ Cultures present in the tropical belt which entail traditions and practices available in these regions in connection to warm climate, islandic formations, rich environmental and vegetation landscapes.

¹² Queer translating denotes here that the process of translation follows a queer process of translating words by incorporating queer theory, ideas, or concepts whereas aura means unique presence or quality of work, *awra* becomes sexualized and gendered in the context of a tropical country like Philippines.

Reading Aura/*Awra* in the Queer Tropics

There are earlier studies on queer tropics. These studies include Amy Forbes's (2016) analysis of *Giliw ko*, a Philippine musical play wherein she argues films are a historical record of how the colonial power of Western countries like the USA established ideologies about race and gender. In this case, films or other works of art, reinforce norms of normality informed by the ideology of heterosexuality. In another study, Yvette Yanwen Lim discusses the formation of queer urban spaces in Manila, Philippines, and Bangkok, Thailand. Lim relates spaces and bodies. In her study, she demonstrates how characterizations of different queer identities in films are being honed and altered by the different spaces they navigate. Queer tropics are envisioned "not as distinct zones of difference, but perhaps as a 'locality of contests' between normative expectations and non-normative desires and contact" (Lim, 2016, p. 95). Gregory Luke Chwala's (2019) work on decolonial queer ecologies in the Caribbean shows how racialized queer and trans characters transgress colonial boundaries by reappropriating spaces of ruin. The tropicality of space provides moments for identities to clash with one another, where normative production of desires and contacts can be disrupted. Similarly, Pedro Paulo Gomes Pereira (2019) conveys this idea in his book *Queer in the Tropics: Gender and Sexuality in the Global South*:

Here in the tropics, we have reinvented and reconstructed queer genealogy, extending it to new areas, thereby amplifying and modifying what Queer Theory is understood to be in a North American context. This modification has taken place to such an extent that, here in the tropics, queer theory has virtually raised the possibility of distancing itself from...pretensions of universality. (Pereira, 2019, p.48)

Understanding the tropics as a site of a contest of homo and hetero culture, Pereira expounds that this friction between the cultures of Latin America and North America enables queer theory to be more productive in the tropics in two senses. First, it is a possible moment of localization and decolonization; and second, it is also a chance to break away from Western/temperate theories as master frameworks of queer epistemology. The reinvention and reconstruction of queer genealogy happens when analysis centers the local experiences of queer folks, understanding the intersectionality of queer experience with people of color, and challenging the Western notion of queer construction of bodies through the available tools and concepts of the locals in the tropics. This practice of knowledge construction allows me to rethink the function and semantics of aura to *awra* as part of queer culture genealogy that the tropics purge from colonial origins. The aura becomes *awra* in the queer tropics,

shifting its definition from value or spirit of the art, to queer performativity that is sexualized and gendered.

Aura plays a crucial role in assessing the authenticity and value of a work of art, particularly in pre-industrial times. Benjamin believes that the more that art is reproduced the more it depreciates. This is because of the loss of an aura that is inherent in the art itself. Benjamin (2008) explains this by citing the differences in the production of a work of art during ritualistic times versus mechanical times. That through the mechanical reproduction of art and the shattering of aura, for example, in the statue of Venus, the art will gain the power to liberate itself from its first tradition and “parasitic” life. Benjamin gives another example here by citing the regress of the aura of an actor who is being filmed. The actor who can bring a whole different experience to the spectator in the theater—because of the actors’ presence and the distance/closeness to his audience—loses his aura and metamorphoses in “personality”. From this, Benjamin argues that even if a work of art releases itself from the old, parasitic, and traditional or even cultic value brought by the aura from its initial production, it can never guarantee that the replication or the reproduction will be a neutral one and out of politics:

An analysis of art in the age of mechanical reproduction must do justice to these relationships, for they lead us to an all-important insight: for the first time in world history, mechanical reproduction emancipates the work of art from its parasitical dependence on ritual. To an ever-greater degree the work of art reproduced becomes the work of art designed for reproducibility. From a photographic negative, for example, one can make any number of prints; to ask for the “authentic” print makes no sense. But the instant the criterion of authenticity ceases to be applicable to artistic production, the total function of art is reversed. Instead of being based on ritual, it begins to be based on another practice – politics. (Benjamin, 2008, p. 224)

This part also reveals the position of Benjamin in relation to the danger and power of aura in terms of mechanical reproduction and fascism. Benjamin closes his essay with a warning that the power of mechanical reproduction is easily manipulated by the Fascist state as a sort of propaganda, specifically through film, the very same way that Hitler used the popular medium. Regardless of this, Benjamin remains hopeful for the power of art and its reproducibility. If the fascist state can use art, the masses can in turn use the same power against the oppressor. Aura and reproduction at this moment highlight the importance of art and aesthetic in society. Similarly, this new form of politics wherein aura recedes allows a different group of peoples, or spaces like the tropics, to resuscitate and rethink the function of aura in a queer decolonial mode such

as *awra*. This movement toward the tropics as a moment of decoloniality merges with the local notion of Filipino aesthetics.

Approaching Media Texts and *Datíng*, a Filipino Lens for Aesthetics

Bienvenido Lumbera, the Philippine National Artist for literature, also emphasizes the importance of the aesthetic or auric value in the native production and reception of art. Lumbera suggests that the local literary landscape and art production can employ the element of "*datíng*" to invoke the Filipino culture and history. To elaborate his position, Lumbera uses three texts from different periods: the folk song "*May Isang Bulaklak*" ("There is One Flower"); Andres Bonifacio's poem "*Pag-ibig sa Tinubuan Lupa*" ("Love of Country"); and Maria Luisa Torres's poetic piece "*Bakit Kami nag Darasal*" ("Why are We Praying"). These three lyrics/poems are all written in Filipino, and Lumbera articulates his theory on *datíng* by focusing on the effect (reception) and aesthetic form (structure) of these texts. Through these elements, Lumbera concludes that there are varying *datíng* for each of the texts, which are formed by their context. First, "*May Isang Bulaklak*" shows how the language and form recreate a universal and clichéd experience that the folk settlers of the Philippines enjoyed. Second, "*Pag-ibig sa Tinubuan Lupa*" uses simple language and form that is impactful to the revolutionizing hearts of the Filipino people during the Spanish period. And lastly, "*Bakit Kami nag Darasal*" uses its aesthetic form and literary language to call readers into political action. Thus, *datíng* for Lumbera is a kind of reception arising from the text's meaning and form which coincides with Philippine history and politics. Further, Lumbera (2018) states:

Pangunahin ang kultura ng Pilipinas bilang puwersang tumitiyak sa datíng ng isang akda. Pinakahulugan ang salitang "kultura" bilang kabuuan ng mga pagpapahalaga, kaugalian, at pananaw sa buhay na tinatanggap noon at tanggap pa rin, sa iba't ibang anyo, hanggang ngayon ng mga institusyon, kapisanan, at pormasyong sosyal sa ating lipunan. Ang alinmang paksain, kahit ang pinakapersonal, ay hango sa pakikiipag-ugnayan ng manlilikha sa mundo. Ito ang dahilan kung bakit maisasad nang walang pasubali na ang datíng ng akdang Filipino ay espesipiko sa ating lipunan, at ang estetikang nagtatakda ng mga pamantayan ay laging nakaugat sa konteksto ng lipunang Filipino. (Lumbera, 2018, pp. 17-18)

Philippine culture is the first defining power that secures the aesthetic value of art. The word culture is loaded with values, customs, and perspectives in life which are accepted from the past and present, in different forms, till now by the institutions, associations, and social

formations in our society. Whichever topic, even if the most personal, is because of the artist's connection to the world. This is the reason why it could be explicitly stated that the *datíng* of a Filipino literary work is specific to our society, and the aesthetic that constructs the standard is always rooted in the Filipino society context.¹³

Culture continues to serve as the defining force of *datíng* in a literary text and Lumbera also adds that culture is inseparable with history or *kasaysayan*. Thus, both culture and history are an integral part of *datíng* in a text. The aesthetic form of the text is always rooted in its context, or in Benjamin's terms, the aura is also contextual. Lumbera ends his essay by noting that readers or scholars should not mistake the use of *datíng* as exclusive to literary texts; but rather, should also anticipate the possibility of understanding *datíng* in other cultural texts. Other forms of cultural texts such as performance or media also allow the concept of *datíng* to be merged with aura as a way to create *awra*. It is a combination of aura and *datíng* that zero in on queer decolonial aesthetics in performances. A tropical country like the Philippines provides a site to co-test these theories and give birth to a new era of queer genealogy, especially for performances. The combination of aura and *datíng* becomes necessary in unraveling the colonial legacies within the production of queer bodies in media or other texts. Two examples illustrate this concept. Firstly, Gerardo Torres's (2004) study examines gay-themed drama plays from the '70s and '80s, where characters predominantly portray straight-passing gays similar to white masculine gays in the West. Secondly, a more recent example from the Philippines is the production of queer representations in Filipino "BL" or "Boys Love" series. These series often depict queer bodies as straight and lean guys who fall in love with each other (Katipunan, 2020) or as eye candy of masculine-fit guys (Celso, 2020). In these representations, the queer bodies being depicted in media are masculine, middle class, and fit boys, who somehow overpower the place of local queer identity such as *bakla*. *Awra*, in this sense, becomes a powerful tool for *bakla* visibility in media, and to take up the space that straight-passing gay males occupied.

The work of Lumbera on *datíng* has been further developed in the last ten years. This is a sort of enacting of Lumbera's wish to study *datíng* in another cultural text, or analyze aura in other politics. For instance, Zorina Santos (2017) studies the works of "Eros Atalia" and uses *datíng* to analyze its political aesthetics. Another study on *datíng* focuses on the development of Philippine literature and the clash between elite and mass literature written by Ian Mark Nibalvos (2019). Though these studies remain in the field of literary productions, there is no doubt that *datíng* as a Filipino critical term remains relevant to media texts. Similarly, Benjamin's critical term aura is used in different cultural studies and scholarly works. Ella Finer (2017) discusses the role

¹³ All translations from this article are translated by the author unless stated otherwise.

of aura in sound studies, specifically in sound recording and its reproduction of aura. In addition to this archive of studies on aura, Brian Turner (2005) calls attention to dance and the reproduction of aura through body performativity. Aura and *dating* progress across time to the extent that other scholarly works like Susan Sontag's essay on Camp, and J. Neil Garcia's analysis on implicit queer themes of anglophone Philippine literature, which he calls reading auras, are related or connected to these theories and contribute to the development of these critical terms. This paper is in an interesting position where the seminal works and ideas of cis heterosexual males like Benjamin and Lumbera have been succeeded by queer figures and scholars such as Sontag and Garcia. This queer decolonial development of theorization represents an interruption, where the ideas of cis heterosexual scholars are queered, translated, and decolonized from the "former seats of empire and its neo-colonies" (Jacobo, 2019). In a broader sense, this process of translating and queering serves as a form of decolonization, displacing the privileged position of the "phallus" inherent in the scholars' positionalities, and giving rise to the figure of the *bakla* through *awra* as a manifestation of "alteracion" (Jacobo, 2019) and "deformation" (Garcia, 2013). Ultimately, this paper is another shift in the genealogy of queer studies by focusing on decolonizing the key term aura and mixing it with *dating*.

This is what the study of *awra* wishes to contribute to the development of this growing archive by addressing the intersection of aesthetics, queerness, history, decoloniality, space, and politics in performance media texts. It offers a way for us to follow how, in the translating of aura to *awra*, it gets contextualized in a postcolonial and tropical space, while becoming gendered at the same time. It shows us how *awra*, not only reproduces a work of art but also racially sexualizes it as in José Esteban Muñoz's (2009) notion of cruising, thus allowing us to use the key term *awra* to magnify queer significations in different cultural performances in the tropics. It is important to recognize that the translation of this critical term is not merely an appropriation of an idea to local tropical imaginaries, but is also a moment on decoloniality facilitated by a local queer community and media representations. In this respect, the moment of translation becomes a moment to amplify marginalized voices and decentering dominant language such as English as the local queer tongue claims it. As the translation happens, from aura to *awra*, the figure of *bakla* inaugurates itself from the genealogy of queer pre-colonial/indigenous identities¹⁴ in the Philippine tropics such as the *babaylan* and *catalonan*, and reclaims the space modern masculine gay men occupy. In this case, the *bakla* who "progressively suffered from the ridicule and scorn"

¹⁴ Brenda Alegre (2022) discusses this on her article where she acknowledges her transpinay identity as product and continuity of *babaylan* and other variation of it. She succinctly discussed this: "So if in two-spirit societies they revered and protected nature and that the power of healing flows through a shaman, this is quite comparable to our very own shamans in pre-colonial Philippines. They may be referred to most often as the babaylans, but because the Philippines is an archipelago, each region may have ways of referring to the same kind of person. Mostly babaylans are women and male babaylans are referred to variably depending on the region. Baylan or baylian, asog, bayok, catalonan, mumbaki or itneg are just some ways to call the powerful babaylans." (p. 54)

(Garcia, 2013, p. 55) of patriarchal society from the colonial rule of the Spanish to the current reproduction of homonormativity, may liberate themselves and disrupt this dominant production of queer representation. Garcia argues that this is possible because resistance in the Philippine tropics is not “transitive—isn’t volitional—but actually inheres structurally in the dynamic between the local and the translocal itself” (2013, p. 56). In other words, resistance to colonial legacies may arise from the local tongue itself or through hybridity of culture, or, in the case of *awra*, it happens through translation. Through the queer tongue and its hijacking modus operandi from the imperial lexis, these local queer identities not only write back but also perform back to empire. Through performing *awra*, we can untangle the (colonialized) reproduction of some beliefs and norms regarding gender identity and reading our bodies. Unpacking these issues, this paper utilizes semiotics to relate signs and symbols to contexts, as I discuss in the next section.

Reading bodies is an example of Roland Barthes’s (1989) theory on text. The text is at the intersection of cultural production. It is in the form of gesture, voice, air, color, and other cultural forms. Text, in this notion, creates a system of signs that generates meaning. Similarly, Lori Hope Lefkowitz (1997) argues that our bodies are a site of culture and can reflect history. By citing the body of Christ as a text, she explains that looking at the body as a lens in reading texts allows us to gain a new perspective and insights about literary representations. Barthes and Lefkowitz’s studies are examples of reading the signs that a body performs and reproduces. This is also a method of studying a cultural text that centralizes the body as the object of the analysis and its signification. From these examples, the theorization of *awra* is possible to be executed through closely reading bodies, texts, visuals, and performances. This interpretative stance, at this point, is an essential method for semiotically breaking down the signs and performances that the two music videos “*Clap, Clap, Clap, Awra!*” and “*Amakabogera*”, and the game segment *Beklaban* (Gay debate), are producing and reproducing. These media texts can be read semiotically by focusing on the lyrics of the songs, dance steps, and visual aesthetics to relate to notions of queerness in the tropics.

Queer Awra in Media Performances

“*Clap, Clap, Clap, Awra*”

Awra Briguela, or Mcneal Briguela in real life, released a song entitled “*Clap, Clap, Clap, Awra*” in 2017. This debuted after Awra Briguela became a regular cast of the long-time TV series “*Ang Probinsyano*” from the network ABS-CBN. Initially, Mcneal Briguela was just a familiar face on the internet after he went viral due to a video where he is playing out and performing “*awra*” (a queer gesture of striking a pose) with his relatives. This incident propels his career to new heights, leading him to adopt the

screen name Awra. Subsequently, this new name opened doors to secure various showbiz projects, including: TV guest appearances, a recurring role in a TV series, and the performance “*Clap, Clap, Clap, Awra*”, a song about queerly performing *aura/awra*.

The song narrates the experience of a queer persona attracting the attention of the public because of her “*awra*”. As the song progresses, the persona persuades her listeners to join her in performing “*awra*,” noting they should be proud to be a “*Pinoy*”, a shortcut for Pilipino/Filipino which means a person who is a Filipino descent, who is born to be the best:

*Kakaiba ang ganda lahat ay napapatingin
 Talento'y pinakita lalong lumakas pa ang dating
 Kaliwa't kanan! Puro oh! Puro ah!
 Sa harap, sa likod umulan ng papuri
 Nagpupugay sa saya ang mundo niluklok
 Kang parang king and the queen
 You're on top, ang galing
 'Di palalagpasin ang tulad mo'y mapapansin
 May ibang arrive ang dating sa entablado'y tanghalin
 Kaliwa't kanan tapatan kahit ng sinuman
 Di malalampasang nagawa nag-iisa kang tumatak
 Nagalak ang lahat sayo'y nakatingin*

A unique beauty everyone is looking
 Talent was shown, stronger presence is developing
 Left and right, Everyone oh! Everyone ah!
 In front and behind, it's raining with compliments
 Celebrating in happiness the world crowns
 You like a king and queen, you are on top, so amazing
 Won't be neglected you're too heeded
 There's a different impact of your style on the stage it won't be denied
 Left and right, challenged by everyone
 Your act is unmatched you're the only memorable one
 Everyone rejoices watching you

The persona from the song clearly captures the attention of the public by explicitly performing her *awra*. The lines – “*kakaiba ang ganda*” (“unique beauty”), “*lumakas ang dating*” (“stronger presence is developing”), “*ibang arrive*” (“different impact”), and “*nag-iisang kang tumatak*” (“the only memorable one”) – state that the persona is expressing itself fabulously, but this is not just a campy performance because this very performance also queers the persona from the song. The line “*Nagpupugay sa saya*

ang mundo niluklok, Kang parang king and the queen (“Celebrating in happiness the world crowns You like a king and queen”), explains the identity of the persona as both queen and king, a queer formation of identity.

*Marami pang sumunod sa 'yong yapak at pinakitang halimbawa
Tuloy kay rami ng naglabas tinatago nyang galing
Kaliwa't kanan! Puro oh! Puro ah! Sa harap, sa likod
Umulan ng talento nagpupugay sa saya ang mundo
Ang pinoy champion sa galing!
Kahit saan mapunta hindi maiiwasang number one ka ngang talaga!
Hindi kailangang magyabang! Kaliwa't kanan, tapatan kahit ng simuman
Di malalampasang nagawa nag-iisa kang tumatak
Nagalak ang lahat sayo'y nakatingin*

Many will follow your lead and from the displayed instances,
That's why many shown their hidden talents and excellence
Left and right, everyone oh! Everyone ah! in front and behind
It's raining with talent, the world is celebrating in happiness
The *Pinoy* champion of excellence!
Everywhere you go it's inevitable to make you number one
No need to brag! Left and right, challenged by anyone
Everyone rejoices watching you.

The second stanza narrates the experience of the persona projecting her *awra* while leading a crowd. The crowd acknowledges the *awra* of the person based on her “*galing*” (“excellence”) and her outpouring talent. Further, the persona also adds that these characteristics are because of her nationality, which is “*Pinoy*”. At this point, the persona gains agency and influence toward the viewers as if the spell of the *awra* starts to work for them. The chorus is a repetition of a single line:

“Oh baby do your catwalk!
Clap clap clap Awra! Oh stand up!
Clap clap clap Awra! Oh stand up!
Clap clap clap Awra! Oh stand up!
Clap clap clap Awra! Oh stand up!”

The chorus, given that it is also the climax of the song, encourages the viewers and listeners to follow the persona. They need to clap and do their own *awra*. The climax shows the effect of *awra* on the audience and its ability to be reproduced through performances.

Awra, as a queer projection of oneself in the public, becomes the source of agency. This agency initially builds up through performing the fabulous self, which blurs the figure of queen and king. Subsequently, the song's portrayal of *awra* adds the elements of "*galing*," or excellence, and the *Pinoy* identity that is an important aspect of it. The song's showcased *awra* clearly refers to what Lumbera theorizes about *dating*, the arrival of an impact on the audience. Meanwhile, the *awra* that the song presents to its listener somehow shares the idea of Benjamin's aura, which is ritualistic and theatrical. However, the lyrics of the song integrates these two concepts into one queer performance by Awra in showing the performer's flamboyant, standout, campy, and excellent performance. This performance reproduces itself while others start to copy it to make *awra* their source of origin. The text overhauls Benjamin's aura, which primarily argues that reproduction reduces the value of aura, since the lyrics of the song "*Clap, Clap, Clap, Awra*" narrate how the value and impact of *awra* are strengthened the more that *awra* is being reproduced. Equally interesting is how a simple queer term transforms Mcneal's identity into a reified version or personification of *awra*. One's aura turns into a personality, which in the case of Mcneal, transforms him into Awra. This queer persona can be analyzed by watching Awra's performance.

Figure 1: Awra aka Mcneal live Performance of "Clap, Clap, Clap, Awra!"



Awra. Close up from her performance (ABS CBN, 2017). Source: Youtube

In figure 1, Awra's close up shot, and Figure 2 Group performance, Awra debuts her 2017 song live in public and dances with it. The dance starts with a couple of cliché movements like twerking, posing, hand movements, and formations. But as the song reaches its refrain, "Oh baby do your catwalk!", Awra starts to walk to the front of the stage doing her catwalk, while the camera focuses in to close in on her *awra* signature face. Finally performing the chorus, the audience sees Awra clapping her hands "Clap, Clap, Clap", while squatting and lowering her body; and as soon as she says, "Awra," she stands up and strikes a pose. The clapping of hands becomes the climax of the dance, which is a queer fabulous projection of oneself. Another apparent feature of this performance is the choice of costume color, which is very tropical in its use of the

colors bright orange, green, and pink, complementing the stages background which is composed of square patterns, a pattern highly similar to woven fabrics of the Philippines or African cloth designs, with the colors pink, orange, and blue.

Figure 2: Group Shot of Performance from “Clap, Clap, Clap, Awra!”



Screenshot (ABS CBN, 2017). Source: Youtube

The *awra* constructed by the song, when translated into live performance, reinforces the relationship between space and performance, and the construction of queer identity. The space of performance, with its tropical aesthetic, background design, and color palette, serves as a platform to accentuate Awra’s queer dance performance. The *awra* of the song, operates on three levels. First, *awra* a queer performance, a flamboyant and campy demonstration of choreography that seeks to be reproduced based on the blurring of stable and noble identities of king and queen. Second, *awra* is informed and honed by *Pinoy* excellence (an excellence inherent to a Filipino of the Philippines) making it a distinct local expression – in this case, Benjamin’s aura becomes *awra* as the queer tropical tongue highjacks the white lexicon. Lastly, *awra* here transforms the identity of a person to the extent of becoming *awra* itself, which is the case for Mcneal. This demonstrates how *awra* goes beyond aura as it builds its value and impact through reproduction, rather than losing it.

“Amakabogera”

Maymay Entrata’s “Amakabogera”, which is a play on *Imma kabogera* (*Imma-stunner*, showstopper, scene stealer, attention grabber). This is the fifth digital album of Maymay in 2021 which features popular Tiktok dance moves. The lyrics and the music video of Maymay share a similar value of *awra* as that experienced in “Clap, Clap, Clap, Awra.” In this song, the *awra* is used at the very beginning, setting the tone and queer performance with flamboyant, campy, and vibrant moves and projections of body. Maymay starts her song with this stanza:

*Lalakad na ala beauty queen
 Awra ko'y will make you scream
 Ganda kong nagniningning
 Lalo kang mapapatingin
 'Di ko na kailangan na magpaganda
 Dating ko pa lang, panalo na
 'Di ko need ng filters sa camera
 Naturang ganda'y ibandera*

Walking like a beauty queen
 My awra will make you scream
 My beauty shining brightly
 Will make you look at me compellingly
 I don't need to enhance my beauty
 Just my presence wins me already
 I don't need filters on camera
 Natural beauty I'll be flaunting

Figure 3: Maymay Entrata's "Amakabogera" solo shot.

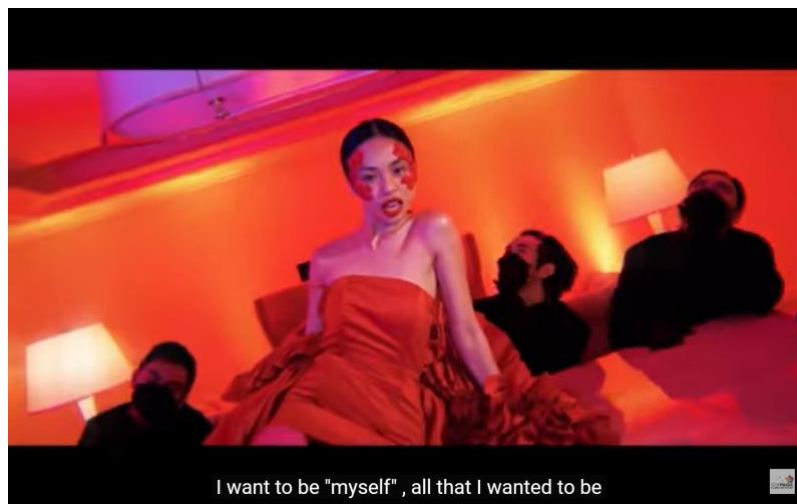


Maymay solo shot from her music video (ABS CBN, 2021). Source: Youtube

These lyrics immediately showcase the construction of *awra*, while the song also uses *dating* to illustrate how style, aesthetics, and beauty are affected by *awra*. The persona's *awra* is here so powerful that it can make other people scream or make the performer control their attention. Like the *dating* from "Clap, Clap, Clap, Awra", Maymay's *dating* in this song is also unique and something she considers natural, which is why she dismisses the function of camera filters. Further, like the *awra* from the previous song, the *awra* in this one gets stronger as it is reproduced through the

performance of the persona. The song also implies the competition or challenge in a similar way as Awra's; this is evident from the words "like a beauty queen" and through the use of her *datíng* or presence, which makes her already a winner. Awra, at this moment, also becomes a tool for competing or challenging limits through queer gestures, performance, and aesthetics. The title of the song moreover reinforces its content, as "*Amakabogera*" is a portmanteau of "I am" (pronounced as Amma), and "kabogera," from the queer term "kabog," which means a projection of oneself in an intimidating manner or a show-off, a stunner. The title suggests how one's aesthetic or "arrive" can be a form of challenging, fighting, or intimidating someone, which shares a similar principle as *awra* – a queer projection of oneself to stun someone.

Figure 4: Maymay Entrata's "*Amakabogera*" dance and group shot



Maymay group shot from her music video (ABS CBN, 2021). Source: Youtube

The effectiveness of the persona's *awra* in stunning someone is further enhanced by the tropical aesthetics showcased in the music video (Figure 3 solo shot, and Figure 4, group and dance shot). The song begins at a resort in the Philippines, which shows trees, pools, and plants imitating a beach-like scene that is common to the islands of the Philippines. In the latter part of the music video, Maymay can be seen inside the hotel of the resort wearing an all-red dress with red petals as designs on her face. These scenes play with red, orange, and pink colors projected as background, creating tropical vibes and atmosphere for the performance. These aesthetics, which form the setting of the music video, strengthen the tropical queer performance of the persona as a pattern and ordering of the world where *Bakla/Babaylan* gains an agency to reveal herself using *awra* to create a space of visibility. Even if the persona is obviously a woman, her performance from the music video is a complete embodiment of queer camp as humorous, stunner, and theatricality. Her identity and performance overlap with Awra's performance in "*Clap, Clap, Clap, Awra*", and similar to the live performance of Awra, the tropical aesthetic of "*Amakabogera*" (I'm a stunner) hones

and highlights the queer performance of the persona. The tropical space that the campy persona occupies allows her to reinvent her aura to *awra* of an “*Amakabogera*”.

“*Beklaban*”

The title “*Beklaban*” which is inspired by the combination of two Filipino words, *Beki* (gay) and *laban* (which means to fight), also uses *awra* as a key factor. This time in the performance of a game. “Showtime”, a midday TV program in the Philippines, offers an avenue for trans and queer folk to showcase their talents, wit, and humor through a game show they created called Miss Q & A. The contestants must go through several rounds of challenges to filter down to the final challenger of the day. The final challenger will face the reigning queen and will try to steal her crown through a “*Talakan*”(live debate), which starts with the phrase “I believe” before elaborating their opinion or argument regarding the question under debate. One of the challenges that a contestant needs to pass is “*Beklaban*” (Gay debate), wherein the challenger will try to snatch the crown from the reigning queen by performing *awra*. The contestant must sing the song “*Beklaban*” (Gay debate), and immediately afterwards strike a pose. Each contestant’s pose mimics an object, phenomenon, or personality, and they explain why it is better than their opponent’s pose.

Figure 5: Queens Chanting at Showtime Beklaban, August episode



The two hosts wearing black and two contestants wearing gowns singing the “*Beklaban*” (Gay debate) chant. (ABS CBN, 2018). Source: Youtube

Vice Ganda and Anne Curtis serve as hosts for each episode, as can be seen from the photos in Figure 5 ‘Queens Chanting’ and Figure 6 ‘Queens Posing’, and they frequently moderate the contestants’ queer projections. Two contestants compete for the crown. The contestants must sing the chant, “*bekla, bekla, aawra ka ba? Oo, Oo, aawra ako!*” (*bekla, bekla, are you going to fight? Yes of course, Yes of course, I will fight.*) While chanting the song, both candidates have to turn their backs to each other

and wave their hands while shaking their hips. When saying *bekla*, they must wave their hands as if they are waving to someone who is far away or as if they are drowning. Once the contestants say “*awra*”, they put their hands on their waist and strike a pose. The pose ought to be powerful, witty, and creative to win the challenge. The Figure 5 shows contestant number 1’s *awra* as a lady with her arms akimbo, while her opponent poses as if she is holding something. To determine the winner in this round, the hosts will ask each contestant to explain their poses. In The Figure 6 Contestant number 1 notes that her pose is of a mother who caught her child outside while using her phone. She had been looking for her only to find out that she was in showtime. Contestant number 2, explains that her pose is a woman holding a bomb, and she is about to throw it at contestant number 1.

Figure 6: Queens posing at Showtime Beklaban, August episode



The two hosts asking questions of the two contestants. (ABS CBN, 2018). Source: Youtube

Reading these performances, one can already clearly see the usage of *awra* in competition and discourse formation. *Awra*, from the example above, becomes the fulcrum of performance wherein power and privilege are to be given once the winner is determined. Performing the *awra* gives leverage to the contestant to move to the next round while also explicitly showing to the public their *galing* (excellence) through a *bakla* performance. In another episode below, one can see how the *awra* is again used by the contestants to win their spot.

In this episode, Vice and Jhong serve as hosts for the day and follow the same routine of asking each contestant to explain the meaning of their queer projections. After some comedic spills, the two contestants are asked to perform “*Beklaban*” (Gay debate) The two girls sing the chant, do the steps, and finally, they strike a pose. Contestant number 1 poses as a waterfall, while contestant number 2 becomes a dog (figures 7 ad 8). After explaining the reason for being a dog, contestant number 2 wins the round through her wit, creativity, and humor. These performances from the “*Beklaban*” (Gay

debate) episodes show how *awra* can manifest in a discursive formation, such as a game or game show. The chant itself is deeply rooted in ritualistic performance, and the body movements performed by the contestants showcase how the chant hails the persona of *bakla*. The utterance of “*awra*” toward the end of the song prepares the *bakla* for a fight or a contest of queer projection of oneself. These performances are also partly in the tradition of Benjamin’s aura, as in the shows’ ritual of performance; however, the repetition and reproduction of each performance again strengthen the aesthetic value of each performance.

Figure 7: Queens Chanting at Showtime Beklaban, January episode



Screenshot of the two hosts and the two contestants chanting. (ABS CBN, 2019). Source: Youtube

Figure 8: Queens Posing at Showtime Beklaban, January episode



Screenshot of the two hosts and the two contestants posing. (ABS CBN, 2019). Source: Youtube

Other than being a chant, the song also shares characteristics with other Filipino children’s games like *Nanay, Tatay, Manga, Manga*, and *Coke Beat Commercial*. This is one of the reasons the public, even kids, patronize the program. Among all these

songs, the children's game *Manga, Manga*¹⁵ (Mango, Mango) best resembles the "*Beklaban*" chant. It is also noteworthy to point out that this chant, in which *beklaban* is patterned, conjures the flora of the Philippine tropics by being inspired by and using the figure of a mango tree, which is a classic symbol of the Philippine tropical landscape. With this association, the performance of *bakla* and her queer *awra* projections are being summoned by a tropical setting. This setting again offers a way for local queer identities to create new genealogies and grammar that is not available to Western logic and theories.

Reading through these performances, one can see how *awra* departs and resonates with the ideas of the two critical terms earlier discussed. *Awra* shares the ritualistic and aesthetic value from *aura* but deviates from the notion of diminishing effect, as its power increases through reproduction. Similarly, *dating* shares similarities with *awra* in terms of style and aesthetics, but it extends to the realm of queer constructions and purposes. In each example, the aesthetic form and value are indebted to the context of the art forms: for instance in how "*Clap, Clap, Clap, Awra*" uses the idea of *Pinoy galing* (Filipino excellence), or the tropical scene from "*Amakabogera*" (*Imma-stunner*), and the figure of *bakla* from the chant of "*Beklaban*" (Gay debate). However, *awra* differs from the literary as a mode of production, since *dating* is theorized from literary texts and *awra* is performed and heightened by tropical aesthetics. From these ideas, *awra* becomes a type of performance that is possible to reproduce while still increasing its value (rather than being depreciated in *aura*) as the lyrics and music video encourage listeners and audiences to do and perform their own *awras*. *Awra* is an aesthetic projection of a fabulous self through the *bakla* as a local queer identity. This deems the figure of *Bakla* as an important aspect of this performance since it is always the climax of the chant, or the one that conjures the *awra* and mixes it with tropical aesthetics and contexts. The climax from each of these media texts is a determining factor of its effect and leverage of power. *Awra* becomes a mode of competition and agency in each of the performances. "*Clap, Clap, Clap, Awra*" uses the *awra* to queerly project oneself as a model of unmatched Filipino excellence. "*Amakabogera*" (*Imma-stunner*) utilizes *awra* as a queer camp projection of oneself in winning a competition. In "*Beklaban*" (Gay debate), the *awra* is developed through queer performance to match another queer contestant in a show off challenge. Thus, *awra* is also a form of power from these contexts that neatly weaves in the explicit images of tropical landscapes and queer or *bakla* performances.

¹⁵ The translated lyrics of the song are:
"Mango, mango, are you already ripe?
Yes, yes, I'm already ripe.
If you're ripe, then you should leave.
I don't want to, I don't want to,
I don't want to, I'll cry".

The *Bakla* in the Tropics: from Gender to Decolonial *Kasarian*

While I am randomly browsing Facebook, a video, in a sudden fleeting moment, presents queer folks= projecting their *awra* in front of a Burger Machine, that local Filipino food stall commonly found near gas stations. This time the projection of *awra* is not from kids, but from *bakla* who are adults. They are having fun in the middle of the night shaking their hips and waving their hands, ready to project *awra*. I laugh as the performers also laugh at themselves in the video. It shows how their campy street performances could really be a form of queer projection in the tropics. Then again, this may be proof that both kids and adults can project their *awras* in the tropics. Everyone can do *awra* (and have their own *awras*). *Awra* performances are not limited as high or low art, nor do they place limitations by distinguishing high fashion from popular and commercial art. Rather, queer performance of oneself matters regardless of any preconditioned (Western or neo-colonial) standards. The performance of the *bakla* in the tropics exorcises established Western norms of gender performativity through *awra*, and, at this point, *awra* becomes the signification of queer tropical aesthetics.

Benjamin says that “Words themselves have aura” (2015, p. 45), and these words are also possible to reproduce. Translating aura to *awra* is possible. In the queer tropics, the aura of the word “aura” is revived in another context as *awra* used by *Bakla* to inaugurate their queer projection to the world. *Awra* not only talks about aesthetics but also the nature of race. *Awra*, like *dating*, is contextualized within the Filipino culture and gender politics. *Awra* as performance requires the existence of *Bakla* (or a queer figure) in a performance. It is not just a projection of a fabulous self, but also a moment of risking, competing, or fighting. Through this continuous performance as well as the reproduction of the performance of *bakla*, *awra* also loosens up our notion of *kasarian* (gender-sex). Unlike its Anglophone tradition, gender-sex is not reduced to dualistic identities of male or female in the Philippines. *Kasarian* connotes multiple genders. With these representations of *bakla*, *kasarian* could also be accessed through *kasarian*. *Sari* is the root word of *kasarian*, which means difference, and when repetition happens, it becomes “*sari-sari*”, which means variety or multiplicity. This is where I would like to theorize *awra* in relation to gender; the more we perform it and the more that we see *bakla* in these tropical performances, the more the notion of gender can become fluid. Decoloniality happens when the spectrum of gender and queerness depart from Western representation and theory through *awra*, *bakla*, and *kasarian*. These local Tagalog language and queer terms form a new queer genealogy that articulates the performances of queer identity from the tropics, which the colonial temperate inclination would find foreign or exotic. Further, *awra*, as a form of risk, is also suggestive of the idea of seduction and desire. When someone asks, “*Oh, awra mo?*” (Is that your *awra*?) or “*Oh, umaaawra ka na naman,*” (Oh, you’re doing *awra* again?) this could mean that you are with someone you are flirting with, or you are

trying to flirt. This is *awra*. It could mean to risk or to fight, a moment of fabulous projection, a mode of decolonialization, seduction, a moment of recognition, or a combination of these many meanings. *Awra* in these ways helps to untangle the Western structure of gender performances through *kasarian*. And in a decolonial context, we may also study the possibility of using *awra* to decolonize not just the subject and its gender as part of a decolonization within the Philippines tropics, but also the very circuit of capitalism, genre, or art forms which may give birth to *awra* into larger possibilities of decoloniality.

Gender and race become an integral part of the analysis for *awra* as a queer decolonial performance. The song “*Clap, Clap, Clap, Awra!*” necessitates the role of race, *galing*, and *bakla* in performing the *awra*; “*Amakabogera*” (*Imma-stunner*) utilizes tropical landscape and aesthetics to bring forth the *awra* of queer camp performance; and “*Beklaban*” (Gay debate) uses the identity of *bakla* to perform *awra* in a competition. In all these performances the *bakla* (or queer figure) is the ultimate projection of the queer fabulous self. This moment of using *bakla* in songs and chants and movements becomes pivotal in the reproduction of identities and performances because first, it disturbs heteropatriarchal traditional gender roles, and secondly, it interrupts the homogenizing tendencies of macho or straight acting male gayness. *Awra* here requires the figure of *bakla* to complete its performance, while the tropical landscape and aesthetics provide a space to contest and reform queer ideologies. The *bakla* is vilified by the temperate colonial tongue and the myriad legacies from which it is necessary for the tropics to liberate themselves from. The *bakla* continues to be marginalized by the popular representation of queerness in the media which sensationalizes the image of queer folk as lean, tall, and beautiful, or masculine gay boys that are traditionally projected by Western media. The *bakla* (through *awra*) helps to untangle layers of colonializing thoughts through performances and the celebration of one’s local queer identity. The *bakla*, which is asked “*aawra ka ba,*” could also mean “are you going to fight?”. The *bakla* is both king and queen. *Awra* opens this agency for the *bakla* as if “*siya*” (s/he) is a genie in a bottle being rubbed to grant some wishes – like a wish to disturb and to decolonize. As the chant goes “*Bekla, bekla, aawra ka ba? Oo, oo, oo, aawra ako!*”, the *bakla* from the song is asked whether they would like to “*awra*” (to fight, to risk, to compete), and the song only gives one answer, which is “*Oo, oo, oo aawra ako*”. The *bakla* only has one option, which is to fight and compete in this competition; she breaks from the negative stereotype of being unwanted, thought as weak or scared, or powerless. The *bakla* finds her agency through *awra* making a space for visibility and empowerment. The *bakla* is projected and then proceeds to untangle the colonial reproduction of identities through queer performance.

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