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Cover Page Footnote
Earlier versions of this article were presented at the historic Bridging the Rainbow Gap conference at Auburn University in August 2021 and the Behind the Publications Series of the Gender, Sexuality, and Women's Studies Program at Wayne State University in February 2023. Much appreciation to the scholars and students who attended my presentations and engaged my preliminary explorations of this topic. I am also grateful to JQTSIE editor Stephanie Anne Shelton and the anonymous reviewers for their close readings and constructive feedback which helped strengthen and clarify my arguments and explanations.
Decolonizing Queer Epistemology: Boys Love and Cultural Imaginary from the Global Majority

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Abstract: This article aims to decolonize queer epistemology in order to challenge the hegemony of white/eurocentric LGBTQ histories, cultures, and representations as the universal and normalized standard of queer and trans life and sociality. Toward this objective, it analyzes whitestream queer epistemology, and notes its limits that do not account for its inclusions and exclusions, especially in relation to race, geography, and methodological (homo)nationalism. It draws attention to the works of queer and trans theorists, researchers, and educators from the global majority, especially the growing scholarship on LGBTQ education outside of the United States, to point out a significant gap in our theoretical, empirical, and pedagogical understanding. The article foregrounds the interpretive and methodological approaches of decolonization and cultural studies to offer more expansive and generative examinations of research on difference, power, and knowledge. As examples of cultural imaginary from the global majority, it foregrounds the coming of age boys love (BL) genre from Asia and, in particular, three BL series from the Philippines. It advances three approaches for decolonizing queer epistemology that challenge eurocentrism, affirm alternatives, and embrace affect, and extrapolates the implications of such critical interventions to queer and trans studies in education.

Keywords: Queer Epistemology; Decolonization; Boys Love; Cultural Imaginary; Global Majority; Asia; Filipino; Popular Culture

Introduction

For Asians and Asian Americans in the United States, the COVID-19 pandemic elicited a compounded fear of being infected by the coronavirus and being targeted for anti-Asian racism, both resulting in harmful and even deadly consequences (Coloma et al., 2021; Coloma & Rhee, 2022). According to the national coalition Stop AAPI Hate (2023), more than 11,000 acts of hate against Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders have been reported since March 2020 in all 50 U.S. states and the District of Columbia. The majority reported “hate incidents involving harassment, bullying, shunning, and discrimination” (p. 24). Asian Americans who are also lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and/or queer (LGBTQ+) indicated experiencing “hate incidents that target them for their multiple identities” (Stop AAPI Hate, 2022, p. 5). A queer Asian American shared a disturbing encounter:

I am a part of the LGBTQ+ community so I was wearing a mask that showed love and support for the community. As I walked away, a woman proceeded to walk up to me and stop me. She looked me up and down and said, “Oh so you’re one of them?” I was confused but then remembered I had on the LGBTQ+ mask. I politely responded, “Excuse me?” She proceeded to say slurs that were both directed towards Asians and the LGBTQ+ community.” (p. 5)

I begin this article with the global pandemic and anti-Asian racism as a point of departure not only to situate how living in fear from the doubled virus of the pandemic and racism has impacted LGBTQ+ Asian Americans but also to attend to the ways that popular culture from Asia has offered emotional comfort, virtual connection, and even escapist fantasy during these hostile and uncertain times. During the COVID-19 lockdown period, I found the web-based boys love shows and was immediately hooked. Boys love or “BL” refers to a relatively new transnational genre of queer media originating from Asia that showcases homoromantic and homoerotic relationships between young men. As a queer-identified, cisgender Filipino man in the U.S. Midwest, I had previously heard of BL in Japanese manga and anime and then discovered BL shows from Thailand, South Korea, Japan, Taiwan, Vietnam, and the Philippines on YouTube that were subtitled and/or dubbed in English. One weekend in September 2020, I binge-watched all 14 episodes of Gameboys, considered the first BL series from the Philippines (Intalan & Lana, 2020). Featuring two teen gamers, Cairo Lazaro and Gavreel Alarcon, the show is set during the pandemic quarantine, with Gavreel pursuing Cairo after beating him in a live-stream game. It involves several entangled relationships, circumstances, and emotions, such as a jealous ex-boyfriend and a supportive ex-girlfriend, as well as fear of coming out to family, guilt for a parent’s COVID infection and tragic demise, and apprehension to start a long-distance relationship. Although the two main characters primarily communicate online via webcam, in the
end, they meet in person, confess their true feelings for each other, and finally kiss.1

Admittedly, I became an avid viewer of BL shows. It is quite rare to see Asian lead actors and Asian-themed storylines in U.S. and western popular culture, and even more rare in mainstream LGBTQ+ media. The BL genre of Asian men loving each other is, to borrow from writer Joseph Beam’s (1986) analysis of Black men loving each other, a “revolutionary act” (p. 9). It disrupts the hegemonic whiteness in queer and trans cultural representations by focusing on largely invisible subjects from the global majority (Coloma, 2013b). I employ the term “global majority” to denote the diverse demographic and epistemological constituencies encompassing those in Asia, Africa, Latin America, and Indigenous communities, as well as their border-crossing migrations and diasporas, that collectively constitute over 80% of the world’s population. It has historical ties to anti-racist, decolonizing, and Third World revolutionary movements. It differs from the concepts “racial minority” and “ethnic minority” that delineate the numerical and/or political status of people of color2 within racial hierarchies in predominantly white North America, Europe, and Australia. It challenges white supremacy and eurocentrism by asserting the majority status of Black, Brown, and Indigenous peoples in the world (Campbell-Stephens, 2021; Shepherd, 1987). Although the term “global majority” is inclusive of people of color in the United States, in this article, I am particularly interested in decentering and going beyond the U.S. Hence, to see oneself as a queer diasporic Asian man on screen through popular culture and media that reflect one’s complex, intersectional, and transnational identities, experiences, and yearnings is at once affirming, empowering, and revolutionary. Even in the 2020s, representation continues to matter.

The BL genre also offers a divergent cultural imaginary of LGBTQ+ subjectivity and same-sex relations that resignifies, shifts, and even swerves from eurocentric themes and tropes as it indexes a way of being and knowing that is grounded in Asia. Of the various BL series, I am drawn to the ones made in the Philippines, partly due to what writer Danton Remoto (2020) appreciates in these shows: “good acting, plausible storyline, deft direction and smart production values, given the constraints imposed by COVID-19.” I am also enticed by the kilig factor elicited by these shows, with the Filipino term kilig defined as “an affective, romantic excitement” which “usually has a physical manifestation – and does not have an equivalent word in English” (Parnell et al., 2023, pp. 56, 63). With my linguistic proficiency in Filipino or Tagalog, I am able to fully enjoy the shows’ artistic approach of combining drama, romance, and comedy, as well as their cultural sensibility in addressing intimacies and relationships. English dubbing and subtitles cannot entirely capture and convey the nuances, subtleties, and multiple meanings of language, affect, and humor in non-anglophone contexts. Hence, when articulating a cultural imaginary that deviates from dominant western epistemology, it often helps to have “insider” cultural and linguistic tools that delve deeply into the focus community, as well as “outsider” discourses that can elaborate on details and explanations for multiple audiences. As both an insider and outsider, I mobilize my upbringing in the Philippines and the United States and my cultural navigation of queer life and representations in both countries to advance a different analytical approach in queer and trans studies in education.

Ultimately, I aim to decolonize queer epistemology to challenge the hegemony of white/eurocentric LGBTQ+ histories, cultures, experiences, and representations as the universal and normalized standards of queer and trans life, relations, and sociality. Toward this objective, this article is structured in the following ways: I analyze whitestream queer epistemology and note the limits of anti-oppressive scholarly fields that do not account for their inclusions and exclusions, especially in relation to race, geography, and methodological nationalism. Consequently, I draw attention to the works of queer and trans theorists, researchers, and educators of color, especially the growing scholarship on LGBTQ+ education in the global majority outside of the United States, to point out a significant gap in our theoretical, empirical, and pedagogical understanding. I foreground the interpretive and methodological approaches of decolonization and cultural studies to offer more expansive and generative examinations of research on difference, power, and knowledge. As examples of cultural imaginary from the global majority, I highlight the boys love genre from Asia and, more specifically, three BL series from the Philippines: Hello, Stranger (Gazmen, Garalde, & Ang, 2020), Oh, Mando! (Derla, 2020), and The Boy Foretold by the Stars (Cabrido & Sta. Maria, 2020). Juxtaposing analysis of the extant scholarly literature and Filipino BL shows, I put forward three moves for decolonizing queer epistemology that defy eurocentrism, affirm alternatives, and embrace affect. I conclude by extrapolating the implications of such interventions to queer and trans studies in education.

**Queer Epistemology and Its Limits**

In her groundbreaking book *Epistemology of the Closet*, which helped inaugurate what has become the insurgent field of queer studies, literary critic Eve Sedgwick (1990) argues that “the closet is the defining structure for gay oppression” in the twentieth century (p. 71). She concedes that the figure of the closet is a western construct regulating normative sexualities. “The epistemology of the closet,” she contends, has been “inexhaustibly productive of modern Western culture

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1 Due to its popularity, the subscription streaming service Netflix picked up *Gameboys* for global distribution, and a “Level-Up Edition” with re-edited scenes and additional footage was released in December 2020. Its second season with eight episodes aired in 2022. A spin-off series titled *Pearl Next Door* was released in 2021.

2 I do not capitalize the word “color” when used in relation to people of color, LGBTQ+ of color, queers and trans of color, and queer of color critique because these terms are not proper nouns. I capitalize the terms “Black” and “Brown” when referring to particular racialized minority groups, but do not capitalize “white” when designating people of European or Caucasian background in order to challenge power dynamics between whites and racialized minority groups. I also do not capitalize terms such as “eurocentric,” “western,” and “anglophone” to disrupt the persistence of white supremacy in schools, societies, and epistemologies.
and history at large” (p. 68). More specifically, “an understanding of virtually any aspect of modern Western culture must be, not merely incomplete, but damaged in its central substance to the degree that it does not incorporate a critical analysis of modern homo/heterosexual definition” (p. 1). Within the western regime of sexuality, the closet functions as a powerful technology to conceal one’s identities, desires, and relations and becomes complicit to the complex dynamics of abjection, shame, secrecy, and internalized oppression. With rampant homophobic and transphobic prejudice and discrimination continuing to rage in schools, workplaces, popular culture, and society at large, it also serves as a shield for safety and protection that could prevent harassment, hostility, and violence. Yet, the modern LGBTQ+ liberation and human rights movements demand being out of the closet as crucial to affirm queer and trans individual and collective subject positions and to resist social and juridical norms around sexual and gender identities (Bruce, 2016).

With the dissident platform of queer and trans studies launched and inspired by the work of Eve Sedgwick, Judith Butler, Teresa de Lauretis, and others since the early 1990s, sexuality has become an influential theoretical, empirical, and educational framework to examine social identities, relations, and conditions. The past 30+ years reveal the “insurrection of subjugated knowledges” (Foucault, 1980, p. 81) as queer and trans intellectual and institutional proliferation has generated academic conferences, peer-reviewed journals, faculty lines, and graduate and undergraduate programs. Queer and trans studies has emerged within, extended, contested, and dramatically transformed a wide range of academic fields in the humanities, arts, social sciences, and the professions, including education. However, the institutional establishment of queer and trans studies has not been an easy or welcomed endeavor (Brim, 2020; Lange, Duran, & Jackson, 2019). LGBTQ+ faculty, staff, students, community advocates, and allies have confronted the historical and ongoing constraints of institutional bias, ranging from benign ignorance and neglect, at best, to outright prohibition, at worst. In fact, the development of this new Journal of Queer and Trans Studies in Education can be construed as part and parcel of a broader epistemological movement in higher education not only to shift LGBTQ+ knowledge production, circulation, and mobilization from margin to center but also to defy disciplinary parameters that delimit radical explorations of sexual orientation and gender identity.

To question, then, the whiteness and eurocentrism of queer and trans studies is not about calling for inclusion within the field. It is not about sprinkling Black, Brown, and non-US/western perspectives in an otherwise whitestream epistemology on gender and sexuality. It is fundamentally about disrupting and reconstituting the field and its dominant foundations and legacies. Sister Outsider, a collection of essays and speeches by Audre Lorde, was published in 1984, and the semi-autobiographical book Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza by Gloria Anzaldúa was released in 1987, both prior to the 1990 publications of Sedgwick’s Epistemology of the Closet and Butler’s Gender Trouble. Yet the vanguard contributions of Lorde and Anzaldúa, two lesbians of color with cultural and political ties to the global majority within and beyond the United States, have not been, until somewhat recently, considered central to the intellectual genealogy of queer and trans studies (Ferguson, 2003; Muñoz, 1999). I question the single-issue focus of queer and trans studies that attends only to LGBTQ+ concerns but does not scrutinize how other markers of difference intersect with or constitute this identity (Collins, 2019; Crenshaw, 2015). This is especially true for research and advocacies that sociologist Roderick Ferguson (2018a) calls “one-dimensional queer,” which focus on sexual and gender freedom but do not interrogate their whiteness, male-ness, middle-classness, or able-bodiedness. On the one hand, only the position of marginality is examined (i.e., nonnormative sexual orientation or gender identity), but not positions of dominance or complicity to dominance (i.e., race, class, ability). On the other hand, the interpretive lens of intersectionality is relegated to the analysis of multiple oppressions (e.g., how impoverished lesbians of color are marginalized due to the interlocking and compounding vectors of race, gender, sexuality, and class) but is not employed to track the varying indexes of power, oppression, and privilege that can occur simultaneously.

Theorizing Within and Beyond the United States

To counter the overwhelming whiteness and eurocentrism in queer and trans studies in education, I build on the interpretive lens of queer of color critique that resists methodological nationalism, forges transnational interrelatedness, and disrupts eurocentrism by linking LGBTQ+s of color in the U.S. with the global majority. In his formulation of queer of color critique, Ferguson (2018b) indicates that it was “born out of circumstances that required a critique of liberal social formations and their contradictions, circumstances that would emanate from a variety of local, national, and international contexts.” He refers to works by queer Asian American studies scholars, Martin Manalansan’s Global Divas: Filipino Gay Men in the Diaspora and Gayatri Gopinath’s Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures, as examples of ethnographic and cultural examinations of LGBTQ+ immigrant lives and diasporic sexualities. Their works showcase the interlocking dynamics of racial capitalism, immigrant labor, cultural production, colonialism and nationalism, and globalized contexts. They demonstrate how queer of color critique “interrogates social formations as the intersections of race, gender, and class with particular interest in how those formations correspond with and diverge from nationalist ideals and practices” (Ferguson, 2018b, n.p.). They also “challenge modernist linear narratives of sexual formations that rendered the particular subjectivities of non-white and non-Western queers illegible” (n.p.). To surface often-sublimated aspects of queer of color critique, I highlight Ferguson’s own points as necessary interventions to direct attention to Asian and Asian American LGBTQ+ subjects who are largely invisible in queer and trans studies and also to contend that the mobilization of queer of color critique should not always center the United States as its exclusive unit of analysis geographically or epistemologically.
A growing scholarly corpus on LGBTQ+s of color in education in the United States constitutes an important line of research at the intersection of race, gender, sexuality, and education. I am inspired by and build on the pioneering works of Kevin Kumashiro (1999), Cindy Cruz (2001), Lance McCreary (2004), and Ed Brockenbrough (2012), who theorize, document, and examine the realities of racialized LGBTQ+ educators, students, and communities. However, research on LGBTQ+ from the global major outside of the United States remains a significant gap in the field of queer and trans studies in education. There are a few noteworthy exceptions, including research by sociologist Dennis Francis in South Africa, social work and counseling scholar Diana Kan Kwok in Hong Kong, and Panamanian-born and U.S.-based education scholar Juan Ríos Vega. In his latest book Queer Activism in South African Education, Francis (2023) examines how cishegender normativity operates in post-apartheid schools and society. Although South Africa is the first country in the world to constitutionally prohibit discrimination based on sexual orientation and is the first country in Africa to legally allow same-sex marriage, he documents how school policies, curricula, and routines continue to privilege cisgender and heterosexual norms. Consequently he showcases the various ways social justice educators and activists within and outside of schools combat anti-LGBTQ+ prejudice and discrimination to cultivate inclusive environments as central to post-apartheid education. Meanwhile, Kwok employs feminist and rights-based approaches to document the hostile conditions experienced by tongzhi or LGBTQ+ students in high school and college and publishes her research in academic and public media outlets in both Chinese and English languages to enact a paradigmatic shift among educators and mental health professionals in Hong Kong. Similar to Francis, Kwok turns to resources outside of formal educational institutions for queer and trans support and advocacy, such as non-governmental organizations, community services, and peer support groups (Kwok, 2018; Kwok & Kwok, 2022). Lastly, Ríos Vega (2020b, 2021) conceptualizes “transnational mariposa consciousness” to reclaim the pejorative term mariposa or “butterfly” in Spanish that describes effeminate or gay Latinx men and to reappropriate it for positive and empowering use. He has also published a bilingual Spanish and English children’s book that spotlights a “fairy boy” who yearns to participate in Panama’s Carnival and is able to fulfill his dream with his grandmother’s and family’s support (Ríos Vega, 2020a). Writing for multiple audiences and traversing nations, languages, and cultures, the scholarly and non-academic publications of Francis, Kwok, and Ríos Vega offer queer epistemological exemplars that interrogate apartheid, colonialism, religiosity, patriarchy, homophobia, and racism, and that simultaneously affirm affective bonds across communities and generations.

What is important for researchers, educators, and advocates in the United States when reading and utilizing queer and trans projects – or any project, for that matter – that are located outside of the U.S. is to understand and ground them in their own terms. It is imperative for us to situate and comprehend such work within their historical, socio-cultural, political, and linguistic contexts. Hence, we need to suspend our U.S.-centric epistemological frames and references that can function as unchecked normalizing comparisons or implicit omissions in encounters with transnational differences. In other words, LGBTQ+ experiences and conditions in the U.S. are neither universal nor standard around the world. Even critical perspectives, such as queer of color critique, if primarily embedded within a U.S. nationalist epistemology, could end up being limited in their interpretive and methodological utility, and could fail to make generative global analytical connections. There is much to be gained and learned when we meaningfully engage with LGBTQ+ epistemologies and cultural imaginaries beyond the United States.

Imagining Otherwise

In advancing queer and trans studies in education, I am interested in decolonizing queer epistemology that decenters the west and especially the United States as the primary frame to understand, compare, represent, and advocate for LGBTQ+ lives and issues. Toward this objective, I draw analytical insights from Taiwan-based cultural studies scholar Kuan-Hsing Chen’s (2010) Asia as Method: Toward Deimperialization for a few key reasons: its attention to Asia, the geopolitical focus of my transnational research across the Pacific, and its deployment of cultural studies to advance the intellectual and political project of decolonization. Central to Chen’s research is the concept of cultural imaginary, defined as the space that constitutes what postcolonial theorist Edward Said refers to as “cultural forms and structures of feeling” (p. 111). Cultural imaginary is “a result of the encounter between colonialism and local historical and cultural resources,” operating on the “terrain of the popular,” linking “concrete experiences of daily life,” and “shaping the imaginations of both colonizing and colonized subjects” (p. 111). For Chen, decolonization “no longer simply means the struggle for national independence but a struggle against any form of colonization” that is “active in geocolonial sites on the levels of identification and cultural imaginary” (p. 112). He maintains that “to decolonize the colonial cultural imaginary so as to free colonizing and colonized subjects from the limits imposed by colonial history is an important task for a politically committed cultural studies” (p. 113). By examining the boys love genre from Asia and, more specifically, BL shows from the Philippines, I demonstrate how “the cultural imaginary is where the political intervention of cultural studies … can make a difference” (p. 111).

Toward my goal of decolonizing queer epistemology, I also deploy the framework of cultural studies in education, especially its use of popular culture to elucidate and disrupt normalized ways of being and knowing in schools and society at large. In this regard, I derive theoretical and empirical inspiration from the work of education scholars Erica Edwards and Jennifer Esposito (2019), who define popular culture as “produced by lay people to express their shared cultural and social interests” and as “an ideological institution that exists to transmit and maintain power and control” (p. 8). They focus on popular culture as a key site for scholarly investigation

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because it is “educative”: it “has something to teach us – particularly through its emphasis on representing people’s philosophies, ways of life, values, and tastes” (p. 1). It “teaches audiences what and how they should think about people, places, objects, and issues” (p. 12). Through the cultural studies tradition of Stuart Hall and the Birmingham School, they consider popular culture as functioning in oppressive and emancipatory ways, therefore contradictory and messy. Through feminist of color theorizing and methodology of intersectionality, they highlight that “the most popular aspects of culture tend to come from the lives, beliefs, and practices of people who are marginalized by society” (p. 10). Edwards and Esposito maintain that, although popular culture may seem like “an innocuous form of entertainment” (p. 11), it can either reinforce the status quo or be a source and site of resistance. In the Philippines, the BL shows serve as a form of public pedagogy to raise awareness and shift perspectives about queer lives and living in a country that is somewhat socially liberal yet politically conservative when it comes to the LGBTQ+ community (Coloma, 2013b).

Moreover, education scholar J. B. Mayo (2017) argues that “the media, in its many forms, commands a substantial amount of power over how our youth view, interpret, and understand the world” (p. 303). In his examination of LGBTQ+ representations in film and television, he suggests that “the national conversation is shifting in that the one bullied is now often viewed with sympathy and compassion” (p. 303). Within the past 15 years, scholars of popular culture, youth, and education have analyzed television shows that include LGBTQ+ characters and plotlines, such as Ugly Betty (2006-2010) and Glee (2009-2015) in the United States, as well as Shameless (2004-2013) and Sex Education (2019-2023) in the United Kingdom (Falter, 2013; Happel-Parkins & Esposito, 2015; Marshall, 2010; Vázquez-Rodríguez, García-Ramos, & Zurian, 2021). They address questions of representational authenticity and complexity of nonnormative genders and sexualities, debates between victimized vs. empowered narratives of LGBTQ+ characters, and comparisons between previous and more contemporary depictions of LGBTQ+ subjects. They also tackle the use and implications of popular culture as curriculum and pedagogical material, anti-bullying strategy, and affirmation of LGBTQ+ youth identities and relations. Ultimately, popular culture continues to be a crucial site where representations still matter, and those in the margins can imagine otherwise. Although the United States and other western countries have released other youth-oriented LGBTQ+ films and television series more recently, such as Love, Simon (2018), Love, Victor (2020-22), Heartstopper (2022-23), and Young Royals (2021-24), I contend that the boys love genre from Asia provides different themes and narratives about queer lives, subjectivities, and relations that are largely invisible in mainstream LGBTQ+ media and popular culture.

**Boys Love and Globalized Queer Cultural Imaginary**

The BL shows from Asia offer a cultural imaginary from the global majority that departs from U.S. and western tropes of queer identities and same-sex relations. The storylines in BL dramas narrate homosocial, romantic, and/or erotic relations between two young men, mostly in high school or university settings (Baudinette, 2020; Devilles, 2021; Fermin, 2013; Welker, 2022). BL started from Japanese yaoi manga in the 1970s that featured homosocial or homoerotic dynamics between male characters, often in essentialized and binary representations with one character taking on the role of seme, the masculine pursuer and dominant sexual top, and the other in the role of uke, who is the pursued feminine and passive sexual bottom. While BL initially appeared in comic books and graphic novels, it has expanded into various multimedia formats, such as television shows, web series, video games, and feature-length films, and since the 2010s, it has proliferated in other Asian countries, especially in the Philippines, South Korea, Taiwan, Thailand, and Vietnam. Each BL show generally has 8 to 15 episodes, with each episode lasting about 15 to 30 minutes. With many BL shows available online through YouTube and accessible with subtitles and/or dubbed in English, this Asian-themed queer cultural genre has generated a sizable global audience with fans and viewers of diverse racial/ethnic backgrounds, genders, sexualities, and age groups, spanning across Asia, North America, Europe, and Latin America (Baudinette, 2020; Welker, 2022).

In *Queer Transfigurations: Boys Love Media in Asia*, editor James Welker (2022) highlights four major themes in the BL genre: boys love is a “transnational and transcultural media phenomenon”; it is “a useful tool for unsettling gender and sexual norms”; it “cannot be separated from LGBT(Q) issues”; and “BL is political” (p. 4). BL shows address important LGBTQ+ topics, such as same-sex attraction and affection, love and romance, affirmation of one’s gay or bisexual identity, acceptance from family and friends, and reconciliation with religion and sexual orientation. Such positive and affirming representations of same-sex male relationships in popular culture can be quite controversial, especially in countries with pervasive LGBTQ+ intolerance, censorship, and discrimination. Although the initial primary audience of BL mangas was heterosexual women seeking alternative depictions of sex and romance in Japan’s patriarchal society, the global consumers of BL now include a much broader audience, including LGBTQ+ viewers. The BL genre has also received criticisms, such as its unrealistic renditions of queer identities and same-sex relationships that show young men developing romantic feelings for each other without openly acknowledging their gay or bisexual sexual orientation and its problematic portrayals of assigned female at birth and trans characters that render them as antagonistic, peripheral, or farcical. Additional criticisms include some individuals’ concerns over the genre’s potential danger of indoctrinating youth by displaying the normalized acceptance of homoromantic and homoerotic dynamics between young men and its inability to address systemic discrimination by not openly confronting anti-LGBTQ+ political issues. I concur that the BL genre does not offer a perfect representation of queer lives, relations, and social dynamics. Like all content and forms in popular culture, it has limits and flaws. However, I

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contend that just because BL is not completely unproblematic does not mean it cannot be useful or, to borrow from Edwards and Esposito (2019), “educative” (p. 1).

In this article, I focus on three highly rated and well-received boys love shows from the Philippines: Hello, Stranger (Gazmen, Garalde, & Ang, 2020), Oh, Mando! (Derla, 2020), and The Boy Foretold by the Stars (Cabrido & Sta. Maria, 2020).3

Hello, Stranger brings together two unlikely university students: Mico Ramos, a studious nerd with a small, close-knit group of friends, and Xavier de Guzman, a popular star athlete in a rocky relationship with his girlfriend. Their course instructor asks Mico to work with the underperforming Xavier in a literary project. While spending time together, they start becoming attracted to each other, thereby generating confusion about their sexuality and uncertainty about their friendship. After revealing these new feelings to Mico’s supportive friends and Xavier’s ex-girlfriend, Mico and Xavier meet in person, sing “Kahit na anong sabihin ng iba” (“It doesn’t matter what others say”), and tearfully embrace to begin their budding romantic relationship.

Oh, Mando! focuses on timid college student Armando (Mando) Deputado Jr., who meets and falls for confident basketball jock Barry Cruz. However, Barry already has a boyfriend, and his sister Krisha actively pursues Mando to become his girlfriend. The series incorporates a staged production of Shakespeare’s Romeo and Juliet with Mando and Krisha playing the lead roles and a fantasy dream sequence of the Rapunzel fairy tale with Mando as a wigged Rapunzel and Barry as the prince. In a series that combines romance and breakups, Barry’s attempted suicide for causing distress to his sister, and eventual reconciliations, it ends with Mando and Barry slow-dancing openly in a beautifully lit bridge with other couples and urban traffic in the background.

The Boy Foretold by the Stars showcases Dominic Cruz, an openly gay and actively involved student in a private Catholic school, who gets paired with fellow student and basketball athlete Luke Armada in a school-sponsored religious retreat. Prior to the retreat, Dominic consults a fortune teller who informs him about meeting his soulmate and gives him three signs about his match. In a film that features teenage angst, ambivalent romance, and selfless sacrifices, at the end, Dominic confronts Luke about their feelings and destiny. Luke, who relies on coin flips to make difficult decisions, goes against the final coin flip result and kisses Dominic as he confesses his love for him.

Analyzing these coming-of-age BL shows alongside extant scholarly literature in queer studies, I will delineate three approaches in decolonizing queer epistemology: (1) disrupting the eurocentric regime of truth in queer epistemology; (2) affirming alternative queer ways of knowing and becoming; and (3) embracing love, joy, and fantasy in queer living and futurity.

Disrupting the Eurocentric Regime of Truth

Decolonizing queer epistemology aims to defy the eurocentric hegemony of queer understanding within the United States and beyond. It challenges a queer imperialism that sets white subjects, knowledge, and practices as standard and superior over those in the global majority (Coloma, 2013a). The BL genre, with Asian characters, storylines, and transnational distribution, disrupts the putative universality of whiteness as normative of LGBTQ+ lives, conditions, and relationships. The three BL shows Hello, Stranger, Oh, Mando!, and The Boy Foretold by the Stars build on existing cultural archives of LGBTQ+ productions and representations in the Philippines and the Filipino diaspora that are gaining a broad global circulation and audience. The popularity of the BL genre speaks to what film and visual media scholar José Capino (2020) indicates as the juggling act of queer cultural imaginary, especially in conservative countries like the Philippines: “‘gay-themed’ [shows can be] a viable form of mass entertainment by accommodating the often contradictory goals of attracting a mainstream audience, destigmatizing sexual deviants, and advancing a provocative—if also tactically calibrated—politics of visibility” (pp. 213-214). As literary and cultural critic Robert Diaz (2015) suggests, “popular culture, including new media, compels queer Filipino/a studies to include divergent mediascapes that circulate narratives about gender and sexuality” (p. 724). He urges queer and trans scholars to be “invested in a politics that attempts to think through, reflect upon, and challenge the hierarchizing modes of visibility that structure not only what we study but how we study these globalized queer communities and discourses” (p. 743).

Diaz’s suggestion to invest in a politics of visibility that critically reflects on the deployment and impact of a globalized queer cultural imaginary aligns with the move of decolonizing queer epistemology by resisting what I call methodological (homo)nationalism. While methodological nationalism centers the nation-state as the unit of analysis, incorporating the concept of homonationalism juxtaposes Jasbir Puar’s (2007) critique of white LGBTQ+ subjects in the “imbricated manifestations [of] sexual exceptionalism, queer as regulatory, and the ascendancy of whiteness” (p. 2) that privilege them over queer and trans people of color and the global majority. Central to disrupting the eurocentric regime and refusing methodological (homo)nationalism is a serious reconsideration of the normalized transnational flows, not only of cultural imaginary, but also of history, politics, economy,

1These three coming-of-age BL shows from the Philippines featuring gay and/or bisexual male characters in high school and university settings attracted positive reviews and wide viewership. Although Oh, Mando! did not have a second season, Hello, Stranger had a film sequel released in 2021 that brought Mico and Xavier, alongside their friends, an ex-girlfriend, and a new love triangle, to a writing camp by the beach. With the commercial and critical success of The Boy Foretold by the Stars in the Metro Manila Film Festival in 2020, a television series sequel titled Love Beneath the Stars was released a year later that showcased the joys and challenges of Dominic and Luke’s relationship in an all-boys Catholic school.

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Filipino BL shows deviate from most BL series in Asia and gay-themed media in the west. In his analysis of Filipino BL, media scholar Erwin dela Cruz (2022) argues that, in its glocalization, some aspects of Japanese and Thai BL are evident, while others are not. For instance, the themes of “homsociality and the existence of love triangles involving the main leads” span across the BL genre in various Asian countries (p. 90). However, he points out the insignificance of coming out and the sympathetic portrayal of female characters as major themes that make Filipino BL stand apart from many Asian and western depictions of gay and bisexual men’s identities and inter-personal dynamics. Coming out, or the public disclosure of one’s non-heterosexual identity and orientation, is an important discourse and enactment in LGBTQ+ communities in the west and in most BL depictions of their male lead characters. However, in Filipino BL shows, coming out does not play a central role in driving their dramatic narrative structures and character development trajectories. In Hello, Stranger, for example, the brokenhearted Mico shares his true feelings about Xavier to his supportive close friends, yet never names his identity as gay or his interest in Xavier as becoming his boyfriend. Related, both Xavier in Hello, Stranger and Luke in The Boy Foretold by the Stars are college and high school jocks who end up revealing their new and confusing feelings about their male classmates to their girlfriends without labeling their identities and feelings as gay or bisexual.

Moreover, Filipino BL shows depict gay and bisexual male, as well as heterosexual female, characters differently compared to other Asian BL series. The basketball athlete Barry in Oh, Mando! and campus leader Dominic in The Boy Foretold by the Stars are out bisexual and gay young men, respectively, and they are comfortable about their sexual orientations. The portrayal of out gay and bisexual characters in Filipino BL diverges from the overwhelming majority in the BL genre that focuses on heterosexual young men who develop feelings for and become romantically involved with another man. Heterosexual female characters in Filipino BL are also generally shown in positive and supportive roles. As girlfriends or former girlfriends, they lament over the loss of their relationship, but they do not blame the male protagonist for developing feelings for another man or for not being honest about his true sexual identity or orientation. In Oh, Mando!, Krisha is upset with her brother Barry not because he is bisexual but because he is having an affair with her boyfriend Mando. As best friends or mothers in these shows, the female characters demonstrate love, understanding, and compassion for the young men grappling with their feelings and circumstances. Such positive representations depart from usual depictions of female characters as villainous (ex-)girlfriends, unsupportive friends, uncaring teachers, and disappointed mothers in the BL genre and in LGBTQ+ shows in the west. When disrupting the eurocentric regime of truth in queer epistemology, which cultural imaginaries from the global majority are represented and how they are made visible truly matter. As depicted in the Filipino BL shows, the selection of which topics are addressed or not (e.g., non-salience of coming out) and the portrayal of particular characters (e.g., gay/bisexual men and heterosexual women) offer important cultural perspectives that distinguish Filipino BL from western LGBTQ+ media and from other Asian BL series.

**Affirming Alternative Ways of Knowing and Becoming**

Decolonizing queer epistemology argues that even insurgent fields like queer and trans studies in education have their conceptual, methodological, and pedagogical gaps. Even as queer and trans studies in education fights for legibility and legitimacy, we must attend closely to the politics of inclusion and exclusion within the field. We need to ask: Whose histories, cultures, and perspectives are told? And whose are not? In other words, as an already minoritized field in academia, how does it end up marginalizing its own others? Queer and trans people of color, as well as those from the global majority, have critiqued the overwhelming whiteness and eurocentric dominance that underpin the field’s epistemological foundations (Eng et al., 2005; Tudor, 2021). The power of whiteness and eurocentrism renders white LGBTQ+ histories, cultures, and representations as generalizable and ubiquitous across time and space and as the standard index against which othered LGBTQ+ communities and portrayals are compared, measured, and understood. For instance, even as Sedgwick notes her focus on western culture in Epistemology of the Closet, her work is generally read neither as only particular to the west nor as solely relevant to white LGBTQ+ subjects. Her book circulates as one of the founding canons of queer studies, and her theorizing of the closet becomes emblematic of LGBTQ+ oppression in the west and across the globe. Consequently, white LGBTQ+ subjects become the implicit and de facto representatives of nonnormative genders and sexualities, rendering LGBTQ+’s of color and LGBTQ+’s from the global majority invisible or peripheral.

In his provocatively titled essay “Looking for My Penis,” artist Richard Fung (1991/2017) searches for gay Asian representation in mainstream and independent films and media. He contends that Asian men have been stereotypically portrayed as either the “egghead/wimp” or the “kung fu master/ninja/samurai,” who is “sometimes dangerous,
s, sometimes friendly, but almost always characterized by a desexualized Zen asceticism” (p. 88). When looking at “commercial gay sexual representation,” he adds, “the images of men and male beauty are still of white men and white male beauty” (p. 88.). As whiteness prevails in cultural depictions, so does white-centered erotic and viewing pleasure, even in situations that feature sexual intimacy between Asian men. In his analysis of the gay porn video Asian Knights, Fung scrutinizes a scene initially showing two Asian men having sex with one another and then a white man taking center stage in the action and in the frame. He argues that, even in gay media that highlights sex between Asian men, the white character serves as “a stand-in for the white male viewer who is the real sexual subject” (p. 91). Hence, “Asian-Asian desire, though presented as the main narrative force of the sequence, is deflected, or rather reframed from a white perspective” (p. 91).

Fung considers the impact of both desexualized imagery of Asian men and the hegemony of white gay male desire and gaze: “Often gay Asian men find it difficult to see each other beyond the terms of platonic friendship or competition, to consider Asian men as lovers” (p. 91). An important contribution of the BL genre in decolonizing queer epistemology, and by extension, queer desire, is Asian men in homoromantic storylines being foregrounded at the center without being averted by white gays and gaze.

When cultivating more affirming and multi-dimensional queer and trans portrayals from the global majority, it still matters who is in charge of their construction and circulation. For instance, a noteworthy divergence that marks Filipino BL is queer leadership at the helm of many productions. The directors of Hello, Stranger (Petersen Vargas) and The Boy Foretold by the Stars (Dolly Dulú) are both gay, and the straight ally director of Oh, Mando! (Eduardo Roy Jr.) led the production of other LGBTQ+ films, such as Quick Change and Fuccbois. Many BL shows in Japan, South Korea, and Thailand are based on BL novels that are geared toward a largely heterosexual female audience. However, there is hardly any Filipino BL novel or short story to convert into web series or films, with the exception of The Boy Foretold by the Stars, which is based on the director’s play written in college. Consequently, the formulation of Filipino BL, especially by gay directors and writers, appeals to a broader audience that is inclusive of LGBTQ+ perspectives and viewers. An unforeseen benefit of not having published BL manga and literature is that Filipino artists and creatives can craft their BL characters, themes, and narratives for a more diverse market, including LGBTQ+ audiences, instead of the primary focus on heterosexual female readers and viewers in other Asian countries. In other words, for LGBTQ+ viewers in the Philippines and in the diaspora like me, Filipino BL shows can feel like they were intentionally created for us, a rare cultural occurrence in both western LGBTQ+ media and mainstream Philippine media. Another difference in Filipino BL is the casting of gay and bisexual actors as lead protagonists. For example, the actor (Adrian Lindayag) who plays the character Dominic in The Boy Foretold by the Stars, and the actor (Alex Diaz) who plays Barry in Oh Mando! self-identify as gay and bisexual, respectively. The majority of lead characters in other BL shows are heterosexual men, a clear indication that the stigma of “playing gay” no longer results in a death knell for an actor’s career in Asia. Yet, it is also crucial for gay and bisexual actors, such as Lindayag and Diaz, to be chosen to play lead gay/bisexual roles because they can provide a genuine level of authenticity to their characters and can serve as role models for the LGBTQ+ audience and aspiring LGBTQ+ actors. Whereas heterosexual and cisgender actors are privileged to be given opportunities to play characters outside of their genders and sexualities, such is not the case for many LGBTQ+ actors. Therefore, for the rare lead queer and trans roles, casting LGBTQ+ actors, as exemplified by the selected Filipino BL shows, facilitates the complex and genuine narrations of their own individual and collective stories.

Another unique aspect of Filipino BL shows is the blurring of the seme-uke dynamic that is common in the BL genre. As briefly noted earlier, the seme generally denotes being more masculine, active, and physically larger, and the uke is usually more feminine, passive, and physically smaller, thereby replicating stereotypical heteronormative male and female roles in relationships. Dela Cruz (2022) argues that “this dynamic is almost absent” in Filipino BL shows (p. 92). For example, in his analysis of Hello, Strangers, he notes the seme and uke characteristics of the “muscular and athletic” Xavier and the “studious and introverted” Mico. However, “these characteristics do not play into their dynamic. Instead, their lines and gestures have no distinct dominant or submissive character” (p. 92). A similar commentary about disrupting the seme-uke dynamic can be said about Barry and Mando in Oh, Mando! and about Luke and Dominic in The Boy Foretold by the Stars. The masculine/dominant/active vs. feminine/submissive/passive binary breaks down when the outgoing bisexual jock Barry chases after the more reserved theater actor Mando who begins questioning his sexuality, thereby reversing conventional gendered and sexuality roles in same-sex relationships. Although both gay campus leader Dominic and popular athlete Luke put faith in destiny and luck in finding their soulmates, their attraction toward each other is underpinned by deeper personal values shared during a religious retreat rather than conventional flirtations as seen in teen romantic comedies.

Furthermore, Filipino BL deviates from other BL series by addressing socio-cultural and political issues pertaining to LGBTQ+ communities. Whereas the BL genre, in general, tends to shy away from overtly political themes, some BL shows from the Philippines tackle such topics openly, perhaps due to the LGBTQ+ directors, writers, producers, and actors involved in these projects. For example, in Oh, Mando!, the theater director, Mr. Siwa, who stages the Romeo and Juliet play, is fired by the university administration for his nonnormative sexuality and gender presentation. Students, including the out bisexual Barry, his sister Krisha, other gay students, and allies, hold a public protest on campus chanting “LGBT Rights” and advocating for Mr. Siwa. At the end of the show, the students see the reinstated theater director walking down the hallway, who subsequently encouraged them to...
audition for the following year’s production and reminded them to now call her “Ms. Siwa.” The Philippines is a highly contradictory country: a highly macho patriarchal culture that values strong women, and a Catholic stronghold in Asia with about 80% of its population practicing this faith, yet somewhat socially tolerant of LGBTQ+ individuals. So long as the LGBTQ+ community knows and stays in their place and does not clamor for equitable political rights, they would remain as second-class citizens in their country (Coloma, 2013). However, for queer creatives who understand the power of popular culture for social justice and change, addressing political themes as integrated into their artistic process and product functions as a powerful mechanism to affirm alternative ways of knowing and becoming.

When decolonizing queer epistemology, the question of who creates and controls non-western LGBTQ+ cultural narratives and their transnational circulation continues to be significant, especially in order to dispel orientalist tropes and the hegemonic white male gaze. With many LGBTQ+ creatives at the helm, Filipino BL shows center queer desire, romance, and intimacy between men, andblur conventional *sene-uke* dynamics that reinforce stereotypical cisgender/normative roles. They also openly confront LGBTQ+ political topics, such as anti-gay and anti-trans discrimination in schools and society, thereby mobilizing the transnational media platform not only for mass entertainment but also for public pedagogy of LGBTQ+ lives and experiences. By affirming alternative ways of knowing and becoming through BL from Asia, more multi-dimensional depictions of non-western LGBTQ+ realities and relations can circulate and be better understood globally.

*Embracing Love, Joy, and Fantasy*

To be fully recognized and understood for who you are is a necessary affirmation of LGBTQ+ subjectivity in schools and society that continue to be hostile, exclusionary, and oppressive. According to GLSEN’s latest national School Climate Survey, the “overwhelming majority of [LGBTQ+ students] routinely hear anti-LGBTQ+ language, and experience victimization and discrimination at school,” resulting in “worse educational outcomes and poorer psychological well-being” (Kosciew, Clark, & Menard, 2022, pp. xv; xviii). According to the Movement Advancement Project (n.d.), only six states in the United States (California, Colorado, Illinois, Nevada, New Jersey, and Oregon) have laws that explicitly require K-12 curriculum standards to include LGBTQ+ histories, experiences, and people. However, ten states (Alabama, Arizona, Arkansas, Florida, Indiana, Iowa, Kentucky, Montana, North Carolina, and Tennessee) explicitly prohibit the teaching of LGBTQ+ themes and issues in schools and/or require parental notification and allow parents to remove their children when LGBTQ+-relevant curriculum is taught. As of June 2024, the American Civil Liberties Union (n.d.) is tracking 523 anti-LGBTQ+ bills across the country, including curriculum censorship, school facilities bans (bathrooms and locker rooms), school sports bans (against trans student-athletes), and forced outing in schools. LGBTQ+ students, parents, educators, and allies have been mobilizing to provide spaces of support and inclusion within and outside of schools, often at the risk of their safety, well-being, and even jobs. Yet even out-of-school educational places that offer LGBTQ+ affirmation, such as drag story hours in libraries, bookstores, camps, and community centers, are under attack (Hollerbach, 2024). When schools reinforce cisgender/normativity and punish nonnormative genders and sexualities, students and teachers turn to educational sites outside of schools for more positive, inclusive, and complex representations of LGBTQ+ histories, cultures, and realities. For LGBTQ+ youth, educators, and even researchers, popular culture serves as a critical site not only for information and identification, but also for intimacy, insurgency, and imaginary.

The BL genre offers diverse representations of same-sex love, joy, intimacy, and fantasy that are woefully absent in the school curriculum and in school spaces that police LGBTQ+ identities and relationships (Duran & Coloma, 2023). In *Oh, Mando!*, Mando and Barry first bump into each other in the university area, where Mando becomes attracted to the basketball athlete. In *Hello, Stranger*, Mico and Xavier are paired together for a class project where new, unexpected feelings surface. In *The Boy Foretold by the Stars*, Dominic and Luke get to know each other at a school-sponsored religious retreat. Just like in real life, in the quotidian and fortuitous spaces of formal and informal education, queer romance emerges. Social media features young Filipino gay and bisexual men as BL couples in real life. Actors and real-life couple Paul Cervantes and Kennedy Nakar starred together in the BL series *Lakan* (2020–21). Actor and TikTok celebrity Jam Morales is involved in a two-year relationship with another young man and posts their dates, travels, daily routines, and family activities on YouTube, Facebook, and Instagram. While these two examples feature actors and celebrities in same-sex relationships, there are many other young Filipino LGBTQ+ couples whose romance and relationships are not publicly displayed in social media and popular culture yet are nonetheless real, affirming, and revolutionary.

Admittedly, BL shows offer fantasies of same-sex love and intimacy in an educational and societal climate of persistent homophobia and transphobia. Storylines of boy-meets-boy and then they fall in love are typical in gay romance. Similarly, the narrative plot of opposites attract is common in this genre: the athletic jock and the studious nerd; the outgoing and the timid; the masculine and the feminine; the popular student with many friends and acquaintances and the inconspicuous one with a close group of friends. In Filipino BL, the protagonists have supportive families and friends who accept them for being gay or bisexual, or for developing new attractions and feelings toward another young man. In a predominantly Catholic country like the Philippines, religion is generally not used in the BL series to pass judgment on the lead characters’ same-sex attractions or romantic relationships. However, whereas many BL shows do not openly address homophobia and transphobia, Filipino BL does, in spite of the genre’s general.
preoccupation with offering feel-good same-sex romance and fantasy. After all, theater director Ms. Siwa is fired for their sexual orientation and gender identity. Homophobic teasing is directed toward Mico at a writing retreat. Luke gets into a fight with a classmate who makes disparaging comments to Dominic about their relationship as a same-sex couple in an all-boys Catholic school. To combat anti-LGBTQ+ hate, the lead protagonists stand up to detractors and defend themselves. They rally in protest, confront bullies, and, when necessary, literally fight back.

While friends play an important role in LGBTQ+ lives, so do parents and siblings, as shown in Filipino BL. The “family is a central analytical unit and concept in studies of racialized minority and diasporic populations” because it “often brings up the structures and affect of home, belonging, security, and collectivity” (Coloma, 2018, p. 92). More specifically, the “search for love and acceptance within one’s family is a struggle that many queer individuals confront” (p. 97). In many LGBTQ+ films and shows, the protagonists’ relationships with their parents and siblings often suffer due to their sexual orientation or gender identity. However, that is not the case in many Filipino BL. For example, when Xavier tells his parents that he is no longer with his girlfriend and has developed romantic feelings for a male classmate, their initial reaction is ambivalence. They do not abandon or disown him; instead, they indicate their need for time to process this newly shared information. Although Mando is concerned about his father’s reaction if he were to find out about his sexuality, they actually become closer and more open to each other after Mando’s disclosure about his gay identity. At the other end of the spectrum, Barry is out to his family as bisexual and is quite close to his younger sister. Although Dominic is out in school as gay with two gay best friends, his sexuality is not openly discussed but implicitly recognized and accepted at home.

Given the romantic fantasy presented by the BL genre, cultural critic Gary Devilles (2022) cautions that “we cannot ignore the possibility of cooptation of the culture industry no matter how liberating it tries to be. What must be stressed here is that the depiction of gay concerns and issues stem from complex power relations that can be oppressive, legitimate, and normative” (p. 57). Heeding Devilles’ pointed critique, the BL portrayals of same-sex love and joy can seem improbable but not quite impossible. Moreover, sociologist Tricia Fermin (2013) suggests that the BL genre, as it originated from Japan, serves as “alternative erotic media that helps fans realise their sexual subjectivity and agency” especially in highly patriarchal cultures with toxic heteromasculinity. Comparing Japanese and Filipino BL audiences, she notes that Japanese fans are “detached and disinterested” in LGBTQ+ issues and can be “sometimes homophobic.” On the contrary, she finds that Filipino viewers “feel a great deal of sympathy and at times, identification with” the BL gay and bisexual characters due to the “strict, male-centred discourses of morality and sexual propriety in mainstream Filipino society” (n.p.). They view BL as generally connected to queer social and political issues that elicit “sympathy towards LGBTQ condition and causes” (n.p.).

In decolonizing queer epistemology, embracing love, joy, and fantasy functions as a necessary antidote to the general invisibility of non-western and, in particular, Asian same-sex relationships and intimacies in mainstream LGBTQ+ media and popular culture. Through the BL genre, normalizing portrayals of attraction, flirtation, and romance between young men can offer positive examples for LGBTQ+ youth who do not receive queer- and trans-affirming pedagogy in schools and for LGBTQ+ adults who have yearned for such representations growing up. In fact, schools miss the opportunity to foster inclusive and nurturing environments when they do not offer a curriculum that teaches about diverse gender identities and sexual orientations. As a result, youth and educators turn to popular culture, including cultural works from the global majority, for information on LGBTQ+ identity, intimacy, and imaginary. Since the BL genre has captured a growing transnational audience encompassing a wide range of racial/ethnic, gender, sexual orientation, and age groups, no doubt its popularity can be attributed partly to its kilig factor, an affective excitement generated by romantic and even fantasy depictions of attraction and love between young men. Such an affective response to the BL genre and, by extension, to the LGBTQ+ community has invaluable consequences for engendering love and joy and for cultivating allies and co-conspirators to combat the enduring climate of violence, hatred, and discrimination in schools and society at large.

Conclusion

Anywhere outside of Asia, it is rare to have Asian and Asian American male leads in mainstream film and television and even more rare in LGBTQ+ media. One of the few recurring gay Asian or Filipino characters in U.S. television was Mateo Liwanag in the sitcom Superstore (2015-2021). For this reason, the BL genre disrupts not only the general absence of Asian male representation in mainstream and LGBTQ+ shows but also challenges their limited portrayal as side characters whose storylines remain peripheral to the central narratives. It is, therefore, incredibly refreshing for BL shows with Asian men in romoromantic situations to reach a broad transnational audience through YouTube online and, more recently, streaming services like Netflix. Within the coming-of-age BL genre from Asia, I am particularly drawn to the BL shows from the Philippines, largely because my ethnic and linguistic background allows me to fully enjoy their artistic approach and cultural sensibility in addressing LGBTQ+ identities and intimacies. The three BL shows analyzed in this article, Hello, Stranger, Oh, Mando!, and The Boy Foretold by the Stars, feature young Filipino leads and casts that deal with the joys and travails of same-sex attraction, romance, and relationships in high school and university contexts. I promote the use of popular culture, such as films, television shows, and online series, as necessary public pedagogy for queer and trans teaching and learning. Popular culture provides a diverse range of mirrored, alternative, and even imagined realities, which offer affirming and relevant options for marginalized subjects who do not see themselves depicted in both formal education curricula and mainstream media. For queer and trans people of color and from the global majority, popular culture fosters and

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reinforces a cultural imaginary that showcases quotidian experiences, affective relations, and discursive knowledges otherwise illegible and illegitimate in normative regimes of gender and sexuality.

The limited scope and knowledge of education research on LGBTQ+s from the global majority outside of the U.S. context does not signify an actual dearth of research on this topic from scholars and educators outside of North America, Europe, and Australia. Rather, it reveals the imperialist imposition of whitestream queer and trans studies that problematically asserts the dominant superiority and universality of eurocentric theories, methods, and pedagogies while relegating knowledges and practices from the global majority as peripheral, particular, and unimportant. In other words, in spite of its putatively radical platform, the field of queer and trans studies has enacted its own intellectual imperialism. White-authored scholarship on queer and trans studies circulates and proliferates widely within and beyond the west. Yet scholarship on and by LGBTQ+s of color and LGBTQ+s from the global majority does not receive a similarly broad reception and usage. Peer-reviewed journals and academic books function as either gate-openers that privilege research written in English in standard academic format, or gatekeepers that marginalize research in other languages and formats. Moreover, engagement with research on LGBTQ+s from the global majority can end up being additive if merely used as non-western examples to elaborate on eurocentric concepts or frameworks, or being extractive if utilized without attention to harms or benefits towards impacted communities. To rectify such unequal power/knowledge dynamics and to properly depict and comprehend LGBTQ+ realities and conditions from the global majority, therefore, requires decolonizing queer epistemology.

In decolonizing queer epistemology, I employ the interpretive approach of cultural studies by analyzing popular culture from the global majority outside of the U.S. context and, in particular, the BL genre from Asia. I put forward three decolonizing approaches based on my examination of select Filipino BL shows and the extant scholarly literature in queer studies: to disrupt the eurocentric regime of truth in queer epistemology; to affirm alternative queer ways of knowing and becoming; and to embrace love, joy, and fantasy in queer living and futurity. These approaches challenge queer imperialism that establishes the universality of whiteness as the standard norm of LGBTQ+ histories, experiences, and intimacies. They resist methodological (homo)nationalism and reconsider transnational flows that direct knowledges and cultures from the global South to North and even across South to South. Decolonizing moves dislodge the white gaze and highlight non-white subjects as central actors (as well as directors and producers) of LGBTQ+ narratives and representations. They embrace ways of knowing and becoming that are germane to queer and trans people in the global majority, especially by attending to their socio-cultural, political, linguistic, and historical contexts. They dispute homophbic and transphobic violence, exclusion, and suffering as the primary mode of LGBTQ+ life and living.

Instead, they affirm loving and reciprocal relationships and kinships as central to LGBTQ+ well-being, conviviality, and futurity. Lastly, they reimagine queer epistemology from possibilities engendered by fantasy and speculation.

Moreover, focusing on BL shows from the Philippines advances additional aspects to decolonizing queer epistemology by marking their divergences from whitestream LGBTQ+ popular culture and other BL series produced in Asia. For example, the Filipino BL genre does not put emphasis on coming out as a central narrative trope and does not replicate the masculine/active and feminine/passive binary that reinforces stereotypical cisgender/normalized gendered and sexualized roles. It emphasizes the importance of family and friends not just for well-being and support but as irrevocably consequential for queer living and futurity. In particular, instead of antagonists or insignificant, women are depicted as essential in gay and bisexual men’s lives as close friends and family members. Lastly, Filipino BL takes up LGBTQ+ political issues and causes more openly, including anti-gay and anti-trans prejudice and discrimination in education and society-at-large. In the midst of the global pandemic, these BL shows not only offer creative intellectual inspiration but also became a surprising source of affective comfort, connection, and flights of fancy during troubling and uncertain times.

As the new Journal for Queer and Trans Studies in Education launches new scholarly, methodological, and pedagogical lines of inquiry, this article on decolonizing queer epistemology foregrounds cultural imaginaries from the global majority and seeks to reconsider what is canonical and foundational in queer and trans studies in education. It takes note of prevailing and implicit hegemonies and exclusions by foregrounding scholarly, educational, and cultural works by racially minoritized, Indigenous, and global South theorists, researchers, teachers, and artists and by accounting for intersectionality that indexes sexuality as always constituted by race, class, gender, and other markers of difference. It goes beyond whitestream perspectives centered in North America, Europe, and Australia and instead mobilizes largely untapped epistemologies from the global majority in Asia, Africa, Latin America, Indigenous communities, and their diasporas. By analyzing popular culture from the global majority, queer and trans studies in education can take a more expansive and radical approach to ways of knowing and becoming that recognize and celebrate those still peripheral to the margins as educative.

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