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Decolonizing queer modernities: the case for queer (post)colonial studies in critical/cultural communication

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ABSTRACT

In this essay, we advocate for a queer (post)colonial studies as a continuation of the critical foundational work that has been done by postcolonial feminists, women of color, queer people of color and non-academic activists. In doing so, we make the case for critical/cultural scholars to engage with queerness through postcoloniality and decoloniality as a way to lay bare the geopolitical imbalances and colonial entanglements in which queer scholarship is done. As an exemplar case study to support our argument, we examine the controversy that emerged from the Comprehensive Sexuality Education proposal in Ghana, West Africa. In the end, we argue that queer (post)colonial studies is imperative for critical/cultural communication because it refuses the Western heteronormative structures that claim to have domination over the bodies and future, turning instead to what we may imagine once our intimate desires are loosed from heteronormative, colonial, and homonationalist holds.

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Queer and (post)colonial theories began to take root in communication studies around the same time.[1] In 2002, Raka Shome and Radha Hegde coauthored their germinal essay on postcolonial approaches to communication studies.[2] In that essay, they charged critical/cultural studies scholars to bring postcoloniality and communication studies together by paying attention to the ways that issues of race, class, gender, sexuality, and nationality are entangled in geopolitical arrangements and cultural productions. Within this same period, Gust Yep, Karen Lovaas, and John Elia edited *Queer Theory and Communication: From Disciplining Queers to Queering the Discipline(s).*[3] This collection ruptured the silence around the violence of heteronormativity embedded in the theorizing of communication studies.[4] These essential works, among others, initiated scholarly conversations that communication scholars are still unpacking in 2021: How should we "queer" the field of communication studies? How can we substantively address the cisheteronormativity of our methods and theory? What would that future look like? And, in other spaces: How can we substantively address the coloniality of our methods and theory?[5] It is no coincidence that discussions about *queering* communication studies and calls to incorporate (post)colonial studies into critical/cultural work were catalyzed in the same period. Regrettably,

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these conversations have often failed to overlap or be explicitly acknowledged because while many queer (of color) scholars have acknowledged the importance of incorporating a critique of intimate modernity, postcolonial studies has been slow to take shape within the discipline, let alone attend to incorporating queer critique.

(Post)colonial studies emerged to analyze the social order from the perspective of those who were deemed abnormal and nonprogressive in relation to rhetorics of Western liberation and modernity. At the same time, queer theory emerged as a continuation of feminist politics against heteronormativity. Suitably, when put together, queer (post)colonial studies can unveil the subjugated knowledges of those whom modernity engages through the violent silencing of their voices, what Scott Lauria Morgensen describes as the "colonial necropolitics that frame[s] Native peoples as queer populations marked for death" as well as "the biopolitics of modern sexuality" that he terms "settler sexuality."[6] Other fields recognized the confluence of queer and (post)colonial studies before we began introductory conversations in communication studies.[7] As we consider queering communication studies, it is imperative to ask: How can we queer the discipline while attending to settler colonialism, the shifting geopolitical relations of the colonial aftermath, and contemporary forms of coloniality?

Here, geopolitical relations refer to the modalities that contemporary forms of colonialism and neocolonialism use to adapt and reproduce themselves in ways that can elude detection by our current methodological and theoretical tools. For instance, the concurrent comingling of US imperialism and gay rights calls into question the liberalism and fervent nationalism within which queer rights is implicated. Karma R. Chávez notes that if "queer politics and theory are implicated in liberalism and nationalism, they are also imbricated in the colonialism upon which liberalism and nationalism are partially premised."[8] Scholars such as Jasbir K. Puar have critiqued the imperialistic nature of gay rights.[9] She contends that Western human rights organizations champion sexual identity as an identity to protect while ignoring how other axes of difference such as race, class, embodiment, and nationality intersect with sexuality. Such single-issue discourses elide the web of racial, class, and global inequalities engendered by a neoliberal world order that works together with heteronormativity to violate racial and sexual minorities in contemporary LGBT political causes.

In communication studies, the ongoing charges to "queer the discipline" continue to lack a thorough analysis of how heteronormativity is entangled with (post)colonial politics, even though there have been numerous calls to do so.[10] Studies that portend to "queer the discipline" lack a thorough interrogation of their own imbrication with setter colonialism, neocolonialism, and coloniality. Similarly, numerous studies that indicate to do (post)colonial cultural critique fall short of *queering* boundaries and bodies as their cultural analyses of the nation-state, settler colonialism, US imperialism and globalization sometimes fails to critique the "colonial/modern gender" system itself.[11]

Given these ongoing criticisms and unfulfilled promises, we advocate for a queer (post)colonial studies as a continuation of the critical foundational work that has been done by postcolonial feminists, women of color, queer people of color and nonacademic activists. In doing so, we make the case for critical/cultural scholars to engage with queerness through postcoloniality and decoloniality as a way to lay bare the "uneven production of connections and disconnections between subjects, objects, and environments that demonstrate both the ways that racializing and colonizing processes

structure knowledge production and reinforce unjust material relations."[12] As an exemplar case study to support our argument, we examine the controversy that emerged from the Comprehensive Sexuality Education proposal in Ghana, West Africa. Ghana is a unique space to study the "politicization of homosexuality" because while other countries such as Nigeria and Uganda have created laws that recriminalize same-sex sexuality, the Ghanaian government have not pushed for such measures largely in fear of losing foreign investments and tourism. At the same time, the Ghanaian government has not created laws protecting the rights of queer Ghanaians (itself a form of violence). Over the years, religious leaders have demanded Ghanaian Presidents to publicly denounce "homosexuality" as an assurance that they will not pursue legislations that would decriminalize same-sex sexuality. An analysis of how this controversy transpired and its political ramifications reveals the critical intersections that queer critique and (post)colonial cultural critique share. We first present theoretical arguments underlying the need for a queer (post)colonial critique. Then we provide an analysis of the case study. Finally, we conclude with a turn toward queer decolonial futures.

Theoretical intersections: queer theory and (post)colonial cultural critique

Shome and Hegde wrote that postcolonial cultural critique provides "theoretical frameworks to understand ways in which cultures are constituted and contested."[13] However, less than 20 years later, scholars were already mourning the decline of postcolonial theory in the field.[14] Several critiques have been leveled against (post)colonial studies but one relevant to this essay is its evasion of questions regarding heteronormativity.[15] Postcolonial and decolonial scholars have noted how such omissions reproduce the "colonial/modern gender system" that disciplines queer subjects.[16] Ann Laura Stoler has argued that the regulation of intimacy is central to the maintenance of imperial power.[17] As such, downplaying issues of sexuality in (post)colonial studies can have dire consequences to those whose cultural knowledges, lands, and bodies continue to be circumscribed outside the logics of Western queer modernities. In specific countries in (post)colonial Africa, definitions of sexuality drawing from Victorian ideals on gender are now being used as the lens to craft the boundaries of "local sexual culture" and sexual citizenship.[18] This has implications on how we theorize sexual cultures and make references to "local" culture in critical/cultural studies as contemporary sexual cultures in non-Western places are a combination of various historical processes.[19] Thus, situating the regulation of intimacy, kinship, and desire as relevant to the cultural critique of postcolonialism, decolonization, indigeneity, and settler colonialism opens up analytical space for critiquing heteropatriarchy and its violent multivalent reproductions through the nation-state. Queer theory offers such possibilities.

Queer theory problematizes the homo/heterosexual binary that stabilizes and naturalizes heterosexuality.[20] Queer theory also calls expected values, beliefs, and relations into question by challenging normative bodies of knowledge. In doing so, queer scholars uncover hegemonic circulations of power and offer potential sites of resistance and new/alternative ways of knowing, being, and acting.[21] Nonetheless, there have been several calls for queer studies to shift from a singular focus on sexuality to an intersectional analysis where issues of race, gender, class, ability, nation, and the sex/body are central concerns. Merging postcolonial studies and queer studies opens up further

possibilities for intersectional analysis that resists simplistic binary categorizations such as Western—non-Western; Global North—Global South; heterosexuality—homosexuality, normativity—antinormativity.[22] This is essential because it resists simplistic categorization of identities, nations, and sexual subjectivities. Likewise, sexuality models such as heterosexuality—homosexuality hold little analytical currency in non-Western contexts where same-sex sexual activity does not necessarily lead to a stable sexual identity.

Queer (post)colonial studies can be used to critique the contemporary manifestations of US queer politics where the radical potential of "queer" among the mainstream LGBT movement has collapsed into a politics of inclusion into the US white capitalist heteropatriarchal nation-state. The inclusion has come with a price because as the support of LGBT rights has increased, support for issues pertaining to the lives of people of color have waned—what David Eng described as queer liberalism.[23] Chávez noted that queer liberalism has transnational implications "as the reduction of queerness to an aesthetics of choice may very well codify across the planet a Euro-American liberal-humanist tradition of freedom and democracy."[24] Puar adds that the incorporation of "LGBT rights" as symbolic sites of Western liberal humanist tradition of freedom and democracy can function imperialistically as the barometer of Western progress and liberal democracy.[25] Gay rights is often levied as a reason for violences against nonwhite and non-Western others who are typically portrayed as the ones threatening gay survival in as much as they are also rendered queer—sexually and culturally dissolute. In this vein, the inclusion of certain normative queer subjects into the US nation-state deserves scrutiny for how such inclusions are embedded within settler colonial logics and neocolonial geopolitical relations that initiated European conquest of the nonwhite world in the first place. A queer (post)colonial cultural analysis can address this "gay imperialism" by analyzing how gender and sexuality intersect with imperialism and settler colonial logics.[26]

Arjun Appadurai reminds us that today, as states have little control over their economic sovereignty, they end up asserting their sovereignty through culture.[27] Nations, governments, and non-Western queers across the world have also responded to gay imperialism and US homonationalism in ways that need theorization in critical/cultural studies. In parts of Europe, right-wing groups have temporarily taken up LGBT issues as reason to deny the human rights of refugees, embracing queerness as a way to shore up anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant rhetoric.[28] In parts of Africa, remnants of British colonial laws used to criminalize nonheterosexual sexual behaviors are being used to deny the humanity of many queer Africans, leading to various forms of discrimination and homophobic violence.[29] Thus, queer African scholars have demonstrated that it is unhelpful and blatantly false to attribute homophobic violence to innately African propensities.[30] Queer (post)colonial studies offers an analytical intervention into not only homonationalism but global responses to homonationalism. In the next section, we demonstrate the potential of a queer (post)colonial lens through a case study of the proposed Comprehensive Sexuality Education proposal in Ghana.

Finding queer (post)colonial grist: the case of Ghana's Comprehensive Sexuality Education proposal

In September 2019, newspaper reports surfaced that the Ministry of Education in Ghana was about to implement a Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) proposal. Between

September and October 2019, the Catholic Church, Ghanaian Pentecostalist Charismatic Church leaders (hereafter, GPCCs), some government officials, and the National Coalition for Proper Human Rights and Family Values (an anti-LGBT group with connections to the World Congress of Families—a group labeled as a hate group by the Southern Poverty Law Center) launched a campaign to oppose the proposed CSE curriculum.[31] These groups argued that the CSE is a Western campaign to indoctrinate the Ghanaian youth into same-sex sexual practices. The proposed CSE curriculum in Ghana includes information about human development, anatomy, and reproductive health, as well as information about contraception, childbirth, and sexually transmitted diseases like HIV. According to UNESCO, CSE is a rights-based and gender-focused approach to sexuality education.[32] Numerous studies have shown the benefits of CSE to the wellbeing of sexually active youth, benefits that abstinence-only programs lack. In fact, CSE also includes abstinence as one of many ways that adolescents can be informed about their sexual health. Recent studies on sexual education and adolescent sexual behavior indicate that adolescents who received CSE are less likely to experience teenage pregnancy.[33] In light of the evidence to the contrary, GPCCs and the Catholic Church diocese in Ghana have argued vehemently that the curriculum is against "Ghanaian/African culture and values" and also a neocolonial ploy to further colonize and control African bodies. This discourse is not only deployed among GPCCs and the Catholic Church in Ghana. Across Africa, various Presidents including the former president of Zimbabwe, Mugabe, have used similar comments to thwart any discussions about LGBT rights and homophobic violence. Nonetheless, what makes GPCCs and the Catholic Church's voice on this issue worthy of a queer (post)colonial analysis is their discursive articulation and (re)constitution of "African culture and values."

A queer (post)colonial cultural analysis raises ontological and epistemological questions about the purported "African cultural identity" that continues to be an ongoing site of (post)colonial ideological struggle. Sabelo J. Ndolovu-Gatsheni contends, "The epistemological line is simultaneously the ontological line."[34] In this vein, Stuart Hall also reminds us that "cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But like everything that is historical, they undergo constant transformation. Far from being eternally fixed in some essential past, they are subject to the continuous 'play' of history, culture and power" as part of the process of rediscovery that colonization distorted and disfigured.[35] If cultural identity is not an essence but a positioning, then how we understand that positioning matters. The recovery of a historical African subject by GPCCs and the Catholic Church to deny the rights of LGBTQI Ghanaians is guided by what Jacqui Alexander describes as heteropatriarchal recolonization—"the continuity between the white heteropatriarchal inheritance and Black heteropatriarchy"—to fix meanings about African cultural identity.[36]

A queer (post)colonial analysis deconstructs the particulars of heteropatriarchal recolonization by examining how "African cultural identity" is discursively deployed and utilized to maintain a narrow view of African subjectivity. Lewis noted that by the nineteenth century, Africans were deemed inherently biologically different and degenerate in relation to Europeans.[37] Central to this essentialist notion was Africans' supposedly pathological sexuality, forming the anxiety around which antihomosexuality and concubine laws were written. A queer (post)colonial analysis allows us to question the essentialist positions through which the (re)discovery of (post)colonial identity has forced many

nations to seek a destructive exclusive modern identity that places Christian cisheteropatriarchal men as normative subjects of modern identity. In short, the question of what is "Africanness" must be continually questioned as a queer (post)colonial project because of colonial institutions such as GPCCs and the Catholic Church that masquerade as innately African.[38]

Another discourse that emerged in the midst of the CSE controversy was Africans' "innate homophobia" in relation to a more progressive and liberal West. Reports harnessed from news websites in other African countries and Western news organization websites pointed to the "backwardness of Africans."[39] Ndashe explains that the global narrative of "homophobic Africa" stifles a more complex analysis of the phenomenon.[40] Kwame Otu argues that engaging in a complex analysis entails paying attention to the historical relations of power enforced and established through colonialization and Christianity.[41] More so, Thoreson cautions against the use of "homophobia" as an objective measurement of a country's treatment of its queer citizens.[42] A queer (post)colonial analysis provides not only a way to critique the shifting logics of colonial relationships and power but also the "queer liberalism" of the transnational LGBTQI movements.

In 2018, I (Godfried) attended an antihomophobic violence training for specific Gay and Lesbian Non-Profit Organizations in Accra, Ghana, sponsored by the Canadian Embassy. During the training, the Ambassador came to give his remarks and also to reassure the attendees that the Canadian government supports the LGBT community in Ghana. At the end of his speech, the Ambassador noted, "People in Ghana are still evolving on this issue, this is the same trajectory that Canada took years ago and now gays and lesbians can live freely." As a diasporic queer African participant who spends majority of his time in the United States, that statement jolted me. Did he mean Ghanaians are still evolving in the Darwinian sense or national recognition of gay rights was the proof that we are fully humans? Additionally, which gay Canadians is he referring to as free? Native/Two Spirit people or white settler LGBT individuals?

I (Jenna) recognize this discourse, one that white Western aid workers use often, though not perhaps when their African counterparts are in the room. Here the relegating of African spaces to a North American developmental past serves both a neocolonial and heteronormative purpose, even as it purports to support LGBTQ rights. The ambassador's comment institutes a linear path of development that refutes queer and non-Western temporalities at the same time as it relegates African subjects to a backward, barbarian past that makes Western aid requisite for Africans to reach the point of "living freely."

In sum, the Canadian Ambassador's statement oversimplifies the complex historical moments and contemporary material realities of two places with different but connected histories. While the British are no longer in administrative roles in Ghana, the colonial governments in the US and Canada are still there and still maintaining power and control over indigenous communities.[43] The logics underpinning his statement are reminiscent of homonationalism—where gay and lesbian identities are embedded within the logics of the modern nation-state and used to shore up US and Western exceptionalism.[44] Morgenson argues that homonationalism is an effect of US queer modernities that were formed during the conquest of Native peoples and Native lands.[45] A queer (post)colonial analysis interrogates the contemporary logics of queer modernities where the integration of LGBT subjects in to the US and Canada national imagery allows for the framing of the

West as exceptionally liberal and progressive in relation to the backward and regressive nonwhite others.

Toward queer decolonial future(s)

This essay forms a decolonizing bridge between queer and (post)colonial studies that can resist the strands of homophobia present in nationalistic discourses that rest on a homogenous view of national identity, insist on linear temporalities, and ignore the erotic as a possible site for decolonization. In conclusion, we offer our own recent work on desire and the erotic as one window into the decolonizing potential of queer (post)colonial studies. In a recent essay, I (Godfried) write that "the erotic allows for a kind of loving that unsettles institutionally maintained power relations that suppress our ability to seek alliances around our collective intersectional oppression."[46] As such, the erotic offers a valuable coalitional space where queer and (post)colonial theory may mix and mingle, demonstrating what tension, pleasure, and even life may be created in and through their meeting. I (Jenna) add that "desire produces futures that rupture and move beyond the violence of contemporary heteronormative, patriarchal, capitalistic coloniality," drawing us toward, even seducing us into, futures that are no longer predicated on the violences of heteronormativity and coloniality.[47] The erotic rearticulates solidarity as intimacy, which does not allow for the dehumanization of the Global South so often found in homonormative discourse. Precisely the opposite: The erotic opens us to radical understandings of others and their decolonial desires—desires that have the potential to remake the future. Queer (post)colonial studies is imperative for critical/cultural communication because it refuses the Western heteronormative structures that claim to have domination over the bodies and future, turning instead to what we may imagine once our intimate desires are loosed from heteronormative, colonial, and homonationalist holds.[48]

Notes

1. We use (post)colonial throughout the work, other than when referencing specific scholarly contributions, in order to recognize both shifting forms of colonialism as well as the continuation of coloniality.
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19. See, for instance: Kwame Otu, "Saints and Sinners: African Holocaust, 'Clandestine Countermemories' and LGBT visibility politics in Postcolonial Africa," in *Being and Becoming: Gender, Culture and Shifting Identity in Sub-Saharan Africa*, ed. Chinyere Ukpokolo (Denver, CO: Spears Media, 2016), 195–217.
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