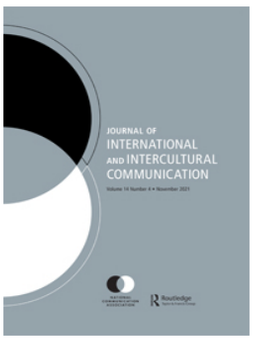

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Journal of International and Intercultural Communication

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rjii20

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To cite this article: Jenna N. Hanchey (2021) "The self is embodied": Reading queer and trans Africanfuturism in *The Wormwood Trilogy*, Journal of International and Intercultural Communication, 14:4, 320-334, DOI: 10.1080/17513057.2021.1931707

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/17513057.2021.1931707

Published online: 01 Jun 2021.

JOURNAL OF INTERNATIONAL AND INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION
2021, VOL. 14, NO. 4, 320–334
https://doi.org/10.1080/17513057.2021.1931707

"The self is embodied": Reading queer and trans Africanfuturism in *The Wormwood Trilogy*

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ABSTRACT

This essay examines the politics of embodiment in *The Wormwood Trilogy* in relation to queerness, transness, and decoloniality, and how the struggles for embodied self-determination are metaphorically connected to the struggles for African liberation in Africanfuturism. I argue that *The Wormwood Trilogy* affirms African queer and trans relations to embodiment by not only proclaiming the embodiment of the self, but also recognizing the importance of transformation and (re)creation to embodied personhood. I conclude with the ways using Africanfuturism as theory can decolonize queer and trans intercultural futures.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 1 September 2020
Accepted 26 April 2021

KEYWORDS
Embodiment; africanfuturism; queer Africa; critical intercultural communication; coloniality

Imagine: An alien presence establishes itself inside a dome in the Nigerian countryside. A city grows up around it, because once a year the dome opens and when it does, the people around it are miraculously healed. So miraculously that the healing does not only affect those living and injured, but also those already dead and buried. The so-called "reanimates" walk again, repeat routines, but seem to have lost their spirit – their selves. The question arises: Who do the reanimates belong to? Are they still themselves, or do they now belong to the aliens, without whose technology they would have remained dead?

Tade Thompson builds to this question through his trilogy of novels, *Rosewater*, *The Rosewater Insurrection*, and *The Rosewater Redemption*, collectively referred to as *The Wormwood Trilogy*. The question of belonging is not simply one of property, but one of the politics of connection and disconnection. What is the self, and how is it dis/connected to embodiment? Thompson answers clearly through the character of Hannah Jacques, and it echoes through his novels like a refrain: "Selfhood is embodied."

At the end of the second book, Hannah Jacques' husband, Jack, the Mayor of Rosewater, makes a treaty with the alien representative. The Homians destroyed their own planet, long ago and far away, and instead of settling on space stations or setting sail on a ship, they decided to download their consciousnesses into a quantum computing system called the xenosphere, so that no matter how long it took their probes to find a suitable planet, they would wait, disembodied, until they could download themselves onto a new home. In order to postpone the colonial takeover of human bodies as vessels for alien consciousnesses, Jack Jacques allows the aliens to claim the reanimates.

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As the alien representative, housed in a body that once was a human named Alyssa, comes to inspect the reanimate bodies, Hannah Jacques places her body in the way, saying:

> You haven't saved your planet or your people. Those of you who survived should have stayed in the space stations. What you've done instead is to commit mass suicide. The mind is an illusion, a hologram generated by the body. What you've encoded is memory, and personhood is not just memories. Personhood is embodied.

In this essay, I investigate the queer and trans potential of this Africanfuturist trilogy that insists on the embodiment of the self. Beyond "affirm[ing] the body as a site of knowing" (LeMaster, 2020, p. 169), *The Wormwood Trilogy* uses a politics of embodiment that affirms African queer and trans epistemologies, setting them against both the global erasure of African theorizing and cisheteronormativity on the continent itself. Thompson's insistence that the self is embodied, juxtaposed with the corrosive disembodiment of colonizing forces, presents a particularly important example for critical intercultural communication scholars: an Africanfuturist perspective on the self demonstrating that African queer and trans embodiment must be connected to decoloniality (Asante, 2020a; Camminga, 2017).

In addition to answering Asante's (2020c) call "to expand research on queer African studies in intercultural communication research" (p. 32), this essay also accepts this special issue's invitation to examine the global politics of queerness and transness in relation to coloniality and futurity in intercultural communication. Thompson's Africanfuturism is both queer and decolonial at the same time, necessitating an approach to embodiment that does not look like white, Western performative queerness (Camminga, 2017). Over and over, his characters remind us: "the mind and body are one, irreversibly linked … the self is embodied." This grounding in embodiment reflects an Africanfuturist approach to queerness, one that recognizes the colonial roots of gendered binaries in Africa (Oyěwùmí, 1997), as well as the overdetermined Western influence on cisheternormativity in the continent. As Asante (2020a) argues, "To continually resist and disrupt heteropatriarchal power, it is necessary to decolonize." For Africans, queering, transing, and decolonizing must work in coalition.

This essay highlights the politics of embodiment in *The Wormwood Trilogy* in relation to queerness, transness, and decoloniality, and how the struggles for embodied self-determination are metaphorically connected to the struggles for African liberation within Africanfuturism. If intercultural communication examines interaction across cultural power lines, then *The Wormwood Trilogy* epitomizes such exchange in its portrayal of aliens attempting to colonize the Earth, beginning with Nigeria. As such, I use Thompson's books as the basis for theoretical understanding in this essay, drawing from wa Thiong'o's (2012) understandings of poor theory and globalectical reading to do so.

The essay unfolds in the following manner: First, I introduce African queer and trans perspectives, examining how queer and trans futurities show up in Africanfuturism and explaining how intercultural communication scholars can read Africanfuturist literature as a means of generating theory. Second, I trace how *The Wormwood Trilogy* affirms African queer and trans relations to embodiment by not only proclaiming the embodiment of the self, but also recognizing the importance of transformation to embodied personhood and celebrating the potential of selves to (re)create their own bodies. I conclude

with the ways reading Africanfuturism as a basis for intercultural theory can connect decolonization to queer and trans futures.

The queer and trans potential of Africanfuturism

Queer and trans Africa

Though the terms "queer" and "trans" are not without problems, many African scholars find they hold potential for understanding African sexual and gender nonconformativity (Asante, 2020a, 2020c; Camminga, 2017; Matebeni & Pereira, 2014; Ncube, 2020; Nyanzi, 2014). However, queer and trans cannot simply be levied in an African context without attending to the ways those frameworks are constructions emerging from Western epistemologies. There is a myth, ironically perpetuated by Christian religious organizations on the continent, that non-normative gender and sexual expression in Africa is Western in origin (Asante, 2020c). To unreflexively respond to this myth with Western frameworks would be similarly problematic. African scholars demonstrate how queerness and transness must be rethought within African contexts in order to be useful to those who experience sexual and gendered oppression on the continent.

For Asante (2020c), "*queer* encompasses the pluralistic African sexualities viewed as discursively mediated, historically situated, and materially conditioned … the various non-normative genders and sexualities that cannot be neatly captured by the globalized LGBT acronym" (p. 22). Queer in this sense may not necessarily conform to white, Western definitions of "gay," "lesbian," or "homosexual," but rather attends to the way that nonnormative gendered and sexual embodied acts, discourses, and silences emerge in and through particular sociohistorical, cultural, familial, and material conditions. Thus, Matebeni and Pereira (2014) consider "queer" as "an inquiry into the present, as a critical space that pushes against the boundaries of what is embraced as normative" (p. 7).

Similarly, transing communication, according to Yep et al. (2015): "is a practice that examines how gender is contingently assembled and reassembled with other structures and attributes of bodily being such as race and nation" (p. 82). As such, transing communication "prioritizes the experiences of people in their own gendered bodies as they engage with the social world" (p. 82), privileging bodily experience, sensation, and meaning-making over the categories that organize gender and sexuality in particular gendered systems (LeMaster et al., 2019). In a South African context, Camminga (2017) sees redefining "trans" as a means of opening "possibility for gendered existence within a wider decolonial framework." In this manner, African queerness, transness, and Africanfuturism intersect by centering the myriad experiences, contexts, and embodied lives of the continent, while questioning the contemporary limitations placed on them and how they may move toward future liberation.

Queerness, here, might not show up only in light of sexuality, or of particular manifestations of sexuality recognized within white, Western homonormative structures as "queer" (Nyanzi, 2014). Rather, if we understand cisheterosexism as "an intersectionally constituted colonial structure designed to privilege particular intersectional modes of embodiment, identity, and relationality as it dominates others" as LeMaster argues (Manning et al., 2020, p. 418), then nonnormative embodiments can function as queer

and trans in their resistance to coloniality. For instance, Macharia (2016a) describes how his work on shifting gender and sexual embodiments in African contexts often doesn't register as "queer" in a Western framework. He "see[s] yawns lining up" as Westerners ask "Where are 'the queers'?" meaning "where are the white people we can care about?" and "where are the Europeans and US inhabitants we can care about?" (p. 186). African queerness is sometimes unintelligible to white, Western theoretical structures.

Indeed, African epistemological systems writ-large often register as unintelligible to white, Western thought. Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018) argues that this is due in large part to the ontological erasure of African and Black subjects as beings in their own right: "White races claimed complete *being* for themselves and pushed African people into a perpetual state of *becoming* – a state of incompleteness" (p. 252). He sees this as part of the condition of coloniality, a matrix of power that erases both African ontologies and epistemologies. Importantly, Ndlovu-Gatsheni declares that challenging coloniality is an embodied venture, as decoloniality "demands the unpacking of the Cartesian notions of being" (p. 244). African subjectivity requires theorizing in ways that divest from white, Western, heteropatriarchal philosophies that so easily sever self from body. Again: selfhood is embodied.

In addition, from an African epistemic perspective, selfhood is not only embodied, but relational (Asante, 2020a). Thinking of the embodiment of the self as only individual uses Western logics and recenters coloniality (Camminga, 2017). Rather, drawing from Akan philosophies, Gyekye (1995) argues that African subjects are "amphibious": simultaneously individual and communal. In African epistemologies, the individual is preceded by the community – "a person becomes human only amid others" (Asante & Pindi, 2020, p. 225) – meaning that the subject arises from communal and contextual relations. Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018) adds that African subjectivity is constituted in and through resistance to coloniality, at the same time as having its own distinct cultural and material traditions. In sum, African subjectivities are communally-oriented and constituted through resistance to coloniality such that subjective embodiments of gender and sexuality are intimately tied to systems of colonialism, neoliberal imperialism, and racialization.

If subjectivity is interdependent with relations to others, environments, contexts, and structures of power, then it must be able to shift and change depending on those relations. Cruz and Sodeke (2020) argue that the African postcolonial context is organized through liquidities and fluidities, and that African subjects engage in "liquidities as communicative power sites" (p. 3). Akwaeke Emezi (2018) offers one way to think through how African selfhood and embodiment use liquidities as sites of power in relation to queerness, transness, and coloniality. They use both the terms "trans" and "*ogbanje*" to understand their embodied self. An *ogbanje* is an Igbo spirit-child, "a kind of malevolent trickster, whose goal is to torment the human mother by dying unexpectedly only to return in the next child and do it all over again." It was only when they connected being trans to being *ogbanje* that they understood their gender in the fullness of their colliding worlds: "maybe my transition wasn't located within human categories at all. Instead, the surgeries were a bridge across realities, a movement from being assigned female to assigning myself as *ogbanje*; a spirit customizing its vessel to reflect its nature." For Emezi, bodily transformation – or "mutilation," as they term it here – acts "as a shift from wrongness to alignment." At the same time, this transformation is not

unconstrained. Part of the reason they embrace the term "mutilation" is to reclaim it from the ways it was used against them:

> Still, there was a deep sense of transgression about what I was doing that I couldn't shake, especially as a Nigerian. It was too easy to tune into our communities and hear the voices heavy with disgust, saying that what I had done was disfiguring, that God had made me one way for a reason and I had no right to say or do otherwise, that I was mutilating myself.

Emezi's work to customize their body weaves together resistance toward coloniality – through both claiming the identity of *ogbanje* and revolting against colonially-imported religious beliefs – with gendered and sexual self-determination. As Emezi reminds us, the self is embodied, but that body can change, and even be remade by the self.

Africanfuturism and queer futurity

According to Macharia (2016b), queer African studies is "dominated by social science approaches" (p. 502) that often fail to have "a capacious imagination" (p. 501) for the experiences, contours, and expressions of queerness. These approaches act as a sort of "salvage anthropology" (Weston, cited in Musangi, 2018, p. 403) that rushes to capture essentialized versions of "African sexuality" before it is supposedly erased by globalization. The problem with this scholarship, for Macharia, is that:

> Once subject to that logic, it becomes impossible to value beauty, desire, pleasure, and play, to imagine creating liveable and shareable worlds where these elements are more than simply incidental, but are, instead, foundational to how those worlds are invented, inhabited, and sustained. (p. 504).

In this essay, I seek an alternative approach for intercultural communication studies of African queerness. I draw from Africanfuturism as a basis for theory that challenges homonormative Western approaches to queerness and allows for imaginational capacity. Tired of having her novels being referred to as "Afrofuturist," Nigerian-American author Nnedi Okorafor (2019) coined the term "Africanfuturism" to represent her work:

> Africanfuturism is similar to "Afrofuturism" in the way that blacks on the continent and in the Black Diaspora are all connected by blood, spirit, history and future. The difference is that Africanfuturism is specifically and more directly rooted in African culture, history, mythology and point-of-view, … and it does not privilege or center the West.

Africanfuturism is a form of speculative fiction that imagines visions of the future whose "default/center is African," not Western.

Africanfuturism requires its own terminology and trajectory, distinct from that of Afrofuturism, because too often diasporic understandings and representations of Blackness function to obscure African continental imaginings. As South African author Mohale Mashigo puts it, Afrofuturism "is not for Africans living in Africa":

> Our needs, when it comes to imagining futures, or even reimagining a fantasy present, are different from elsewhere on the globe; we actually live on this continent, as opposed to using it as a costume or a stage to play out our ideas. We need a project that predicts … Africa's future "postcolonialism."

That is, Afrofuturism often uses African languages, cosmologies, and contexts to address diasporic legacies, rather than continental ones.

Other African authors support Mashigo's and Okorafor's arguments that African science fiction needs a label distinct from Afrofuturism. In a discussion at WorldCon, Oghenechovwe Donald Ekpeki said that Afrofuturism "mostly pertained to the broader diaspora to the exclusion of stories from within the African continent itself" and Suyi Davis Okungbowa explained that he "did not believe what he wrote was Afrofuturism," as the term does not capture global contours of Blackness (Bacon, 2020). In fact, Tade Thompson himself described Afrofuturism as "'geopolitical inappropriate' as a descriptor of speculative fiction from the African continent" (cited in Samatar, 2017, p. 175).

As Mashigo (2018) highlights, Africanfuturism holds potential to imagine futures free from structures of coloniality, which takes much different form on the continent than it does in the diaspora. Global hegemonic forces have long attempted to foreclose the possibility of liberated African futures. In the Western colonial imaginary, Africa is equated with lack, emptiness, and backwardness (Mbembe, 2001; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018). Western futurisms thus posit the continent as "the zone of the absolute dystopia" (Eshun, 2003, p. 292) as an attempt to foreclose radical imagination that would act against Western neocolonial capitalist interests. By making African futures out to be impossible, they attempt to prevent resistance. This functions as what Currier and Cruz (2020) refer to as a "politics of pre-emption," a "mobilisation meant to ensure that another movement's imagined future does not materialise" (p. 83). By imagining the impossible, Africanfuturism manifests its own possibility and draws it into being (Hanchey, 2019, 2020).

As such, Africanfutures are also queer futures – nonnormative imaginings of relations (Ncube, 2020). Wabuke (2020) recognizes that "if Africanfuturism [… is] to center Blackness, [it] must also center Black womanhood and nonbinary LBGTQ identities." Queer Africanfuturist visions provide an opportunity to question "the terms of humanness provided by the colonizer" (Towns, 2020, p. 77) and instead rely on "a *shared* decolonial fight against the overrepresentation of Western man as the human" (p. 78) as well as the colonial logics of gender and sexuality that have emplaced him as such.

When writing *The Wormwood Trilogy*, Thompson was reflecting both on the lack of queer Africanfuturist writers and "the laws on homosexuality in Nigeria" that made him "feel ashamed" (Ryman, 2017). Whereas most alien invasions clearly map onto settler colonial narratives, Thompson's portrayal instead captures the creeping influence of neocolonialism – an alien takeover happening so slowly that it becomes difficult to recognize the need to resist (Hopeton Hay Podcasts, 2019). He also describes how the aliens represent the endgame of humanity if Western hegemony continues to drive us toward environmental devastation and collapse, thus connecting the pursuit of neocolonialism to the decline of the colonizer's humanity in their inability to recognize the importance of their own embodiment and its intimate imbrication in geopolitical and cultural contexts. *The Wormwood Trilogy* offers critical intercultural communication scholars a lens through which to examine how queer and trans African perspectives on embodiment can counter the dehumanization of Western colonial hegemony.

Globalectical reading and the decolonial imagination

To imagine beyond contemporary constraints requires the fictive. And the fictive is always a little queer. As Johnson (2020) powerfully writes, "If our current social lives are riddled with inequities, then the blueprint for justice must be imagined" (p. 83). Imagination is particularly important at the times when it feels the most constrained – when the most weight is arrayed against the possibility that one could imagine something different, could act on that imagination, could transform their world. Reading *The Wormwood Trilogy* globalectically is one means of unlocking such imagination.

wa Thiong'o (2012) describes globalectical reading as "breaking open the prison house of imagination," thus "declassifying theory in the sense of making it accessible" (p. 61). He definies globalectics as the interconnection between the global and the dialectical, encouraging readers to examine literature both within the local context of its writing and as a representation of intercultural power struggles. In this manner, wa Thiong'o presents literature as an in-road to theory, a "poor theory" stripped of ornamentation to make it more accessible to the masses (p. 4). Poor theory's accessibility is a matter of epistemic justice, as it questions hegemonic notions of who may produce theory and for what ends. By reading *The Wormwood Trilogy* globalectically, as situated within Nigerian worldviews and yet reflective of intercultural neocolonial political dynamics, I examine these works as space out of which theory may be developed. In a world where, as Macharia (2016b) laments, "Africa still does not feature as a theoretical point of departure for mainstream queer studies" (p. 500), Africanfuturism provides tools for constructing theory that demands the centrality of African ontologies and epistemologies to African lives, both present and future.

Centering Africanfuturist novels as tools for generating theory is important to global queer and trans studies in intercultural communication for three reasons. First, it renders African subjects as central to knowing and understanding the world, countering the epistemic injustice of coloniality that presents Africans as inagentic, atheoretical, and epistemologically deficient (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018). African ways of knowing are underrepresented within intercultural communication (Asante, 2020b), and the field writ-large (Mohammed, 2021). Second, it focuses on the possibilities of queer African imagination, countering Western readings that foreclose African queer possibilities (Macharia, 2016b). Third, it decenters normativities by focusing on imaginative possibilities that queer the possible and open nonnormative future potentialities (Ncube, 2020).

I write this essay to illuminate Africanfuturism. However, I am not African. And though I endeavor to think queerly, aligning with Nyanzi's (2014) perspectives on "queering queer," I do not face the embodied oppression and violence that African queer, trans, and otherwise nonnormative folks do. In writing this essay, I am also conscious of the ways I participate in and perpetuate "the power dynamics that place northern scholars above African and Africa-based scholars," that Mohammed (2021, p. 15) so importantly points out. I endeavor to engage with the epistemic depth of Thompson's characters in their own right, as well as how they connect to African scholarly work, focusing primarily on African thought.

Yet by even publishing this work, I fail at this goal at least in part. I hope that the engagement with African work presented here outweighs my failure. And, as I have argued in previous work (Hanchey, 2019), for white, Western, cishet scholars such as

myself, decolonial work requires our failure – because if we are not failing, then we are not trying at all. We must be willing to fail and to continually engage in reflexivity over it – examining our failures and using them as a basis for transformation, while simultaneously recognizing that our future attempts will *also* continue to fail. I am committed to such never-ending reflexivity, to continued learning and transformation with each future step.

Queering and transing embodiment in *The Wormwood Trilogy*

The Wormwood Trilogy affirms a queer and trans Africanfuturist relation to embodiment that understands that it cannot be separated from the self while simultaneously supporting its fluidity and ambiguity, such that embodiment constantly re-forms in relation to material contexts, cultural circumstances, and acts of resistance to colonial structures of cisheternormativity. As such, it can be read as a basis from which critical intercultural communication scholars may learn about postcolonial African struggles for bodily self-actualization in and against colonial contexts. In the following sections, I examine how queer and trans politics weave in and through decolonial struggle through three facets of self-body relations: (1) the self is embodied, (2) but that body can change, (3) and be created by the self.

The self is embodied

In the third book, *The Rosewater Redemption*, Hannah Jacques takes the Rosewater government, now a city–state that contentiously seceded from Nigeria under the leadership of her husband, to court over the fate of the reanimates. The culmination of her case occurs when Venture Alade takes the stand:

> "Mr Alade, we can see that you have some functional difficulty moving about. Was this due to injury?"
>
> "Yes … My skull was crushed and the debris rested on my ribcage, compressing it."
>
> "That would have been hard to survive."
>
> "I didn't survive. I was pronounced dead when the ambulance arrived."
>
> … "Are you saying you were a reanimate?"
>
> "Yes. I was dead, now I'm alive."

Mrs. Jacques proves to the court that even though reanimates may be diminished in function, they do not lose their personhood. They are not "empty vessel[s] to be bartered away to the alien overlords and filled with … alien interloper[s]," as she earlier describes. However, the Rosewater lawyer is unperturbed. In his cross-examination, he asks:

> "What, sir, brought you back from the dead?"
>
> "The alien. Wormwood."
>
> "Thank you. Nothing further."

In the end, although Mrs. Jacques holds the popular opinion, Rosewater wins the case.

In having Rosewater win, even though it is clear that these humans are not emptied of their humanity, Thompson analogizes the colonial queer condition. Black people, the colonized, queer and trans folks – all have been dismissed as less-than-human under coloniality in ways that sanction violence against them and seek to deny them autonomy over their own bodies (Asante, 2020c; Towns, 2018). Such violences serve a purpose for the colonizer, acting to strengthen colonial power. Here, declaring the reanimates no longer human allows for the aliens to increase their presence of occupation through the violent takeover of human bodies.

For the defense, the court case hinges on the fact that reanimation could not happen without the aliens. That is, since the alien technology is causing the bodies to repair themselves, they argue that the bodies should now belong to the aliens. Subtly, Thompson is pointing toward the ways that medicine and other benevolent-seeming gendered and sexualized technologies are imbricated in the colonial scheme (Hunt, 2016) – they may provide the colonized with increased reproductivity or lifespan, but only to serve the colonizers. The healing power of the alien dome, Wormwood, for instance, is also the mechanism through which human DNA is slowly transformed to alien DNA. As Towns (2018) describes, Black bodies are used within coloniality as technologies through which to extend the colonizers' being.

However, by eventually demonstrating that the reanimates *do* get their personalities back in time, Thompson asserts that African selfhood, even if it utilizes a colonial technology to increase function, is not beholden to colonialism. African subjectivity is hybrid, like Pindi (2018) writes, it is ambivalent as Asante (2020b) explains, but that does not mean subjects are held to the colonial epistemologies of the technologies they hybridize and ambivalently use. By recognizing that colonial technologies can be utilized in ways unsanctioned, Thompson exemplifies a queer relationship to colonialism itself.

The focus on selfhood as embodied in the books exceeds the boundaries of the court case. Even Wormwood must be embodied in order to interact with the humans. In the second book, the avatar becomes the first human erased and rewritten with alien DNA and consciousness – a white woman named Alyssa. It is no accident that Thompson chose a white woman settler in Nigeria as the avatar of the colonizer. In doing so, he drew an explicit tie between alien colonization in the novel and the realities of lived coloniality. Part of what this analogy highlights is the corruption of personhood caused by the white, Western, colonial belief that the self can be disembodied. When the aliens begin to transfer into human bodies, it is not without problems. Alyssa is at first unable to reconcile her human body and alien consciousness, floundering to understand who she is and what is happening to her. She is not alone. The humans divide the aliens into four categories: squatters, passers, sleepers, and synners. Of these, only squatters seem relatively unperturbed by the transfer of their alien consciousness into a human body. Passers, on the other hand, are so disturbed that they live in denial, attempting to "pass" as human. Sleepers cannot even handle being conscious, and instead lie catatonic. Synners, on the other hand, "treat humans like they're not real." Later, we find that the aliens have kept a fifth group secret: those that go mad upon transfer and are kept locked up.

Colonizers think they can be disembodied, that their personhood exists separate from their bodies, because of the norms that have universalized whiteness, cismasculinity, and Western epistemologies. Those invisible within colonial structures do not recognize their

bodies as having bearing on their selfhood. However, Thompson demonstrates that this attempt to disembody consciousness results in corruption of their relationship to bodies, seeing them as things and tools rather than part of the self. This is why the synners delight in death and destruction: when selfhood is disembodied, human bodies are seen as "not real." Thompson demonstrates how coloniality makes African life out to be "unreal," while simultaneously facing the reader with the violence and destruction this perspective has wrought.

… But that body can change

One of the most impressive things about Thompson's work is how he is able to juxtapose alien bodily change and human bodily change in ways that throw the differential distribution of power in colonial structures into relief. Homian choices to take over human bodies are not the same as human choices to amend their bodies, even when they utilize alien technologies. The first is colonial; the second is queerly decolonial – a recoding layered with resistant ambivalence.

Bodily amendment here emerges from the healing power of Wormwood, placing people in a convivial arrangement with it (Mbembe, 2001). This technology of the colonizer can be used to resist colonial conditions or in ways that embrace commodification. Thompson describes how some seek healing in order to make changes to themselves: "there are also people who deliberately injure themselves for the sole purpose of getting 'reconstructive surgery.'" In addition, there are reconstructions that go wrong. Throughout the trilogy, readers are introduced to people with various amendments: a man with a second face on his torso; a cabal of organ smugglers who heal themselves with extra organs in order to sell them, and a man who has slits all over his body harboring tentacles. When this last man is killed, one of his tentacles is wrapped around Eric, an assassin working for the Nigerian government, and Eric decides to keep it.

Eric's tentacle makes for an interesting queering and transing of embodiment. It clearly thwarts binary renderings of gender as masculine or feminine because of its inhumanness. Yet it regenders Eric in more complicated ways, as well. Eric, as an assassin, is ultra-masculine in some ways that the tentacle supports and upholds – violent and ready to kill when threatened. Yet, the tentacle is oddly feminized, as well. For one, it likes to dance in the rain: "the tentacle loves water and throws itself everywhere, as if exercising." In addition, both the tentacle and the slits where it attaches itself to Eric's body smell distinctly of honey:

> "Do you drink a lot of honey?"
>
> "Why do you ask?"
>
> "You smell of it. All the time."
>
> "Is it unpleasant?"
>
> "No. Just an odd thing to be smelling."

Notably, the smell of honey is not unpleasant, just queer. During an intimate moment with a lover, she licks the slits on his body where the tentacle attaches, commenting

that they "only smelled like honey." The tentacle complicates both Eric's gender and sexuality.

Bodily change in *The Wormwood Trilogy* is not always about choice. Neither is it always a continual progression that fits an idea of linear development. One character, Layi, highlights how bodily change is "queerly ambivalent" – it is connected to the colonial context that has left the humans inextricably intertwined with alien DNA. Asante (2020b) defines "queerly ambivalent" as "a queer mode of relating that explores the space between institutional constraints and individual agency" (p. 158). Layi is queerly ambivalent in both sexuality and body. When he off-hand mentions to his sister's boyfriend that he wants to march in Rosewater's first-ever Pride Parade, Kaaro is surprised:

> "I didn't know you were gay," he said.
>
> To be fair, I don't know either. I am sometimes attracted to men, though. I'll be marching in solidarity. That way, if I turn out to be gay later, I can say I was part of history. And I might meet hot guys.

Layi refuses to allow his sexuality to be easily settled or clearly defined. Later, speaking with his sisters, he continues to deny Westerncentric terms to define his sexuality:

> "Can we focus?" says Aminat. "On me? I'm why you're here, right?"
>
> "Yes," says Tomi.
>
> "Speak for yourself," says Layi. "I'm here for the hotness of Rosewater boys. They have such good skin here."
>
> "Okay, didn't know you were gay," says Aminat.
>
> "What, Kaaro did not tell you?" Layi looks surprised.
>
> … "Is this a coming-out moment?" Aminat looks to Tomi, who seems more interested in getting something out of her cornflakes.
>
> "Nah. I thought you knew," says Layi.
>
> "Everybody knows," says Tomi.

He is surprised that Kaaro did not tell Aminat, but he also never actually told Kaaro he was gay. He refuses to label this "a coming-out moment," relying on ambiguity to alternately express his sexuality, and assume he doesn't need to. This fits with an African approach to queerness that does not rely on "coming out," but rather "thrives through a culture of invisibility" (Asante, 2020b, p. 172).

Layi is also queerly ambivalent in terms of his embodiment. Layi can burst into flame, he can fly, and he cannot always control it. At the beginning of the series, Kaaro meets Layi in his home – where he is chained at the ankle. Layi, however, is relaxed and confident, utterly undisturbed by being chained in his house, because he can simply break out whenever he needs. Layi often shows up to rescue Aminat and Kaaro with no explanation of how he knew they were in danger or how he broke from his chain. Layi's fire and chain demonstrate his queer ambivalence: He is agentic in ways others are unable to comprehend, and yet socially restricted. The chain acts as a nod and a wink: Layi is restrained, but able to break through his restraints whenever he needs.

… And be created by the self

Perhaps the queer character most inextricably entwined with alien systems is Oyin Da, the narrator of the series' conclusion. Oyin Da demonstrates the potential for a queer and trans form of embodiment that is (re)created by the self. Although she uses the alien xenosphere system in order to do so, she maintains a queer decolonial epistemology by using alien tools against their purpose. Thompson describes the xenosphere and the fungus-like xenoforms that make up its network:

> The xenoforms connect to each other and to human nerve endings, from which they can thread their way to the brain, extract information and share it with all the other xenoforms, creating a field of historical and real-time information. The data goes both ways: whoever controls the xenosphere controls thoughts, and thoughts create reality.

The thoughtspace of the xenosphere transforms reality into what is perceived. What is perceived is remembered, is real, constitutes futures. Oyin Da is the prime example of this.

Oyin Da is actually dead. She died when she was a child, trying to complete construction of a time-travel machine. However, she had such a strong spirit and desire to live, that she imprinted herself on the xenosphere, re-embodied herself, and even created a revolutionary following. And in the end, it is Oyin Da, queer xenosphere ghost, who figures out how to save the world.

Contrary to the alien mass suicide – a type of disembodiment that is only possible within colonial mentalities that view the self as separable from the body, and one which depended upon taking over the bodies of others – Oyin Da desired life so much that she hung onto a fiction of embodiment after her death. The fiction is so convincing that even she does not always remember she is dead. Instead, she and others see herself as a time-traveler, able to jump in and out of time and place by some secret that only she knows. She is able to perform embodiment so convincingly that it becomes reality.

Oyin Da's sense of embodiment allows for queer worldmaking. In the xenosphere, she marries a woman named Nike, another xenosphere ghost, and together they create and recreate a world and a child named Junior:

> In this house of thought, in this bed of imagination, I stroke my lover's belly, going over the soft folds as she recovers from our exercise, following the lanes laid out between stretch marks. The bed has a canopy, and a filmy netting covers all sides, blurring everything outside. Violins mix with talking drums, coming from memory rather than a hi-fi system. Is this real? As real as it needs to be, I think.

Nike describes their home as "constantly being rebuilt within our agreement." Their world is never settled, never final, and yet is firm, real, and consensual. However, when Oyin Da becomes engrossed with her mission to save the world, she sometimes loses grasp on her embodiment, and as she does, her sense of self starts to slip. Each time, Nike finds her in the xenosphere and re-orients her to her body and her home. Oyin Da must continually recreate her idea of a body, and of the world that her and her family occupy, in order to maintain selfhood.

Africanfuturism in intercultural communication theory

Connecting Africanfuturism to queerness and transness in the *The Wormwood Trilogy* highlights the shifting and changing forms of embodiment, while simultaneously reinforcing the fundamental interconnection of the body and the self. As a basis for poor theory, Thompson's work demonstrates how African queer and trans perspectives on the embodiment of the self resist Western neocolonial dehumanization. I conclude by reflecting on the lessons that the trilogy raises for intercultural communication scholars.

First, the aliens' acceptance of disembodiment is what leads to their ultimate demise. They believe that they can download their consciousness onto a server and that it remains a "self," even when utterly disconnected from all contextual relations. But selves are intimately and politically relational (Asante, 2020a), and particularly in African epistemologies, there is no self prior to social relations (Asante & Pindi, 2020; Gyekye, 1995). Importantly for intercultural communication scholars, this demonstrates how colonizers, by perpetuating violences against bodies and relationality, lose their selfhood.

Second, focusing on African queer and trans epistemologies of embodiment provides a path for reinvigoration of the self, or what Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018) terms re-humanizing (p. 80). For Ndlovu-Gatsheni, the dehumanization of ontological anti-Blackness and African epistemological erasure must be met with re-humanizing practices that center African being, context, thought, and materiality. For intercultural communication scholars, centering on embodiment as a form of re-humanizing offers a coalitional space that may work to disrupt colonial and cisheternormative structures at once.

In conclusion, I call for continued readings of Africanfuturism within intercultural communication. Examining the politics of queer and trans embodiment in Africanfuturist literature can help intercultural communication scholars to not only analyze current subjugation, but also imagine paths toward liberated futures. The limits of imagination structure what is believed to be possible. Africanfuturism provides intercultural communication scholars with a means to reach for realms as yet unthought, where bodies, relations, and therefore selves, may be free.

Acknowledgement

The author would like to thank the anonymous reviewers, Shinsuke Eguchi, and Godfried Asante for their comments and assistance with the manuscript.

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