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Dialoguing About the Nexus of Queer Studies and Intercultural Communication

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Chapter Thirteen

Dialoguing about the Nexus of Queer Studies and Intercultural Communication

Bernadette Marie Calafell and
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Perhaps a way for us to start is by defining how each of us understands or defines queer.

Bernadette: For me queerness is always explicitly tied to race, class, gender, nationality, and ability. It's intersectional and it's critical. Queerness is always about the body and embodiment. I say all of these things because in many ways, I define queerness by what it is not yet (Calafell & Eguchi, in press). My understanding and feeling of queerness are influenced by Cherríe Moraga (1983) and Jose Esteban Muñoz (2009). Muñoz (2009) is known for writing about queerness on the horizon, or that we are not yet queer. In some ways, he wants to further unsettle what has become ironically the hegemonic understanding of queerness, which is connected to White, gay, male disembodiment. His work is influenced by queer feminists of color like Moraga (1983). When you read her work, you feel the presence of her body. This is central to queerness for me—laying bare the politics of racial embodiment.

Queerness is also about possibility. Again, Muñoz (2009) is instructive here for me, specifically his work on hope and queer utopias. Perhaps it's because he is a performance scholar that further draws me to his work. But the sense of possibility his work offers is explicitly tied to the possibilities of performance and the ability to re-perform, disidentify, or perform resistance. Performance makes the body present, and the racialized body holds queerness accountable to issues of power.

ities with race, class, gender, religion, etc. I remember a Queer Nation sticker that said, "Dress for Success—Wear a White Penis." I have no idea if they invented the phrase or not. The AIDS crisis and the anger that it created among LGBTQ communities cannot be underestimated. That anger was reflected in the artwork of Gran Fury, ACT UP die-ins, and other expressions of outrage. This anger and what it meant to be queer immediately resonated with me when the Queer Nation manifesto declared that being queer "means everyday fighting oppression; homophobia, racism, misogyny, the bigotry of religious hypocrites and our own self-hatred" ("The Queer Nation Manifesto," 1990). Queer opened up discussions about sexualities and concerns well beyond the traditional confines of "gay" and "lesbian." Fred Corey and I wrote about this anger in "DeathTEXT" (2012), but it's impossible to capture that zeitgeist as it was a moment in time.

At one time in my life, race was the defining force in everyday life. I lived in the first county to integrate its schools in Georgia. Race was an important consideration every day in every way, as Jim Crow was slowly dying in the South. When I graduated from high school in the only high school in a county about 100 miles to the southwest, the world was rapidly changing. The economy in this county was driven by the cotton mill industry, yet NAFTA was about to become an enormous force in the economics of this kind of place. Later in my life, when sexuality became more important, I recognized important parallels and disjunctures from the ways that racial difference functioned in the South. I tried to bring these tensions to "Show/Down Time" (Nakayama, 1994) and to highlight the uneasy coalitions that are always (im)possible.

What are some of the early examples you can think of that led to the nexus of intercultural communication and queer studies?

Tom: This is a difficult one, as I don't know who was the "first" to bring them together. I guess we could look at "Gayspeak" and see if there's a chapter on African American/Black LGBT communication. I'm not sure how we want to define "queer" . . .

Bernadette: In answering this question, one of the first pieces that comes to mind is your essay "Show/Down Time: 'Race,' Gender, Sexuality, and Popular Culture" (Nakayama, 1994). For me, that essay continues to stand the test of time. It stands as an example of how to do intersectional critique, and specifically how to do intersectional queer critique. While it may not necessarily be thought of as intercultural communication, it deals with transnationalism, imperialism, and popular culture, which are central issues for us as intercultural scholars. It also asks us to think and theorize from an *Other* perspective, which is something that I think scholars are still trying to do. I

My entrance into queer theory came from queer Chicana feminists like Cherríe Moraga (1983) and Gloria Anzaldúa (1987). As someone who grew up in the 1980s and 1990s and attended college in the 1990s, I knew about Queer Nation and such. I knew I wasn't straight, but I didn't quite know where I fit. It wasn't until I read Moraga's (1983) *Loving in the War Years* that I finally felt a sense of place. The familiarity of her story resonated with me. I connected with the way she talked about her family and her experiences as a Chicana who benefited from White privilege. She understood her Chicana identity through her queerness, whereas for me I understood my queerness through my identity as a Chicana. Like Moraga (1983), for me queerness was always about everyday experiences and performances of identities: those everyday lived experiences and actions that allow us to thrive, survive, and resist. I guess you could say my connection to queerness was through Chicana feminism, which essentially was a precursor to what we now call queer of color theory. Chicana feminist theory is queer of color theory. Given the connection between queer and feminist theories, I don't think you can really consider yourself a feminist or a queer theorist unless you are committed to transfeminisms.

Tom: For me, queer emerges at a specific historical moment. On the academic side, it led to the rise of queer theory and queer studies, which are academic enterprises aimed at disrupting the ways that sexualities had been conceived. In particular, queer scholars challenged more static notions of "homosexual" or "gay" as relatively fixed and focused on gay White men. On the activist side, Queer Nation and queer nationals arose to make change to the contemporary situation of sexualities. They felt that the leading activist organizations at that time were too focused on HIV/AIDS activism and wanted to expand the activist goals to challenge "the continued existence of anti-gay discrimination in the culture at large" ("Our History," n.d.). Many queer nationals came from ACT UP chapters, and Queer Nation was organized along similar lines of chapters in various locations across the country.

I think it's important to note that queer studies and Queer Nation are not just historical. Both are still alive, although Queer Nation doesn't have the visibility and vibrancy that it once did. Queer studies, in contrast, has established itself in more enduring ways in the academy by creating journals (e.g., *GLQ*, *QED*) as well as queer studies programs that are often connected to LGBT studies programs (e.g., Wesleyan, Brandeis). Queer studies has also established itself in women's studies programs and departments (e.g., Portland State University).

I entered the academy in the 1980s, and my experiences in the academy and, for me, the activism of ACT UP shaped a lot of my thinking about sexualities. When Queer Nation emerged, I was immediately drawn to their much larger agenda, direct action tactics, and the intersectionality of sexual-

beyond just the typical focus on continental philosophy and instead engage feminist, queer, and performance theories. The critical, practical, applicable, and experiential is where I see queer and intercultural communication meeting. Also, perhaps they coalesce around activism, which goes back to your discussion of Queer Nation. In terms of activism, I am also consistently impressed with the work Karma Chávez has been doing around coalitional politics between immigrant rights groups and LGBTQ groups, as well as her involvement in Against Equality.

This kind of approach informed the revisions we (Kate Willink and I) did when we revised and updated the graduate curriculum in culture and communication at the University of Denver. It was important for us to take an intersectional approach to culture that, as you mention, moved away from traditional nation-centered models. We also decided that it was only going to be a critical approach. We created courses like Critical Intercultural Communication, Critical Methods for Studying Culture, Writing Culture, along with courses such as Critical Sexuality Studies, Performative Writing, Performance Ethnography, Culture and Affect, and Critical Whiteness Studies. I'm curious about the shifts you had in your graduate curriculum at your previous institution, especially given that it is a much larger department.

Tom: I think one of the things that grounds our work in this area is the dialectical tension (Martin & Nakayama, 1999) with the realities of "traveling" to other sites where there are very different assumptions. I put "travel" in quotation marks as it doesn't always mean traveling to other locations in the physical sense but also in the intellectual sense. Here I think that it is important for queer intercultural communication scholars to consider the ways that living in an international environment also impact critical/queer intercultural work. Some countries have the death penalty for "homosexuality," and how is traveling there different for LGBTQ travelers/sojourners than for others? Other countries don't have the death penalty but have a range of other penalties including prison time (see, for example, HRC's map: https://assets2.hrc.org/files/assets/resources/Criminalization-Map-042315.pdf).

Queer intercultural communication scholars need to better understand and explore the institutional powers that oppress LGBTQ peoples around the world. What is the role of religion as institutionalized and empowered by the people of various cultures? Or is religion used as a convenient weapon to empower homophobia? What other institutions are fueling antiqueer policies and sentiments, and which institutions are pushing back against those politics—for example, tourism? International work is complex and difficult, but I want to call for more of that work so that we better understand the institutional politics that cross cultures and those politics that are culture-specific. Without understanding these complexities in cultures, communication, and

continue to use it in my courses, and especially in my Critical Intercultural Communication graduate seminar. In many cases, graduate students feel overwhelmed and say they don't know how to do intersectional critique. It continues to stand as a model for that.

I think a lot as well in terms of scholars whose work has embodied a queer intercultural perspective, which for me is an intersectional approach to queerness and culture. Again, it comes back to feminist theory as the analytic framework to bring together all of these aspects. Folks like Bryant K. Alexander, John T. Warren, Julia Johnson, and Gust Yep come to mind as critical intercultural and queer work before it was labeled as such.

Tom: I tend to agree. The intersectional history of queer intercultural work was done before the term was mapped over that work. I am happy to be included in that group. It's interesting that it doesn't seem to be highly cited or a major article for others. In any case, race, gender, and sexuality (and much more) are such important, deeply entwined parts of identities, world experiences, and everyday lives that they shouldn't be so easily ignored. They work together and against each other in many different ways in everyday life.

What are some important points of connection between intercultural communication and queer studies? What do they bring to one another?

Tom: Intercultural communication, especially critical intercultural communication, has provided one of the homes for the kinds of work that bring together queer studies and intercultural communication. Of course, creating this home was not without some resistance from the view that this wasn't "intercultural communication" and distinctions were made between "intercultural communication" and "cross-cultural communication," etc. as the breadth of intercultural communication expanded beyond the view of "national cultures" as key to understanding cultural differences on the international level.

Bernadette: For me a lot of this starts with the rhetorical shift in intercultural communication. Basically, would queer intercultural communication have been possible without it? The rhetorical shift led by folks like you, Dreama Moon, Lisa Flores, Fernando Delgado, and Marouf Hasian opened the field for the possibility of where we are now, not only in terms of the critical and queer turn, but the performative. The juncture of queerness and intercultural communication revolves around how we think about *critical*. I often have my graduate students read Kent Ono's (2011) "Critical: A Finer Edge" as a way to think about what critical intercultural communication can be. One of the things I like about the piece is that he challenges us to think about critical

sexual, gendered, etc. Life is so complex that any one way to do scholarship can't capture the complexities of everyday experiences.

What advice do you have for folks who want to start doing work in queer intercultural communication?

Bernadette: First and foremost, know the work of those who came before you. Please don't Columbus us. The politics of citation are very important. *Do not erase women of color.* We have always been here doing the work, so please acknowledge that. If you don't cite women of color already, then ask yourself why, and do something about it. Also, if you are a man of color doing this work, please don't attack intersectionality. Sorry, but unreflexively critiquing a theory created by Black women does not make you particularly radical or cutting edge. You may disagree with work that has come before you. You may think you can do it better. Maybe you can, but recognize that those that came before you created a space for you to enter the conversation. Be kind. Be compassionate. Be humble and practice critical love and intersectional reflexivity.

Tom: I agree. It is very important to situate your work within the historical trajectory of the work of others. The history of ideas is a part of what you are entering and participating in. It is also crucial that you consider the historical moment in which you are writing. The tensions and goals of any moment may not be the same in another moment. Try to understand the issues that others have confronted when you read their work. In this area, in particular, the social and legal climate has changed radically in a very short time period. These rapid changes mean that it is easy to misunderstand other contexts and identifications from previous eras. In addition, it is also important to recognize how various aspects of identities—e.g., race, gender, sexualities—work together as well as against each other in intersectional work. And, as always, things are always more complicated than they seem.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What do you see as emerging issues that come together at the nexus of critical intercultural communication and queer studies?
2. How do your identities inform the ways you understand the world and larger relations of power?
3. Can you think of examples in popular culture that bring together intercultural communication and queerness?

queer politics, it can be difficult to navigate our way through these issues and push for social change.

What do you see as the future of intercultural communication, and critical intercultural communication in particular?

Bernadette: The future in some ways needs to be even more praxis-oriented. What can we as intercultural scholars and teachers bring to the table when it comes to the challenges faced by undocumented students or the way the current presidential administration is literally trying to erase trans people out of existence? These are the kinds of questions that I think many of us are dealing with and that our students want answers to. Folks like Shinsuke Eguchi, Benny LeMaster, and Amber Johnson represent to me the best of what we can be as we think about what we need not only as scholars but as practitioners in intercultural communication. Because of the changing political and media landscapes, we need to develop new skills and rethink roles.

Also, I think part of rethinking our roles requires that we be open to and learn new methods for doing our scholarship. I, along with some of my collaborators who do work that is performance-centered have encountered some pushback or resistance from some intercultural scholars. Ironically, at times, there seems to be a desire for us to disembody our identities in the critical intercultural work we do. Drawing on our own experiences is often shunned upon and taken nonseriously as academic work. At times, it feels like even critical scholars in culture are performing discipline through politics of respectability by dictating what counts as rigorous work on culture. People of color have been spoken for and treated violently by the anthropological gaze; thus, I often wonder if these critiques, which most often are directed at scholars of color, are again another form of not only disciplining but paternalism and speaking for. Thus, the future of critical intercultural communication has to be more inclusive of critical performative and autoethodologies that are often connected to decolonial, feminist, and indigenous methodologies.

Tom: I agree. I wrote "Sextext" with Fred Corey (Corey & Nakayama, 1997) to open up scholarship to other ways of writing or "reporting" our scholarship and to highlight the ways that sexuality and sexual desire are a part of that process (depending on what the scholarship is about). For queer studies to ignore or overlook desire seemed problematic, and there must be many other ways to capture that part of what being queer is about. It's not the only thing, of course, but how can scholarship capture that part of queer? I hoped that that journal article opened up many different ways of writing scholarship that can address the many, many ways of experiencing life—whether racial,

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