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On Queer of Color Criticism, Communication Studies, and Corporeality

Jesus I. Valles-Morales and Benny LeMaster

Queer of color criticism offers an intersectional approach to theorizing identity and subjectivity. Moreover, a select number of critical communication scholars increasingly turn to queer of color criticism as an especially effective means of interrogating the performative constitution of difference particularly as it emerges in relation to racial, gender, and sexual minoritarian subjects (e.g., Eguchi, Calafell, & Files-Thompson, 2014; Eguchi & Roberts, 2015). We can trace the roots of queer of color criticism to queer of color theorists in the 1970s who were troubled by the heteronormativity of ethnic studies and communities of color as well as the whiteness of queer theory. At the same time, women of color feminists—most of whom were also the queer of color theorists—articulated frustration with the predominance of whiteness in US American feminism and the sexism that was prevalent in anti-racist spaces. Taken together, queer of color criticism is a multidimensional analytic approach to criticism. In his germinal text, *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique*, Roderick Ferguson (2003) defines queer of color criticism thusly:

Interrogat[ion] of social formations at the intersections of race, gender, sexuality, and class, with particular attention in how those formations correspond with and diverge from nationalist ideals and practices. Queer of color analysis is a heterogeneous enterprise made up of woman of color feminism, materialist analysis, poststructuralist theory, and queer critique. (p. 149)

Moreover, David Eng, Judith Halberstam, and José Esteban Muñoz (2005) offer the following questions, which have evolved into predominant meditative points guiding much contemporary queer of color criticism (and queer theory more broadly): “What does queer studies have to say about empire, globalization, neoliberalism, sovereignty, and terrorism? What does queer studies tell us about immigration, citizenship, prisons, welfare, mourning, and human rights?” (p. 2). Roderick (2003) and Eng, Halberstam, and Muñoz’s (2005) words frame the performative boundaries that constitute much of queer of color criticism, which has since developed into a variety of perspectives and interventions.

A recent collection edited by Grace Kyungwon Hong and Roderick A. Ferguson (2011) articulates *strange affinities*. That is to say, Hong and Ferguson move queer of color criticism, an extension of woman of color feminism to be sure, toward a broader project of comparative racialization. Their project seeks ways in which disparate groups come together in coalition in ways that extend beyond traditional theorizations of racial identification and solidarity. They argue that the task of queer of color criticism and woman of color feminism is to “create a language to describe what has been rendered unknowable through normative comparative method[s]” and that “an analytic for understanding how

the creation of categories of value and valuelessness underpins contemporary racialized necropolitical regulation” (p. 16).

Within Communication Studies, in particular, there have been critical calls that attend to the multiplicity of embodied subjectivity and that heralds queer of color criticism. For instance, E. Patrick Johnson (2005) uses gumbo, and the pot (the body) that it is cooked in, as a metaphor to describe the embodiment of blackness (gumbo) as both product and process, being and becoming. Johnson refers to his project as *quare*, a local vernacular articulation of queer that his grandmother used. In his criticism, Johnson finds that (white) queer theory is largely interested in the performative constitution of identity but fails to account for variations in its own realization. In response, Johnson offers *quare*, which “fixes our attention on the discursive constitution of the recipe even as it celebrate the improvisational aspects of the gumbo and the materiality of the pot” (p. 18). In the end, Johnson’s call functions as an “interventionist disciplinary project” that attends to the discursive constitution of subjects (as queer theory might) while also theorizing the “practice” of everyday life (p. 20). In a similar project, Wenshu Lee (2003) rearticulates and extends Johnson’s *quare* to *kuaer*, a transliteration of two Chinese characters: *kua* and *er*. Put together, *kuaer* can be loosely understood as “Transnationalist womanist quare children who are proud and praised and whose critical consciousness is multi-racial, multi-sexual, multi-gendered, and multi-class-based” (p. 162). Lee’s *kuaer* extends Johnson’s *quare* by integrating transnationalist (a critical praxis that combats globalization and that makes “transnational links between and beyond Taiwanese quare wo/men” [p. 161]) and womanist (attending to gendered and racialized experiences) perspectives into its metaphoric gumbo pot.

More recently, Gust Yep (2013) suggests a collaborative and coalitional analytic lens that he calls “queering/quaring/kauering/crippin’/transing” bodies. Yep’s lens bridges multiple bodies of literature currently under-theorized and -utilized in critical intercultural communication research, including “queering” (i.e., Jakobsen, 1998), “quaring” (Johnson, 2005), “kauering” (Lee, 2003), “crippin’” (McRuer, 2006), and “transing” (Stryker, 2006; see also Stryker, Currah, & Moore, 2008). Yep (2013) offers queering/quaring/kauering/crippin’/transing in order to challenge “the assumption of an original, authentic, and essential body” (p. 120). More specifically, Yep proposes an intersectional analytic method that seeks to: (1) “queer” bodies by destabilizing categorical structures that limit a subject, (2) “quare” bodies by seeking the affective mechanisms that propel bodies to act, (3) “kuaer” bodies by looking not only race, gender, and sexuality (as is the case with quaring), but also at one’s relationship to transnationalism, (4) “crip” bodies by locating a variety of ways of navigating institutions and systems of oppression through mobility and access, and (5) “trans” bodies by critically engaging the performative act of traversing constitutive borders (i.e., gender borders, racialized borders, and so on). In the end, queering/quaring/kauering/crippin’/transing can help researchers “unpack and deconstruct dominant discursive constructions of the body and their embodied translation in relationship to gender, sexuality, race, class, ability, nation, and culture” (p. 120).

For critical communication researchers, it would be advantageous to consider the many ways that bodies are enacting multiple identities at once and having to negotiate various levels of power in order to simply live life. Such work queers—or makes unstable—the normative boundaries seeking to contain and constrain the dynamism of lived experience in all of its simultaneity and contradiction. We are thinking here of the work of Lugones (2007) who writes “though everyone in capitalist Eurocentered modernity is both raced and gendered, not everyone is dominated or victimized in terms of their race or gender” (p. 192). We find the work of critical scholars useful but minimizing when it assumes that bodies are only ever the oppressor or the oppressed across time and space. What Anzaldúa (2002) shows us is that all bodies enact oppressor and oppressed based on unique communicative contexts. A communication theory of queer of color criticism engages work that perceives an integrative and dynamic body navigating multiple planes at once that affirm while extending beyond identification to global markets and neoliberal systems of control. Starosta and Chen (2010) suggest that critical intercultural scholars:

Should learn how to search for similarities in differences by holding the attitude of ‘harmony without uniformity.’ In other words, all situations are stages of change and transformation, and any new perspectives are never without affinities to previous perspectives. Thus, opposition and fellowship complement one another. (p. 142)

Until we begin to consider the ways that we are our own Other and that part of that realization is coming to terms with the ways that we are forced to reject that which is rejected similarly in others, we will fail to connect to others in ways that communication scholarship purports to desire.

A Call for Corporeal Interventions

And as I write this, and compile this, and chart a geography of this type of criticism, I am compelled to think about the way in which such work has been contested and questioned, perhaps not in publication but certainly in the hushed whispers of academic conferences and behind closed office doors. As I write this, I want to wrestle those moments where I recognized that queer of color criticism is taught as an addendum, a small page in the back of a rhetoric text book accompanied with a picture of Gloria Anzaldúa smiling at the reader. The picture, of course, is larger than the text. As I write this, I think to the moments where criticism and theory are questioned as things divorced from action and the tangible world, from lived experience.

Queer of color criticism is immensely valuable because it is born from the need for such work, from the need to both create a language to explain the experiences of our worlds, and at once invite that world to help us make this language. At the moment I write this, the queer and brown students in my classroom are beginning to crack the world open with their fingers, pencils wrapped around fingers as journals carry the difference they pour onto the page. Somewhere, queer of color criticism

is happening when the queen on the stage begins lip-synching to Sridevi, hips and arms moving to the music from Nagina, breaking monotony of snow white divas at the club. Two Xicanas are passing each other in the street somewhere in Albuquerque, strangers, wanting each other, wanting words to describe want, to speak back to that hunger. Somewhere, in the long pauses in conversations between my father and I, under the decades of machismo we have both inherited, is the need for this body of work.

There are those of us for whom queer of color criticism has become a place to begin the labor of producing oxygen we can breathe safely in a world that would sometimes rather we did not. How I wish I could show you the places in my body where José Esteban Muñoz and Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherríe Moraga have taken the place of scars and missing skin. I would show you, too, the words I have braided to my bones that they may not shatter, and then every sentence that I have read that sparks a belonging and at once a freedom. I am alive because I have ancestors, who lived, too. I am alive because in rage, queer ancestors whisper to “go” to every blood cell in my body. To practice queer of color criticism is to live a life that is closer to a freedom, to liberation, to embracing the worlds we bring with us to the classroom, the worlds we may not be able to leave behind. To practice queer of color criticism is to allow the self to be porous to the hurt of others, to let our understandings be guided by what our bodies know, what our communities have taught us. So here, we breathe and we question, and in doing so, we begin.

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