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# Disruptive Ambiguities: The Potentiality of Jotería Critique in Communication Studies

## **Cover Page Footnote**

The author would like to thank Bernadette Marie Calafell, Kate Willink, Roy Wood, Gust Yep, Shinsuke Eguchi, Juan Carlos Perez, Jared Vasquez, Brendan Hughes and the many other academics, artists, activists, friends, and family that supported him throughout the process of constructing this manuscript.

## Disruptive Ambiguities: The Potentiality of *Jotería* Critique in Communication Studies

Robert M. Gutierrez-Perez

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*Utilizing performative writing to interrogate the experiences of a queer Xicano male in the discipline of Communication Studies, this essay argues for specificity in dialogue with specificity to disrupt dominant and/or normalized power relations in Queer of Color Critique (QOCC) and beyond. After defining QOCC, the potentiality of jotería critique is offered as a decolonial queer praxis that focuses on hybridity, radical interconnectedness, and nonheteronormative mestiza/o sexual and gender subjectivities. Further, by embracing the ambiguities of hybridity and the politics of radical interconnectedness, Jotería communication studies is a nascent sub-discipline that works in the borderlands between the academic, the artistic, and the activist world, which contributes to and challenges the greater discipline to disrupt the multiple logics of the center in emancipatory, transformative, and embodied forms.*

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Gasping for air, searching for a familiar face, reaching out with watery eyes for relief, I just can't shake the feeling that I am not supposed to be here, that this place isn't made for me, and that I will always be alone. It is a bright day in Washington, D.C. as I follow the crowd across the street towards the 99th Annual National Communication Association's main conference hotel. On the exterior, I am dressed to impress in typical middle/upper-class professional garb; and yes, I am "playing the game" in dress pants and shoes, collared shirt with cufflinks, and a bold designer tie (Anzaldúa, *Reader*; Urrieta). As a mestizo, I am aware of how my ambiguous body politics disrupt spaces with the collective force of centuries of miscegenation whereas my mixed-race, mixed-nation, and mixed-ethnic heritage propels "iterative hesitations" into all of my communicative interactions (Calafell and Moreman).

These iterative hesitations challenge postcolonial discourses through hybridity or mestizaje within the visual and within the regulation of grammatical correctness in language; and in fact, holding onto all of my multiple selves on both sides of the border(s) enacts a "mestiza/o consciousness" that confronts the hegemonic

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1 Gloria Anzaldúa in *Borderlands/La Frontera* describes a mestiza/o consciousness as "a tolerance for contradictions, a tolerance for ambiguity" (101) that a person develops from "having or living in more than one culture" (100). As a result of being "cradled in one culture, sandwiched between two cultures, straddling all three cultures and their value systems, la mestiza undergoes a struggle of flesh, a struggle of borders, an inner war" (Anzaldúa, *Borderlands* 100). In the end, "the work of mestiza consciousness is to break down the subject-object duality that keeps her prisoner and to show in the flesh and through the images in her work how duality is transcended" (Anzaldúa, *Borderlands* 102).

construction of identity singularity and racial purity (Anzaldúa, *Borderlands, Reader*; Calafell and Moreman; Warren). In other words, I am using duct tape to hold back the tears seeping through the cracks in the dam because I am experiencing another national convention where I am only one of a handful of queer Latinas/os in attendance. In what can only be described as “soul-murder,” battle fatigue is settling in as the realities of being a queer Xicano male in an overly White cis-hetero discipline sits heavily on my chest (Calafell, “Mentoring”; Martin and Nakayama; Yep, “Violence”). I can’t breathe.

Queer of color critique (QOCC) is a counter-theoretical space that actively resists multiple forms of oppression in the academy and beyond. In communication studies, Gust Yep, a fellow mestizo,<sup>2</sup> notes that “individuals and groups located in the lower positions of the U. S. racial hierarchy (e.g., people of color) have their identities, actions, and bodies visibly and insistently marked” (“De-Subjugation” 172) while in contrast “whiteness was, and continues to be, the standard, the ideal, and the norm in communication theory, research, and pedagogy” (“Pedagogy” 90). To resist these politics, queer of color critics within and outside of communication studies actively challenge queer studies’ lack of engagement with race, ethnicity, and nation through both personal and political scholarship to emphasize the Eurocentricity in mainstream queer theories on sexuality and gender (Calafell, “(I)dentities”; Martínez, *Making Sense*; Martínez).

Further, QOCC calls out how queer theorists render the work of people of color “innocuous through brief citation and footnote,” which “ultimately renders it topical, particular, and more generally irrelevant to the theorization of ‘sexuality’ and ‘gender’” (Martínez, *Making Sense* 17). One of the contributions of queer theory and QOCC (along with several other postmodernist and feminist approaches) is that it reminds us about the socially constructed nature of identity categories, so this essay is not a return to the problematic “subject before politics” assumptions surrounding identity. Rather, my personal experience at a national

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2 Yep has described himself as an “Asianlatinoamerican,” and although he has never been to China, his racial background is “100% pure Chinese” (“My Three Cultures” 60). However, during the majority of his youth, he lived in Peru, South America and later moved to the United States at the age of 15. He learned Chinese first, then Spanish, and then English. As Yep writes, “I strongly identify with all three cultures, and they are more or less integrated into this complex entity that I label as my ‘multicultural self’” (“My Three Cultures” 60-61). This multicultural landscape fits under the broad definition of what this essay describes as *Jotería* studies. Yep’s life experiences and wealth of scholarly works demonstrate not only the value of *Jotería* critique to communication studies, but also, how the potentiality of *Jotería* critique is not limited to Latinas/os, Chicanas/os, and Xicanas/os.

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conference is an active, resistive, and purposeful critique of the continuing lack of racial inclusion in Communication Studies and LGBTQ studies (Calafell, “Notes”; Chávez, “Pushing Boundaries”; Martin and Nakayama). This essay is not apolitical navel-gazing banter, but instead an attempt to theorize from the flesh, or from subjugated knowledge, to reclaim space for queer people of color (QPOC) (Calafell, “Rhetorics”; Moraga and Anzaldúa).

However, as much as QOCC is resistive, how is it that Black queer studies is homogenized with Latina/o queer studies, Asian/Pacific Islander queer studies, Islamic queer studies, Native American two-spirit studies and so on and so forth? In communication studies, White queer and QOCC is uniquely positioned to “unpack heteronormativity” or to “recognize heterosexuality as a historical construct that relies on various discourses and habits to reproduce itself” (Fox 62; Yep, “From Homophobia”). Furthermore, queer critique in all its forms within communication studies “involves a commitment to ‘queer world-making,’ or the presentation of alternate worldviews that run alongside, rather than replace, master narratives” (Fox 62; Yep, “From Homophobia”). Because, as Yep explains, “race can never be understood alone without examining how it intersects with class, gender, sexuality, and nation to produce particular forms of social subjectivities and experiences” (“De-Subjugation” 172-173), I advocate for a more nuanced approach to QOCC that resists Whiteness by demanding QOCC move to explore the particularities of our QOC communities in dialogue with the particularities of each other’s QOC communities (See Eguchi, “Queer”). Specifically, *Jotería* critique utilizes a mestiza/o consciousness to disrupt the normative assumptions of race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexuality, and nationality through a rhetorical lens constructed from the ambiguity of hybridity, or mestizaje.

However, the aim of this essay is not to break away from or ignore the contributions of QOCC. Instead, *Jotería* critique draws from and harmonizes with QOCC in many productive directions. *Jotería* critique, like QOCC, is committed to utilizing performative writing to create scholarship with thick(er) intersectionalities<sup>3</sup> (Yep, “Thick(er)”). Moreover, embodying this critical practice within *Jotería* critique means moving beyond the politics of inclusion to engage in the potentialities of queering/quaring/kauering/crippin’/transing as a struggle against coherence and premature identity closures (Yep, “Queering”). *Jotería* critique utilizes the ambiguity of hybridity or mestizaje to disrupt systems of

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3 Thick(er) intersectionalities are “exploration(s) of the complex particularities of individual lives and identities associated with their race, class, gender, sexuality, and national locations by understanding their history and personhood in concrete time and space, and the interplay between individual subjectivity, personal agency, systemic arrangements, and structural forces” (Yep “Toward” 173). Rather than utilizing intersectionality as a kind of “checklist,” thick(er) intersectionalities demand an embodied and deeply reflexive analysis that moves beyond the race/class/gender/sexuality mantra. Shinsuke Eguchi offers a prime example of thick(er) intersectionality scholarship wherein he challenges, interrogates, and problematizes the production of desire and attraction through an autoethnography within the Asian-Black (dis)connections of White Gay America (“Queer”).

domination and oppression, and offers several potentialities for communication studies (Calafell, “Future”).

In Spanish, *jota/o* means “fag,” and *Jotería* is imperfectly translated as “faggotry” or “fag-ness.” These terms are often used as derogatory labels to discipline the gender and sexuality performances of Latina/o, Chicana/o, and Xicana/o interlocutors into a heteronormative hegemonic framework (Bañales). According to Shane Moreman, who introduced *jota/o* into communication studies, *jota/o* is an identity deployed from an intimate understanding of intersectionality as a means of communicatively resisting understandings of gender and sexuality divorced from other interconnections, such as race, class, etc. (“Rethinking”). Throughout this essay, *Jotería* is therefore deployed as an identity category, a cultural practice, and a social process that utilizes a *mestiza/o* epistemology as a dramatic gesture of empowerment and as an embodied oppositional consciousness for a large, diverse community within and beyond the U.S. Southwest (Arrizón; Bañales; Hames-García, “Jotería”; Pérez). Although not exclusively labeled *Jotería* communication studies by their authors, *Jotería* critique has been developing within the discipline of communication studies by several prominent scholars over the last decade, such as Calafell, Chávez, Moreman and Yep. Rather than subsume *Jotería* communication studies under the QOCC umbrella, I offer *Jotería* critique as a decolonial lens that disrupts dominant and/or normalized power relations by focusing on hybridity, radical interconnectivity, and nonheteronormative *mestiza/o* subjectivities.

## **Disruptive Ambiguities**

The ambiguities of hybridity are confronted and worked through within the material, psychological, spiritual, and everyday lives of LGBTQ Latinas/os, and by focusing on hybridity and *mestizaje*, *Jotería* critique engages with post-colonial discourses and decolonial methodologies surrounding resistance and agency. *Mestizas/os* are interlocutors that inhabit multiple racial, ethnic, cultural, and national spaces simultaneously, and by focusing on hybridity, *Jotería* critique challenges conceptions of racial and ethnic purity, cultural authenticity, and the colonial/modern enterprise of the nation. Michael Hames-García, a leading *Jotería* scholar, writes: “As *jotería*, our bodies and our *selves* are lived legacies of colonialism, racism, xenophobia, homophobia, sexism, and heterosexism” (“Jotería” 136). In other words, *mestizas/os* (within Latina/o culture) are the product of centuries of colonialism, miscegenation, and violence catalyzed by the first contact between Native and Spanish peoples as well as the forced slavery of African peoples. This complex history, which includes U.S. imperialist actions throughout the Americas, means that nonheteronormative *mestizas/os* speaking multiple languages (English, Spanish, Nahuatl, y más) come in Brown, White, Black, and more with a variety of eye and hair types and colors, which disrupts the racial/ethnic norms ascribed to Latinas/os. This ambiguous discursive and embodied disruption is potentially decolonizing.

For example, José Esteban Muñoz, a prominent queer of color scholar of theory, performance, and culture, proposes “disidentification” as a form of queer of

color resistance to dominant power structures through the performance of insider/outsider ambiguity politics (*Disidentification*). Within communication studies, Calafell has utilized disidentification to theorize the strategies/tactics of QOC resistance within the discursive and embodied performances of Ricky Martin (*Latina/o*), while Moreman has interrogated memoirs of Latina/o-White hybrid individuals to offer equipment for living to resist identity trappings (“Memoir”). In gay Latino studies, scholars have interrogated the embodied performances of *sinvergüenzas* (shamelessness) to reconsider early mainstream queer theory on gay shame (La Fountain-Stokes; García, “Lawrence”). Others have revisited and redeployed “camp” towards a more resistive and critical vision of a “Chicano camp” to challenge the inherent Western assumptions within this queer project (García, “Against”). Additionally, within and without communication studies, scholars have employed *rasquache* and *chusmería* as QOC performances of resistance, critique, and intervention (Moreman, “Rethinking”; Muñoz, *Disidentification*). Following the lead of *Jotería* studies, an emerging field of study within Chicana/o studies, *Jotería* communication studies is committed to the radical interconnectivity of all things, and like this essay, it draws on interdisciplinary scholarship and is positioned at the juncture of three worlds: the academic, the activist, and the artistic (Carlos-Manuel).

In fact, *Jotería* critique is a decolonial political project that rejects boundaries and challenges homonormativity, modernity, and social hierarchies based on racial, gendered, sexual, classed, and aged differences (Bañales). By relying on (queer) Chicana feminist scholarship as a foundation for its nascent work, *Jotería* critique engages in a theoretical praxis of resisting the colonial/modern gender system, transforming spaces through queer world-making, and investigating the intersection(s) of borderlands subjectivities (Anzaldúa, *Reader*; Alarcón; Calafell, *Latina/o*; Gutierrez-Perez, “Brown”, “Question(ing)”, “Warren-ting”; Hames-García, *Identity*, “*Jotería*”; Hames-García and Martínez; Martínez, *Making Sense*; Martínez; Moraga and Anzaldúa; Muñoz, *Disidentifications*). For instance, by emphasizing performance and the body in everyday life, queer temporality, utopian futurity, multiplicity, the Coatlicue state, and Joto passivity are some of the many decolonial theories that prioritize *Jotería* world-making (Anzaldúa, *Borderlands, Reader*; Calafell, *Latina/o*; Gutierrez-Perez, “Coatlicue”; Hames-García, *Identity*; Martínez, “Con Quién”; Muñoz, *Cruising*). Others have interrogated aesthetics and affect as potential sites of transformation and resistance (Anzaldúa, *Reader*; Calafell, “Mentoring”; Calvo-Quirós; Gutierrez-Perez, “Warren-ting”; Muñoz, “Feeling Brown”, “Feeling Down”; Rodríguez), and many have forwarded the experiences of transgender Latinas/os to intersectionally address cisgender privilege (Galarte; Moreman and McIntosh; Muñoz, *Disidentifications*). By reclaiming and redeploying the experiences of nonheteronormative mestiza/o subjectivities, *Jotería* critique makes the radical claim that *Jotería* is beauty, transformation, and power (Bañales). As a decolonial queer critique that embraces the ambiguity of hybridity with a commitment to radical interconnectivity, the specificities of this positionality in dialogue with the specificities of other QOC positionalities can productively

challenge and disrupt QOCC to center the experiences of Other subjectivities on their own terms.

## **Performative(ly) Writing Mestiza/o Consciousness**

As a mestizo,<sup>4</sup> I internally and externally migrate through/between all of my lineages simultaneously (Willink, Gutierrez-Perez, Shukri, and Stein). “What are you?” is an oft-heard question recklessly thrown in my direction. For decades, I suffered from internalized racism and classism because of my mestizaje, and I often referred to myself as a mutt or a coconut (i.e., brown on the outside, white on the inside). Additionally, I felt confused and self-hating in the proverbial closet trying to understand my bisexual-gay-queer<sup>5</sup> orientation towards sexual desire, and I often lashed out at others to make myself feel better or to defend and maintain a masculine gender performance. Navigating this racial/ethnic mestizaje alongside my bisexual-gay-queer identities in tandem with my working-class positionality made performing and understanding my particular manifestation of masculinity a difficult and nearly impossible task. Desperately, I searched television, film, literature, poetry, scholarship, artwork, and other creative forms that would help me navigate the particularities of my gender, sexuality, racial mestizaje, class, and religious backgrounds. In retrospect, I was trying to locate my *Jotería-historia* or my *Jotería* history that “tells us something about who we are today” (Pérez 145). However, as a marginalized community, *Jotería-historias* are often hidden, made invisible, and forgotten (Martínez, *Making Sense*; Revilla and Santillana).

As an illustrative example of this phenomenon, Latinos in my graduate program are often encouraged to reach out to each other for support, and I have both benefited from and been deeply hurt by these connections. By benefited, I mean that these performances of coalescence “into a unified ‘place’” have evoked temporary feelings of “home” where/when together we did feel “connected to each other across time, geography, and language” (Alvarez 51). By deeply hurt, I mean that these

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4 Specifically, my mother was born in San Jose, CA and is part Mexican from her mother who migrated from the state of Guanajuato, Mexico, and she is part English and part Dutch from my grandfather who traveled to California from the states of Alabama and Mississippi. My father is part Mexican from his mother’s long family history in California and part Black from an ambiguous encounter that remains a hidden family secret to this day. Additionally, my mother’s parents are both deaf as a result of early childhood illnesses, so there is an affective legacy intimately connected to ability issues and American Sign Language within my heritage and my understanding of the world.

5 Relying on the assumption within queer theory that sexuality is fluid and contextual (Yep, “Violence”), I hyphenate bisexual-gay-queer to indicate my own dynamic process of sexual identity that continues to (re)shape through my life experiences and the interlocutors that I have already and have yet to interact with. However, this performative writing move does not mean to indicate a hierarchy where bisexual is above gay is above queer, but rather, it is a continuous interaction of becoming that because of the limitations of language is difficult to convey through text alone.



coalitions often blur or ignore critical issues of sexism, heteronormativity, and the politics of skin color to maintain a false sense of belonging. For instance, there is a big difference in the experiences met and overcome when changing the “o” in Latino to the “a” in Latina (See Calafell, “Monstrous”), and further, queerness is only accepted in these ethnic/racial and heteronormative spaces if it isn’t too flamboyant, too vocal, or too political (See Gutierrez-Perez, “Brown”). Like many nonheteronormative mestizas/os, my narrative of marginalization is quickly forgotten and/or ignored to maintain the false sheen of community.

When facing your own inner mirror, there is an accounting for one’s privileges that must take place. A kind of critical reflexivity that acknowledges every act of deconstruction as a simultaneous act of reconstruction. What am I creating/destroying as I move through spaces? Often, I am not the best or most appropriate messenger for certain social justice-oriented politics. In revisiting these Latina/o (dis)connections over the past several years, the *conocimiento* (understanding) that I have reached is: The best forms of advocacy on my body are ones often considered *passive*, such as listening, critical literacy, and reflexivity. However, through an *active* “intersectional reflexivity,” I’ve come to acknowledge that, as a Xicano male, I continuously (re)produce my cisgendered and cissexual male privilege and support patriarchy in a myriad of everyday performances regardless of my queer identity (Jones and Calafell). In the moment of interaction, I forget that my height, my loud voice, my big grin shouldering forward in a narrow hallway makes my performances of masculinity impossible to ignore—my voice will be heard. Yet, I am not an “angry man of color” or another “radical queer” either. By shifting the mirror slightly to the right to examine the multiple refractions of my face back out into infinity, I can see how I am implicated in the support and rejection of Latina/o (dis)connections (Madison). It is hard to admit, but my embodied experiences participate in so many systems that privilege my voice over others. However, this experience of support/rejection is not solely a Latina/o issue, but as a mestizo, I am often never “enough” for any of my cultural communities. Given the hegemonic discourses surrounding racial purity that uphold White supremacist thinking and being, I am not an “authentic” person—I am not White or Black or Latino *enough* to receive full membership into any group. In fact, recently a Black straight male colleague publicly questioned my right to exist: “I just don’t get how you can claim you are Black when you are sitting next to a *real* Black person.” *Jotería* critique grapples with the material realities of hybridity and/or *mestizaje* within gender and sexuality performances and the ways identity, culture, and power are mutually constituted (Hames-García, *Identity*). How can we (re)member our *Jotería*?

## Contributions to Communication Studies

In this essay, I have outlined *Jotería* critique as a conception of QOCC that moves away from binaries that continue to homogenize the brown rainbow of our QOC experiences and scholarship. To resist this essentialism, I advocate for more scholarship, art, and activism that places the particularities of our QOC communities in conversation with the particularities of each other’s QOC

communities. Like when I read Shadee Abdi's work on "narrative trespass," my assumptions surrounding Islamophobia and lesbian experience is challenged in powerfully unexpected ways, and when I grapple with Eguchi's scholarship on sissyphobia and the femme gay Asian body, my own performances of raced masculinity are implicated and further understood ("Sissyphobia"). What other avenues of scholarship are possible when we acknowledge that our differences matter and are equally important to each other? In many ways, the academy as a White male upper/middle-class dominated institution was never made for *Jotería* or QPOC to be successful, and the more we "play the game" the more we participate in a colonial/modern system of domination. With so few of us, we are often tokenized in our departments and academic fields; we are forced to waste our energy making ourselves intelligible to the dominant culture; and our intellectual and material labor is erased as quickly as it is completed. By embracing the specificity and subjectivity of nonheteronormative *mestiza/o* gender and sexuality performances, I offer a decolonial queer critical practice that embraces the ambiguity of hybridity and the politics of radical interconnectedness. By offering alternative decolonial methodologies, *Jotería* critique challenges communication studies scholars to work in the borderlands between the academic, the artistic, and the activist, which can potentially increase the impact of our scholarship. Further, intersectionality and radical interconnectivity as key tenants of *Jotería* communication studies centers non-Western epistemologies and ontologies in their/our theory building and research practices. By embracing ambiguity and difference, turning toward particularity in QOCC disrupts multiple logics of the center and invites greater inclusion in communication theory, practice, and research.

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DEPARTMENT OF COMMUNICATION STUDIES

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Communication Pedagogy

Gender, Sexuality, and Communication

Intercultural Communication

Interpersonal Communication

Performance Studies

Rhetoric and Philosophy of Communication

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The Department offers both master's and doctoral degrees in Communication Studies. Doctoral graduate students elect to specialize in one of six concentrations: Communication Pedagogy; Gender, Sexuality, and Communication; Intercultural Communication; Interpersonal Communication; Performance Studies; and Rhetoric and Philosophy of Communication. The graduate faculty of the Department also offers curriculum in the following areas: ethnography, conversation analysis, organizational communication, public relations, public address, and political communication.

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