

Designing “‘Queer’ Across Cultures:” Disrupting the Consumption of Diversity

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Abstract

This article charts the underlying logic and structure of a course titled “‘Queer’ Across Cultures,” created to provide a transnational focus for the groundbreaking minor in Multicultural Queer Studies, spearheaded by Eric Rofes. Concerned that students would too easily revert to a practice of consuming diversity, I have attempted to weave together readings which complicate a colonial gaze by challenging hegemonic constructions of essential difference. My primary strategy in crafting this course has been to focus on the term “across” in the title. In other words to foreground and theorize the transnational within the production of both similarities and differences in sexual and gender practices, categories, and meanings. Through examining the gendered and sexual dynamics of colonialism, nationalist movements, and contemporary economic and cultural globalization, I seek to engage with the history of relations within and across nations that shape contemporary meanings of sex, sexuality and gender.

Gloria Wekker’s (2006) ethnography, *The Politics of Passion: Women’s Sexual Culture in the Afro-Surinamese Diaspora*, begins with a detailed account of the life story of Miss Juliette, a working class Afro-Surinamese woman, complemented by a rich reflection on the project of ethnography and the meaning of personal narrative. In the midst of this nuanced analysis, Wekker articulates a painful paradox. She writes,

How do I tell Miss Juliette’s life history, and the sexual stories of other Creole working-class women, in light of a dominant Euro-American history of representing black women’s sexuality as excessive, insatiable, the epitome of animal lust, and always already pathological? How do I avoid staging a latter day Sa-

rah Baartman show, with Juliette as the traveling spectacle this time? (2006:5).

Wekker clearly articulated the concerns I felt in the design of the course titled “‘Queer’ Across Cultures.”¹ Many students revert to a familiar pattern of “consuming” diversity when engaging in cross-cultural analysis, collecting examples of essentialized cultural practices and arranging them like colorful jellybeans in a jar. The “consumption of diversity” is the downfall of a form of multiculturalism which emerged in the 1980s, and which Stuart Hall (1991) argues is based on exotification, reproducing in new forms colonial assumptions of fundamental difference between colonizers and colonized. I have worked to create a class which looks at differences across cultures while not reifying and exoti-

cizing these differences; it is a project that must relentlessly complicate a colonial gaze seeking to render the world intelligible through the narrative frame of essential difference.

I developed “‘Queer’ Across Cultures” as part of the groundbreaking Multicultural Queer Studies minor spearheaded by Eric Rofes. Shortly after arriving at Humboldt State University, he initiated conversations with those of us across campus committed to queer studies; reaching out to colleagues in English, Ethnic Studies, Psychology, Sociology, Political Science, Theatre, Film and Dance, and Women’s Studies. True to his spirit as a seasoned organizer, Eric gathered us together for a series of beautifully executed, agenda-packed meetings. Under his leadership we moved through discussions about queer theory and activism, diversity, multiculturalism and intersectionality, to arrive at pragmatic discussions of curriculum. While we were fortunate to have in place a number of courses that fit our emerging mission, it was clear we had two gaping holes: a cross-cultural course on sex, sexuality and gender; and a queer history course.

I don’t know how it happened that I was slated to create a new course in an area outside of my primary research and scholarship. I couldn’t say whether Eric asked me directly (knowing I have a Ph.D. in anthropology), or glanced towards me expectantly. Perhaps his sheer presence and exuberance simply inspired me to volunteer. I do know that I had no business taking on a new project. I was overextended with a precarious balance of teaching, administering, building the Women’s Studies program and parenting. Yet I believe many of us who had the honor of working with Eric found ourselves, at his prodding, doing more than we thought we could. He modeled it for us, willfully ignoring any discouraging barriers and en-

gaging in projects and producing works many see as mutually exclusive.²

As the project unfolded, I sought to integrate postcolonial studies with anthropology and queer studies. I also sought to focus primarily on communities outside the US, for the program’s groundbreaking focus on the intersections of multicultural and queer meant that my colleagues’ had already designed courses such as “Multicultural Queer Narratives,” “Performing Race and Gender,” and “Queer Women’s Lives.” These courses foreground the diverse realities of queer communities of color in the US. Thus, this new course did not have to carry the burden of de-centering a broader curriculum focusing primarily on a prototypical gay, white, class-privileged, and male subject. My charge was to provide a transnational focus, one which would raise critical questions about meanings and practices of sex, gender and sexuality across cultures.

My primary strategy in crafting this course has been to focus on the term “across” in the title – in other words, to foreground and theorize the transnational within the production of both similarities and differences in sexual and gender practices, categories, and meanings. Through examining the gendered and sexual dynamics of colonialism, nationalist movements, and contemporary economic and cultural globalization, I seek to engage with the history of economic, political and cultural relations across nations that shape contemporary meanings of sex, sexuality and gender.

Below I chart out the structure of the class, the key insights and limitations embedded within different sections, and reflect on the overall project of the class.³ I organize the course into three sections: Section I engages with the diversity of categories, relationships and meanings; Section II is focused on the intersections of colonialism, nationalism, race/ethnicity, sexuality and gender in the construction of heteronorma-

tivity; and Section III focuses on situated sexualities and genders in postcolonial contexts. By outlining the rationale for the design of the course, I hope to contribute to the broader conversations on the development of postcolonial queer studies curriculum.

Section I: Diversity of categories, relationships and meanings

This first section of the course introduces a basic framework to critically interrogate the following assumptions underlying hegemonic discourses of sex, gender and sexuality: 1) heterosexuality is the only natural and normal expression of sexuality; 2) there are two and only two sexes, male and female; and 3) there are two and only two genders, masculine and feminine, which naturally correspond with the two sexes. By analyzing the dynamics of naturalizing hegemonic discourses of sex, we examine the ways biology is called forth to support these claims, and we explore alternative conceptualizations of sex, gender and sexuality.

There are multiple frameworks from which to argue against these naturalizing discourses. One of the most obvious is that biological studies on difference between men and women emphasize differences between groups and overlook differences within the categories themselves and similarities across these categories. Joan Scott (1988) aptly argues that poststructuralist theory enables us to see how meanings of categories framed as opposites are mutually constituted. She argues for examining differences in the plural (within and between categories), as well as similarities across groups. The recent work of intersex activists, gender theorists and some biologists (Intersex Society of North America, Butler 1990, Fausto-Sterling 1993, 2000) enables us to understand that our delineation of bodies into two and only two sexes is itself a product of our anxieties, desires, and segmented workings of power including genital surgery in order

to create the illusion of two and only two sex categories. While Fausto-Sterling (1993, 2000) grounds her arguments in a re-reading of biology, Butler (1990) is the most skeptical of our ability to identify the materiality of bodies outside the power-laden discourses of gender. She argues that the language used to describe the materiality of the body (sex) is fully informed by our socially constructed definitions of gender.

In related work, feminist and queer theory has also firmly challenged the claim that heterosexuality is natural. Katz's (1996) work on the invention of heterosexuality lays the groundwork for important aspects of the transnational analysis of the course. His historical analysis of the invention of the concepts of heterosexuality and homosexuality in the late 1800s, and the radical changes in their meanings over the next 40 years, enables students to understand the shifting ground of definitions of normative and non-normative sexual practices and desires, and the recent phenomena of the assertion of sexuality as identity. His work also helps to introduce Foucault's (1980) argument that Western discourses of sexuality, including the elaboration of both normal and deviant desires and practices, are best understood through an analysis of power as productive rather than repressive. This early attention to the workings of power and the production of subjects enables a focus on the concepts of subject-positions, discourse, power, agency, and resistance throughout the course.

A singularly important work on identity and the invention of heterosexuality and homosexuality is Sommerville's (1997) insightful analysis of the methods of early sexology. In this article she argues that the methods of comparative anatomy used in 19th century racist biology (in which the surface of the body was measured and analyzed in the belief that such markings revealed the essence of a person's intelligence, abilities, and desires)⁴ were adopted by early sexolo-

gists. Thus, early studies were obsessed with surface variations in genitalia, leading to claims of oversized clitorises and elongated labia of the female “invert’s” body and African American women’s bodies as well. Held up to a mythical norm, these “inverts” and African American women’s genitalia were declared less differentiated from men’s. Drawing upon Darwinian theories of evolution in which organisms with less sexual differentiation were cast as less evolved, these selective readings of bodies led to a ranking of African American women and “inverts” as lower on the scale of human evolution. Intersexed persons were similarly relegated to the status of less evolved and therefore less human. Thus, rather than race and sex as somehow discrete entities of analysis, Sommerville shows how early discourses of sexology – and the invention of heterosexuality – were dependent upon and produced through the methodologies of early biological discourses of race.

These works introduced within the first several weeks of the course, and which are centered on Euro-American contexts, enable students to engage in a radical questioning of concepts of sex, gender and sexuality. I intersperse the work of these theorists with cross-cultural analyses which elaborate multiple ways of categorizing bodies and desires. These anthropological studies foreground cultures that have (or had) more than two genders or sexes, including numerous Native American communities which identified three, four, or five genders, some of which also define(d) three sex categories (Lang 1999); as well as *Hijra* communities in India, who craft their lives through performing a third gender category (Nanda 2000). Meigs’ (1990) analysis of gender among the Hua people of Papua New Guinea is important for demonstrating the plasticity of human creativity, for Meigs argues that among the Hua, what a dominant discourse would label as sex (particularly the

primary sex characteristic of genitalia) is rather a secondary form of classification of people. Among the Hua in the 1980s, gender was based not on genitalia, but on concepts of juiciness and dryness – thereby creating a system in which it is expected that people change gender categories over time as their bodies become more or less juicy. This relegation of genitalia to a secondary place among the Hua, when read alongside Butler’s (1990) argument that Western culture explains the materiality of the body through power-laden discourses of gender, provides a lived example of the demotion of “sex” to something other than primary or causal, thereby disrupting one of the key narratives of sex in Euro-American culture.

Similarly, anthropological studies of sexuality challenge the supposed natural division of people into heterosexuals and homosexuals. We can see from such studies that while many communities defined both normative and deviant forms of sexual relations, these definitions do not conform to a Euro-American structured hetero/homo divide. In fact, Lang (1999) argues that while some Native American communities did not stigmatize sexual relations among those of the same gender, many did. In the context of three or four gender categories among many Native American communities (in most cases these third and fourth gender categories are for girls/women who became like men and boys/men who became like women), Lang argues that heterogender relationships, defined as involving people of two different gender categories, were considered normal, while homogender relationships were generally taboo. A dominant Western perspective privileging genital conceptions of sex would label many of these heterogender relations as gay or lesbian. These differing forms of classification operate as more than semantics, for at the heart of the difference between heterogender and heterosexual is the identification of who is

in a “normal” category of sexual relationship, with all the resulting rights and privileges that normality accrues.

Furthermore, cross-cultural analysis can reveal how definitions of so-called “normal” and “deviant” sexuality may be focused less on the “sex” of the bodies (i.e., male-male sexual interaction = always homosexual) and more on the sexual act of penetration. In what is broadly referenced as a “Latin American” model of male same-sex sexual practice, the penetrator does not compromise his gender and sexual position as a “normal” man, while the man who is penetrated is feminized and rendered deviant (Kulick 1997).

This exploration of cultural differences in both categories and meanings of sex, gender and sexuality is a useful project for contesting the supposed naturalness of these terms, but it is a project fraught with problems if we refuse to identify and complicate its underlying assumptions. In particular, such reference to cultural difference tends to freeze cultural productions of categories and meanings in time and space, thereby ignoring differences within a culture, similarities across cultures, and the long history of cultural transformations-- the most recent and dramatic of which have been colonialism, nationalist movements, and the current globalization of economies and cultures. Dichotomies of Western/Non-Western, traditional/modern, local/global, are seamlessly reproduced, appearing to be somehow naturally occurring or at least self-evident oppositions. The assertion of a “Latin American” model of gay sexuality is a case in point. Authors such as Quiroga (2000:195-226) argue that this assertion ignores differences in the construction of gay sexuality in Latin America – both within and across countries – and it ignores similarities among Latin American and Euro-American communities.

Section II: Intersections of colonialism, nationalism, race/ethnicity, sexuality and gender in the construction of heteronormativity

Postcolonial scholarship enables an understanding of “queer across cultures” that does not essentialize culture and which refutes a colonial discourse. One of its key insights is a direct challenge of the often unstated assumption that there is a Western world which is discrete, bounded, and separate from the Non-Western world. This assumption is replicated in other dichotomies – North/South, Tradition/Modernity, Developed/Undeveloped, whereby oppositions are posited as if they are somehow based in essential natural or cultural differences.

Scholarship in postcolonial studies reveals that:

1. A central strategy of colonial rule was the production of knowledge about the “East” that postulated essential difference from the “West” (Said 1978).
2. The development of the West, and its resulting “modernity,” was produced through the extraction of resources and labor from the colonies, thereby revealing the complete dependence of a Western construction of self on the exploitation of the colonized (Mies 1998 [1986]). Even defining elements of Western “culture” – such as British tea – emerged through colonial domination, for both the tea and sugar plantations that are central to that quintessentially British “tradition” are dependent upon the labor and the geography of Asia and the Caribbean (Hall 1991).
3. Values heralded as “traditional” in newly independent countries often emerged out of the colonial encounter itself, thereby revealing the mutual production of both tradition and modernity. In ef-

fect, many so-called “traditions” are rather the elite nationalist interpretations of colonially imposed values parading in the guise of national essence (Chatterjee 1993).

4. Modernity is revealed as a discourse that asserts that (a supposedly universal) “we” are always progressing, that “our” lives are improving through technological innovation. This “myth of progress” is revealed as the progress of a few based upon the retrogression of many (Mies 1998 [1986]).

While these key insights are not directly focused on issues of sex, sexuality, and gender, the work of breaking down colonial oppositions is essential to the project of a transnational focus on “Queer” Across Cultures that attempts to disrupt the consumption of diversity. Ann Stoler’s (1997) work brings postcolonial studies closer to queer studies by examining the centrality of the control of sexuality to the project of colonial rule. Contrary to most analyses of colonialism, which relegate analysis of sexuality under colonialism to a realm of effect rather than cause, Stoler argues that anti-miscegenation laws and practices emerged as key strategies of rule in times of political crisis. She argues that it is only through a control of sexuality that “racial” categories can be maintained. The children of interracial heterosexual alliances pose one of the most profound threats to the artifice of colonialism, which is based upon notions of a superior and essentially different self from a distinct and inferior “Other.” Thus the blurring of these categories through the bodies of mixed-race children, and the rifts in the coherence of narratives of essential difference, reveal the dichotomy of self/other as a political construction. Control of sexuality, Stoler argues, is not a secondary effect of

colonial rule, but integral to the project of rule itself.⁵

Postcolonial queer studies furthers Stoler’s important insights by analyzing colonizers’ imposition of European constructions of normative and deviant sexuality upon their colonies. Many colonial laws regulating sexuality were written before the invention of heterosexuality and homosexuality, thus colonial intervention in this realm often occurred through anti-sodomy laws represented as “crimes against nature.” This colonial construction of deviant sexuality could thus be applied against consensual anal sex between a man and a woman as well as between two men. The colonial view of deviant sexuality also covered bestiality, and was broad enough to condemn any non-procreative sexual acts. This colonial construction of “normal” sexuality was thus extremely narrow (Patel 2002, Narrain 2005). Furthermore, colonial laws rendered transgendered persons deviant by instituting administrative categories that assumed a two-sex, two-gender system, thereby marginalizing and stigmatizing trans identities and practices (Nanda 2000, Patel 2002).

Postcolonial queer studies also uses the colonial archive to reconstruct pre-colonial queer histories, a project Eprecht (1998) has argued is plagued by methodological concerns. In the case of societies without written records before colonial rule, the colonial archives serve as an important source for tracing pre-colonial values and categories of gender and sexuality. Yet when the primary discussion of same sex practice and trans identities is found in colonial court records largely focusing on non-consensual criminal behavior, Eprecht asks what in the record counts as evidence of consensual same-sex relations? He explores court cases from colonial Zimbabwe to demonstrate the method of reading against the grain of the colonial script to find narratives of consensual same-sex desire practice. His project is further

complicated by the fact that the British were creating and implementing criminal sexual codes at the same time as their economic policies were transforming the social and political landscape of Zimbabwe. Some historians have argued that men's same sex relations in the gender segregated gold mines established by the British were simply substituting for a supposedly natural heterosexual sexuality. Yet through a careful reading of criminal court cases, Eprecht is able to uncover evidence of same-sex desire and practice that is not rooted in the political geography of male mining communities. His article thus clearly articulates the limitations of the colonial archive, but also offers some strategic reading practices for constructing pre-colonial and colonial queer histories.

Postcolonial queer studies also attends to the painful ironies of nationalist movements, focusing on leaders of newly independent countries who have engaged in an uncritical adoption of colonial values of sex, gender and sexuality. By attending to the contradictory role of elites, many of whom were immersed in colonizers' values through attending colonial educational institutions, we can unpack and analyze some government leaders' virulently homophobic discourses. While Mugabe of Zimbabwe is one of the most infamous for claiming that "homosexuality is a Western disease" or that heterosexuality is "traditional," leaders from the Caribbean, Asia, the Middle East, and beyond have issued similar proclamations. The kernel of truth in these statements is that the construct of homosexuality (that term invented and given meaning in relation to the normative concept of heterosexuality, not to be confused with same-sex sexual desire and practice) is decidedly western, but they are omitting its crucial counterpart – for heterosexuality is a Western import as well.

In nationalist discourse, time and again heterosexuality is unproblematically linked with the cultural body of the nation (Aarmo

1999, beng hui 1999). What is painfully ironic is that as subjects of a neo-imperialist globalized economy, some "queer" people from the global south may at once identify with homophobic nationalist discourses that are parading as anti-imperialism, while simultaneously being terrified of the potential violence directed at their "queer" bodies (see especially Aarmo). Aarmo writes about Evershine's complex relationship to Mugabe's homophobic attacks:

Evershine is one of the black lesbians who condemned Mugabe's outbursts against homosexuals. 'But still I admire the president for his courage to tell the West to go to hell!' Evershine is very conscious of the colonial period and what the 'West' did to Africa. As a black Zimbabwean, she supports Mugabe in his contempt for the 'West,' but as a lesbian, she is scared of the attacks concerning her sexual orientation (Aarmo: 269).

Carefully situated historical analyses enable students to read history critically in order to deconstruct the contemporary deployment of "tradition" for homophobic nationalist projects and to uncover examples of same-sex desire and practice. Yet a turn to history can also have unintended consequences. Shah's (1998) work is extremely important for challenging the impulse to justify contemporary desires and identities through reference to historical evidence of pre-colonial "queer" subjects. Shah engages with debates within the diasporic South Asian queer community about the importance of tracing queer South Asian histories. Raising critical questions about some scholars' far-reaching interpretations of ancient Hindu texts and sculptures, he argues that we must have an understanding of the project of historiography, through which we are "writing history by producing new inter-

pretations of the past” (Shah, 148). He writes, “A ‘recovered past’ cannot secure or fix an identity for eternity. The relationships between identities and histories are fluid and constantly shifting. As Stuart Hall reminds us, ‘Identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past’” (Shah, 148). When we look to the past to validate present identities and desires, he argues, “We are, at best, using ancient text and sculpture to shade today’s meanings of sexual practices” (Shah, 148). He argues for a speculative relationship with a queer history based on ancient texts and sculptures, acknowledging the limitations of our knowledge about the complex debates, intentions and values that gave rise to these cultural productions. He concludes this reflection on queer historiography with a powerful affirmation: “South Asian lesbians and gay men are present now. On that alone we demand acknowledgment and acceptance” (Shah, 149).

Section III: Situated sexualities and genders in postcolonial contexts.

After introducing tools of postcolonial analysis, including critical perspectives on tradition as well as the project of cross-cultural “queer” history, the course proceeds to focus attention on the complex processes through which persons negotiate sexual and gender categories, practices, and meanings within specific locales and in the context of new forms of globalization. Fortunately there are some excellent texts that analyze differences in sexual practices and meanings without essentializing those differences in place or time. Gloria Wekker’s (2006) ethnography, *The Politics of Passion*, is a rich and detailed exploration of these themes, and for this reason I assign the entire book for the class.

Wekker (2006) explores how working class Afro-Surinamese women construct

their sexuality within the context of the history of colonialism, the realities of postcolonial life, and the transnational realities of flows of people, goods, and remittances between the Netherlands and Suriname. This ethnography is particularly useful for deconstructing the dominant Western assertion that sexual desire and practice are internalized as a sexual identity. Wekker focuses on Afro-Surinamese women’s discussions of the *mati* work: their way of describing the sexual relationships they forge with other women (while sometimes simultaneously having relationships with men for the purposes of birthing children, economic security and/or desire). Wekker argues for the importance of taking Afro-Surinamese women’s words seriously: the *mati* work, she argues, is not simply a synonym for lesbian identity. Rather, by paying attention to same sex desire within the construct of work, we can understand that the conflation of sexual desire with identity is an historical product rather than a natural event.

Eschewing simplified (and colonial) discourses of essential meanings and practices, Wekker attends to the multiple and contradictory discourses which shape working class Afro-Surinamese women’s practice of the *mati* work. She explores the dynamic interactions of homophobic discourses of Christianity stigmatizing same-sex desire, discourses of Winti religious practice which support the *mati* work, and Dutch discourses of lesbian identity that conflict with Afro-Surinamese women’s self-descriptions. Through her exploration of working class Afro-Surinamese women’s migration to the Netherlands, she provides rich insight into the practice of the *mati* work that does not freeze this practice in time or place. As the Dutch state regulates the meanings of sexual desire in terms of identity, and frames that analysis within anti-discrimination policy granting same-sex partners the same immigration rights as heterosexuals, migrant Afro

-Surinamese women must position themselves as lesbians, thereby displacing their self-definitions as they encounter the neo-colonial realities of residence in the colonizer's land. By attending to these migrant women's self-representations, Wekker is able to highlight their agency, while also foregrounding issues of power and the production of subjects within a transnational context. Her ethnography carefully integrates analysis of political economy and sexuality, demonstrating what so many theorists claim (but few so carefully demonstrate): that sexuality is historically, socially, politically and economically constructed. Her work is grounded in postcolonial theory which refutes the search for a cultural essence and instead examines the multi-ethnic construction of Suriname within the historical development of global capitalism.

Wekker's richly detailed work then sets the stage for a continued examination of issues of power, agency, and subjectivity within a transnational context, key concepts illuminating the relationship between discourses and the construction of desire, sexual practices, and, in some contexts, sexual and gender identity. By focusing on the concept of agency (within an analysis of the productive workings of power), I direct my students to focus on the multiple and often contradictory ways people negotiate always dynamic traditions within the context of new discourses of sexuality, sex and gender. In this section on situated sexualities and genders, there are several common pitfalls in the literature I seek to problematize. On the one hand there are works which celebrate the emergence of global queer cultures, often with limited interrogation of the reproduction of class, gender, and ethnic hierarchies which occur in these spaces through practices of exclusion (intentional and unintentional). On the other hand are articles which decry the loss of diversity of sexual and gender practices and meanings due to

cultural and economic globalization. These works are in danger of romanticizing static (and colonial) conceptions of tradition, while launching a partial and flawed critique of economic and cultural imperialism (see insightful critiques of Altman [2001] by Arondekar [2005]; see also Wekker [2006], Grewal and Kaplan [2005]). What is most challenging to find – and most useful for this class – are carefully crafted writings which attend to the dynamic complexity of lived traditions within ongoing transnational relations. When these works are at their best, they examine differences (in the plural) within a community. Not all sources I use in this final section of the course live up to this challenge; however, Wekker provides a framework enabling students to search for omissions, to challenge over-generalizations and to ask pressing questions about the global within the local.

Such dynamic interplay of local conceptualizations of sexuality with global cultural flows is explored by Chou in his critical reflection on the emergence of the term *tongzhi* (comrade) within Hong Kong and later China. As a scholar and an activist within Hong Kong, Chou charts the development of *tongzhi* community and political strategies, situating his analysis in an historical exploration of Confusion ideas about sexuality and personhood, British criminalization of sodomy and new social movements. He writes,

Instead of already 'being gay' I would argue that thousands of Hong Kong PEPS [people who are erotically attracted to people of the same sex] 'became gay' in the 1970s, many of them became queer, bisexual, or lesbian in the 1980s, and most of them have become *tongzhi* in the past decade (2000: 59-60).

Chou argues that *tongzhi* activists appropriated the most sacred term of Chinese

communism, thereby indigenizing sexual politics and reclaiming a cultural identity. He charts the construction of new sexual communities who are defining themselves within contemporary Chinese cultural concepts and narratives, reflecting upon Western models of sexual identity formation and Stonewall models of gay liberation and queer resistance. Chou delineates the movement's strategies of "coming home" as opposed to coming out, and "queering the mainstream," thereby elucidating the development of a Chinese model of sexual identity and community formation and patterns of individual and collective resistance to heteronormativity rooted in the locale of Hong Kong and defined through complex transnational histories. Chou's attention to the transnational and hybrid positioning of *tongzhi* enables students to engage with a collective politics of identity based on conceptions of family and community that de-center the individual. Chou is also attentive to the gap between the radical potential of *tongzhi* and its actuality, which reflects hierarchies of class and gender. Yet he remains hopeful that the creativity inherent in the origins of *tongzhi* can be rearticulated through a commitment to engage substantively with the politics of class and gender within this new movement.

Just as Western discourses of sexuality are circulating in global cultural flows, so are Western and medicalized transgendered discourses, leading to conflicts over meanings and identities at the intersections of sex, gender and race. Katrina Roen (2001) foregrounds an analysis of colonialism and racialization in her research with gender liminal persons in Polynesia. She interrogates the western medicalization of transexuality as a form of "corporeal colonialism." After reviewing important insights from transgender theorists in the West who deconstruct this medicalized discourse, she asks, "How might queer and transgender

politics and theories work (or not work) for people whose primary political affiliation is with their racial or cultural identity group?" (2001: 256). Through interviews with three Polynesian gender liminal persons, she examines the ways in which subjects negotiate multiple understandings of the intersections of racial identities and gender liminality through an engagement of Polynesian categories of *fa'afafine*, western medical discourses of transsexuality and state definitions of gendered citizenship. Although she at times lapses into colonial dichotomies of tradition and modernity, as well as problematic divisions of race and gender (as opposed to racialized gender identity), the article raises important questions about contemporary Western transgendered theory.⁶

In order to help students think about the complexity of issues of agency, subjectivity, competing discourses and transnational processes from colonialism to the present, I intersperse several documentaries throughout the class. *Two Spirit People* (Beauchemin et al., 1991) is a short documentary that charts the complexity of forming Native American identities within the context of ongoing relations of colonialism. *Ke Kulana He Mahu* (Anbe et al., 2001) is a longer documentary examining the Hawaiian third gender category of *Mahu* through history to set the context for understanding the diverse ways that persons negotiate this category today: exploring participation in nationalist cultural movements, as well as the performance spaces of drag. *Sunflowers* (Hainsworth, 1997) similarly engages with the theme of contemporary negotiation of identities within neo-colonial contexts. The Sunflowers of the Philippines emerge in this film as subjects who are crafting spaces of creativity within a stigmatized context framed by Catholic heteronormativity. Yet the interviews reveal a more complex understanding of gender and sexuality, articulating a hybrid

formation of colonial Catholic values, pre-colonial categories and meanings of gender and sexuality, and contemporary transnational formations of feminine beauty and fashion.⁷

Once students have a firm grounding in frameworks for analyzing agency, power and subjectivity, I introduce Grewal and Kaplan's (2005) review article to foreground Foucault's concept of governmentality as a critical framework for transnational studies of sexuality. The concept of governmentality is particularly useful for exploring the global AIDS crisis. The practices of codifying, normalizing, stigmatizing and regulating behaviors and identities, through nationalist, medicalizing, and transnational economic discourses in response to the AIDS crisis have created new arenas in which sexual subjects are interpolated by discourse, sexual and gender categories and their meanings are (re)produced, and the role and conception of the state is legitimized. The framework of governmentality reveals everyday state practices as sites for the exercise of power and the production of its legitimacy: the creation of government HIV/AIDS plans, testing and outreach programs, establishment of health centers for targeted populations, training programs, and the creation of models of best practices. Michael Tan's (2000) work on the AIDS epidemic in the Philippines, while not using the concept of governmentality, can be usefully paired with Grewal and Kaplan's article. In particular, his attention to the practices through which AIDS is medicalized and the surveillance and policing of HIV positive persons, helps to bring concepts of governmentality to life.⁸

In this section I also include several articles to critically interrogate mainstream (white, class privileged, and male) US queer politics by utilizing the framework of the course. Yoshikawa (1998) discusses the controversy over Lambda Legal Defense Fund's unrepentant commitment to the use

of the musical *Miss Saigon* as a fundraiser, despite a sustained protest by a coalition of queer/anti-racist organizers who called attention to the racist depictions of Asians in the play, as well as concerns about racist casting in the production. As a result of this painful organizing process, Yoshikawa argues convincingly for the need to engage in an intersectional and anti-colonial analysis where issues of racism are re-centered in US queer politics.

Similarly, Murungi's (2003) article analyzes the painful contradictions of working as an African woman advocating for the rights of all-sexuals⁹ within US-based GLBT human rights work. Interrogating the androcentrism and Eurocentrism of human rights frameworks, and using postcolonial and women of color feminist theory to challenge the underlying assumptions and omissions of this work, she charts her path of engagement in this challenging and important field. She identifies the need to consciously link gay rights work with "anti-racist and anti-imperialist liberation politics" (Murungi 2003, 497), including a critical gaze on institutionalized racist practices in the United States (e.g., police brutality, INS border practices, post 9/11 targeting of immigrant communities). Her account highlights the current wave of anti-democratic politics from African leaders not only in Zimbabwe, but also in Kenya, Uganda, Zambia and Namibia, who have used homophobia as a diversion tactic from pressing political and economic issues.¹⁰ In particular she argues that the frontal attack on women's movements in the witch hunts for lesbian subjects is not a coincidence, but part of a systematic movement to undercut people's movements for justice and the expansion of civil society. One of the greatest strengths of the article is Murungi's pain-filled reflections on how these regional political maneuvers and their global responses have impacted her as an African feminist doing political work in di-

aspora. Through this reflection we can see the ways in which persons are interpolated by multiple and contradictory discourses (African nationalisms; popular media representations of transnational feminism; African women's movements; global human rights; Caribbean lesbian, all-sexual, and gay communities; and diasporic African LGBT communities), and how intimate aspects of self – desires, fears, and longings – are in part produced through this interpellation.¹¹

I conclude the course with the documentary *Dangerous Living: Coming out in the Developing World* (Scagliotti 2003), paired with an article by Hassan El Menyawi (2006) titled, "Activism from the Closet: Gay Rights Strategising in Egypt." The documentary focuses on the Cairo 52, charting the history of the infamous raid on the Queen Boat, a floating nightclub in Cairo, and the subsequent prosecution of men for "habitual debauchery" and "obscene behavior," interspersed with interviews with GLBTQ activists from Asia, Africa and Latin America. The film is simultaneously insightful and problematic, with the compelling moments of the piece provided by interviews with remarkable activists. Yet the richness of these activists' words is eclipsed by a heavy-handed narrative that frames the film along a linear model of gay progress based upon a US Stonewall model of activism.

Drawing upon the analysis of the course, I help students to identify some of the problematic underlying assumptions and omissions in the framing of the narrative. This exercise enables them to weave together much of the prior coursework and apply it to a documentary that is compelling to those lacking a background in postcolonial queer studies. In particular, I encourage students to see that two problematic assumptions are core to the narrative: first, that homosexuality is a stable, essential identity, and second

that the process of gay collective identity formation and collective action is similar across different nations and different historical periods. We then seek to identify key insights from the class that challenge the film's narrative frame, namely:

- The concepts of heterosexuality and homosexuality, homophobia, and the symbol of the heterosexual nuclear family as representative of the nation are all Western in origin;
- Colonizers routinely stigmatized same-sex desire and practice and institutionalized heteronormativity within legal systems of their colonies;
- Nationalist movements did not question this imposed heteronormativity; upon independence colonial laws regulating sexuality were often adopted as law for the independent nation state;
- As national leaders are faced with economic and political crises, as well as the AIDS pandemic, they attempt to hold on to power through critiques of Western economic and military imperialism (here imperialism designates Western domination of global economic institutions as well as US military actions and militarized diplomacy). Because homosexuality is cast as a Western import, political leaders have used homophobic discourse to critique imperialism (through the logic that to oppose anything marked as Western is to oppose imperialism). Thus homophobia gets to ironically parade as anti-imperialist discourse (while that other Western import of heterosexuality is called forth to represent the nation);
- Many GLBTQ people in the US do not have the freedom to live an out gay life; for example, queer youth who end up on

streets due to violent oppression based on their queer identities from family members and in schools; systemic discrimination against transgendered people, rendering passing a strategy of survival for many trans persons; hate crimes against queer people in the US; police brutality against GLBTQ persons, especially GLBTQ people of color (see especially Ritchie [2007] for accounts of police violence against GLBTQ persons of color);

- Those queer activists of color who seek asylum in the West may confront the racist practices of the INS; asylum seekers have been criminalized (see Kassindja and Bashir [1998] for a harrowing account of institutionalized racism in a female circumcision asylum case);
- Once in the US, these activists will have to navigate the anti-immigrant policies of the War on Terror, as well as the new forms of racism that the War on Terror has spawned in communities across the US, including racism within US queer communities;
- The focus on the Cairo 52 has the unintended effect of reinforcing dominant narratives of the “backward” nature of the Middle East, at a time when this narrative is used to justify the latest in imperial wars.

I pair this film with the article by El Menyawi (2006) who identifies the political and economic reasons for raiding the Queen Boat: firstly, it was part of the Egyptian government’s strategy “to divert attention from its failure to address the economic woes of the country” (evident in rising unemployment, recession and insufficient state services for the poor); and secondly it was a

strategy “to attract the support of those who have come to agree with the increasingly popular Muslim Brotherhood” (the popular, yet banned, Islamist political party) (2006, III). El Menyawi writes, “By attacking gays the Egyptian State successfully distracted the public’s attention from its woes, while also shoring up the State’s Islamic credentials” (2006:II). He argues that the model of gay activism in the West is not useful given the contemporary politics of the state that can so easily use homophobia as a tool of anti-imperialist nationalist discourse. Given his harrowing experience of imprisonment and torture due to being an out gay activist, El Menyawi has rethought activist strategies to advocate for a new form of activism, that which he calls “activism from the closet” (2006, IV). The closet in this formation operates not as an individual space of isolation, but rather as a collective space of protection for LGBTQ groups to practice their sexuality and forge changes in society from hidden locations. “The closet,” he argues, “becomes ‘elastic’ – a protean structure moving with flexibility and dynamism. Unlike the traditional narrative of the closet as a location from which a person can only ‘exit’, this closet is expanding and bringing people into it. The hope is that, over time, the closet will expand to include the entirety of society” (2006, IV). By resignifying the closet, El Menyawi articulates a form of activism that is inherently transnational and hybrid (through its dialogue with Stonewall models of US GLBTQ activism), yet rooted in the material realities of post-colonial Egypt.

Conclusion

I have designed “‘Queer’ Across Cultures” such that students who entered the class eager to consume essential difference will depart with analytical frameworks and information that help them to engage critically with dominant US constructions of

sexuality, sex and gender, as well as diverse sexual and gender categories, desires, practices, and meanings. I expect that when the semester is complete, students will have the tools to refuse essentialist claims and to ask questions about the numerous and often conflicting discourses that circulate in any locale; that they will be able to analyze the relationship between these discourses, the multiple and conflicting subject positions that any one person must negotiate, and the complex process of crafting selves in our transnational world. When they are faced with simplistic dichotomies, I expect them to search for the dynamics through which the opposition is produced, uncovering ironies as rich as “British” tea. I also presume that they will no longer be able to think about sexuality, sex, and gender, without also searching for intersections with race, nation, class, ethnicity, religion, age, physical ability, kinship and beyond. Finally, I hope that they will have found a way to meaningfully pair postcolonial and queer, and that they will carry with them knowledge and frames of reference to de-center the prototypical subject of queer studies.

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Endnotes

- 1 I place the word queer within quotation marks in the title of the course to signify the irony of using a Euro-centric term within a course that seeks to examine and de-center Euro-American constructions of sexuality and gender. See section III of the paper and note six for further discussion of this issue.
- 2 See Accomando, this volume, for an overview of the academic, activist and creative projects he spearheaded.
- 3 My caveat for this project is sweeping: every syllabus is but one of many possible ways of approaching a topic and exploring it. A syllabus, as it is a partial approach to engaging with a topic, will necessarily privilege some perspectives and omit or minimize others.
- 4 Omi and Winant (1986) argue that in contemporary US society race continues to operate as “amateur biology” by which the surface markings of the body are believed to communicate deep knowledge about people’s desires and abilities.
- 5 Stoler’s analysis is rooted in forms of colonial encounter specific to Africa and Asia. It is important to note the diversity in colonialisms. Her argument also is of profound interest to disability theorists, for in the attempt to assert the absolute division between colonizer and colonized, she writes about the repatriation to the home country of the elderly, disabled, and poor. Especially during times of political resistance to colonial rule, only the most normative colonizer subjects were allowed to be visible in the colony.
- 6 In this section of the course I also include additional selections from Blackwood and Wieringa’s (1999) edited volume *Female Desires* as well as from Hawley’s (2001) edited volume *Postcolonial Queer: Theoretical Intersections*.
- 7 All of the texts in this section of the course enable us to identify the ironies and contradictions in the use of the term “queer” in the title of the course. As students reflect on the mati work, and identities of mahu, fa’afafine, two-spirit, sunflower, and tongzhi, we identify the workings of power in the project of naming by pointing out the use of the Euro-

centric terms queer, gay, lesbian, transgender as universal terms, while the diversity of other terms remain locally bounded and often subsumed by their supposedly more universal label. Furthermore, the matl work raises the important issue that within Euro-centric frameworks, identity is privileged over practice, a point which links back to Somerville's (1997) important work on the connections between racist biology and early sexology in the formation of conceptions of sexual identity. While the course helps to raise awareness of the dynamics of power in the project of naming (including the insight that one way to trace the power of a group is to identify who has the ability to name oneself and have that name be the one used by others when speaking about them), the terms queer, gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered appear constantly in texts and throughout discussions.

- 8 This section of the syllabus could be greatly expanded to have a number of detailed case studies examining how government AIDS programs have foregrounded particular identity categories and imbued them with meanings through the project of governmental rule, and how citizens positioned in these programs negotiate these categories, meanings, and the exercise of state power.
- 9 Murungi (2003) draws upon the work of Caribbean activists to foreground the term all-sexuals as an alternative to identity-based categories that are prevalent in the West. The term all-sexual emphasizes the concept of all sexual behaviors and thus foregrounds sexual continuums rather than discrete categories and more rigid identities (Murungi 2003, 501).
- 10 This article also helps to raise the point that asylum cases most often rest on the need to represent one's homeland as essentially and violently homophobic. Such arguments paint over the complex histories of colonialism and the political process through which heteronormativity was established and then adopted by nationalist leaders, and they rest on a representation of the US as the protector, the land of safety and freedom of expression. This representation therefore omits not only the racism that immigrants from the global south face in the US (including within the mainstream GLBTQ movement), but also the central role of the US in forcing neo-liberal economic policies on Southern countries (Bello 2000), a key omission in the story of the economic contexts leading to the rise of homophobic nationalisms. For it is often the conditions of economic crisis, caused in large part by such neo-liberal policies, that lead desperate leaders to build national unity through homophobic attacks as a means to fend off political crisis. Such complex stories, however, undermine asylum claims, leading asylum seekers to the choice of betraying one aspect of their identity in order to find a degree of refuge and safety in an unsafe world.
- 11 I draw upon Althusser's (1971) conception of interpellation as a useful, yet limited view of the relationship between, in his terms, subjects and ideology. I prefer the term discourse over ideology as I believe Foucault's (1980) conceptualization of the workings of power through discourse has advantages over a concept of ideology that all too often remains caught in a paradigm that rests on problematic constructions of objectivity and false consciousness.

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