Queering Postcolonial Worlds: An Introduction

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In *Queer Phenomenology* (2006), Sara Ahmed explores the possibilities opened up by what she terms "queer orientations":

> Queer orientations are those that put within reach bodies that have been made unreachable by the lines of conventional genealogy. Queer orientations might be those that don't line up, which by seeing the world 'slantwise' allow other objects to come into view. (107)

To queer—to disrupt hegemonic practices—and to be queer, then, are ways of orienting oneself "slantwise" or "obliquely" within larger frameworks of heteronormativity, imperialism, white supremacy, and neoliberal capitalism. In our interview with the Nigerian diasporic poet Logan February, a conversation that contributes to this issue's engagement with the overlaps and intersections of queer and postcolonial studies, February thinks with Ahmed's concept further, offering ideas about how "telling it slant" (cf. also Dickinson, poem 1263) can be understood as queer praxis. They state,

> I like this word, *slantwise*, because it's also something that's said in poetry, about not writing one's experiences literally but rather writing them slant. In this way, we dispense with obvious meaning and create room to know something else. Thinking about it, maybe presenting a slant perspective of society is what a lot of queer workers, artists and thinkers do – allowing us to see other dimensions to the reality we already live in. (p. 136)

The ensemble of cultural, literary, and theoretical representations engaged with throughout this issue are based on presentations given at the *Postgraduate Forum of the German Association of Anglophone and Postcolonial Studies* (GAPS), which we—the guest editors of this issue—co-organized in October 2023 at the University of Bremen. The creative works examined here present the world "slantwise" in how they articulate

queer, postcolonial relations and conditions in different ways (cf. also Buckley and Ilott 1). In their (re-)orientations toward institutionalized religion, temporality, space, legal frameworks, and colonial legacies, these cultural productions reflect, and facilitate reflection on, how we situate ourselves in our multifaceted worlds. In doing so, they begin to challenge how ostensibly postcolonial worlds intersect with queer subjectivities and the plurality of queer experiences. Indeed, Ahmed posits that "different orientations, different ways of directing one's desires, means inhabiting different worlds" (86). Alongside and in dialogue with the contributors to this special issue, we ask: What worlds are opened up at the nexus of postcoloniality and queerness? How do the histories and legacies of colonialism inform genealogies of queer writing? In what ways do contemporary queer cultural productions "queer" established postcolonial frameworks? And where do we find queer orientations in postcolonial cultural productions?

In a double special issue of *Social Text* titled *Queer Transexions of Race, Nation, and Gender* (1997), Phillip Brian Harper, Anne McClintock, José Esteban Muñoz, and Trish Rosen highlight that while work in queer studies and postcolonial studies "has emphasized that their objects of study cannot be understood in isolation from one another, the critical ramifications of this fact have nevertheless gone largely unexplored" (1). Since then, it is fair to say, these ramifications have been explored in a variety of scholarly and creative contexts in works seeking to remedy what Jasbir K. Puar has termed "the perpetual fissuring of race from sexuality" (126).

Engaging with the intersection of *queer* and *postcolonial*, we build on the work of numerous scholars who have brought postcolonial and queer studies into conversation from both directions. For one, queer studies scholars have long been interrogating the field's U.S.-centrism by bringing questions of race and empire to their work. Both David L. Eng, Jack Halberstam, and José Esteban Muñoz's double special issue *What's Queer About Queer Studies Now* (2005) and David L. Eng and Jasbir Puar's special issue *Left of Queer* (2020), again both published in *Social Text*, take stock of queer studies and interrogate its intersections with postcolonial themes such as empire, sovereignty, citizenship, and human rights. Eng, Halberstam, and Muñoz critique the predominance of U.S. institutions and English-language scholarship in contemporary queer studies, observing a "problematic dynamic between U.S. scholars whose work in queer studies is read in numerous sites around the world" (15). They elaborate:

> Scholars writing in other languages and from other political and cultural perspectives read but are not, in turn, read. These uneven exchanges replicate in uncomfortable ways the rise and consolidation of U.S. empire, as well as the insistent positing of a U.S. nationalist identity and political agenda globally. (15)

While this dominance of U.S.-based and English-language scholarship extends well beyond the field of queer studies, Eng et al. specifically point to the role the dynamics of knowledge production and their own colonial-imperial legacies play in bringing queer and postcolonial thinking together. This important critique resonated throughout our conference, particularly in Salomé Honório's presentation "Queer As In 'C-u-í-r': Retracing the Coordinates of a Transnational Project," in which they explored the destabilization of "the exclusionary capacities of queer theory" within the context of their research on Latin American and specifically Brazilian discourses of the concepts "quír" and "cuír." The project of queering postcolonial worlds, plural, must include alternative conceptualizations of queer as well as voices from outside the United States. Our special issue of *gender forum* features such voices.

In their follow-up to Eng et al.'s issue, Eng and Puar (2020) maintain that this problematic dynamic continues. They write, "As an uninterrogated and unmarked version of American studies, queer studies determines what archives in the global South are legible and, indeed, matter" (4). In doing so, Eng and Puar demonstrate the need for further synergies between queer critique and texts that emerge from contexts beyond simply the United States and Europe. This is a tension that is productively engaged with by contributors to this special issue, such as Nadine Ellinger and Nele Grosch, who draw on queer African scholarship and cosmologies of time, respectively, in their readings of Nigerian (diasporic) and Black British narratives. Furthermore, Eng and Puar assert that queer studies and particularly western queer theory are not exempt from (re)producing exclusions that uphold "a normative queer liberal rights project" (3). In doing so, publications in these fields commonly remain within the frame of the nation-state in their pursuance of rights and representation, Eng and Puar note, warning of "the morphing capacities of queerness" (3). Importantly, as scholars such as Fatima El-Tayeb have shown, "queering" can also be mobilized as a means of resisting the framework of the nation-state. In her study of queer migrant and diasporic art and performance, El-Tayeb writes of "queering and destabilizing the exclusionary fictive European ethnicity" (xiii). Placing into dialogue critical concepts from queer studies and postcolonial studies and thinking with queer decolonial thinkers, as our special issue does, therefore holds the potential to challenge national(ist), hetero-patriarchal, and liberal "homonormative" (Eng and Puar 3) orders in their entanglement.

Challenging the blind spots of both queer studies and postcolonial studies, Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley advocates in "Black Atlantic, Queer Atlantic: Queer Imaginings of the Middle Passage" for an understanding of "[q]ueer not in the sense of a 'gay' or same-sex loving identity waiting to be excavated from the ocean floor but as a praxis of resistance" and thus, much like Ahmed, uses "[q]ueer in the sense of marking disruption to the violence of normative order" (199). Learning from the shortfalls of both "Eurocentric queer theorists and heterocentric race theorists," Tinsley cautions against larger political trends that polarize queer versus diasporic and immigrant issues by moralizing and domesticating sexuality as an undermining of tradition, on the one hand, while racializing and publicizing global southern diasporas as threats to the integrity of a nation of (fictively) European immigrants, on the other. (193)

Tinsley here points to two sides of the same problematic coin that are also visible in the different postcolonial politics and contexts discussed in our special issue's contributions. Analyzing queer postcolonial or, as the volume *Queer Indigenous Studies* suggests, queer Indigenous cultural production, with a view to their respective "material and political conditions [...], including colonization's accompanying systems of heteropatriarchy, gender regimes, capitalism, ableism, ageism, and religious oppression" can "offer a mode of analysis that more complexly facilitates understanding of these entwined systems so that they can be interrupted" (211). As this publication poignantly shows, the material legacies and impacts of colonialism and its "accompanying systems" cannot be disentwined from queer Indigenous texts.

Building on this critical strand of research that challenges the conventional orientations of queer studies and postcolonial studies, this special issue aims to interrogate the (productive) tensions between the two fields at their critical intersections. In so doing, the essays collected here also turn to fundamental, disciplinary questions about the theoretical "point[s] of departure" of scholarship at this conjunction, as posed by Tinsley: "what happens when queer theories [or postcolonial theories, we might add] start with explicit formulations of racialized sexuality and sexualized race, rather than add them in after theories like performativity have already been elaborated?" (205). Following Tinsley's query, theoretical work should always already begin from an intersectional perspective or point of departure in order to best capture the complexity and interplay of, for instance, different mechanisms of oppression or identity formation. Queering postcolonial studies might, furthermore, allow for a rigorous critique and renegotiation of some of the discipline's fundamentals by not only questioning its "straight readings" and

"straightening devices" (Ahmed 72), but also by problematizing, challenging, reformulating, extending, or discarding the terminology of "postcolonial."

Our thinking on the absences of queer critique in postcolonial studies also builds on Shamira A. Meghani and Humaira Saeed's special issue *Postcolonial/Sexuality, or, Sexuality in 'Other' Contexts,* which explores, as the two scholars note in their introduction, "the role of queer representation in racial and gendered subjectivity, as well as the way queerness inhabits and articulates 'other' political issues" (294). Meghani and Saeed make visible a genealogy of postcolonial scholarship attuned to questions of gender and sexuality, citing Ann Laura Stoler (1995), Ann Fausto-Sterling (1995), Anne McClintock (1995), José Esteban Muñoz (1999; 2009), Chandra Talpade Mohanty (2003), Gayatri Gopinath (2005), and Bakshi, Jivrash and Posocco (2016), among others. Yet, just as Eng and Puar (2020), who establish the continued need for postcolonial critique within queer studies, we share the call for a renewed commitment to scrutinizing the ways queer critique, especially a non-U.S.-/Eurocentric queer critique, intersects with and informs postcolonial texts and contexts.

Such debates also informed the presentations and discussions of our conference *Queering Postcolonial Worlds*. Uniting the contributions were questions about creating queer kinship and belonging in or against various states of (in)visibility, barely being, or silences, questions about representations of queer (racialized) embodiment, bodies, and affects, about the role of spirituality, religion, and faith as well as of the everyday and ordinary in imaginations of queer postcolonial worlds. Further, tensions between or in language(s), translation, and issues of intranslatability emerged in our conversations, as did conflicted relations between hegemonic and counter-discourses. Analyses focused on the local or on context-specific case studies came into conversation with approaches attentive to transnational and transcultural connections and relations. Explorations of these and related questions, tensions, and foci are now expanded upon in this special issue.

Following this introduction, Nadine Ellinger's article "The God Within: Interrogating Queer Practices of Faith" outlines the intersections of, and contradictions between, African Christianity and queerness within a framework of European colonial legacies. Through close readings of two contemporary texts by Nigerian (diasporic) authors, Francesca Ekwuyasi's novel *Butter Honey Pig Bread* (2020) and Akwaeke Emezi's short story "Who is like God" (2017), Ellinger presents an argument for a queer embodied and subversive practice of Christian faith. Before doing so, she critically engages with decolonial scholarship that has highlighted

precolonial African gender and queer histories. This theoretical position allows her to unmask colonial and Christian biogender history as only one part of global gender histories, and rematerialize anti-queer, homophobic, and queer subversion and agency within local and global contexts that are shaped by pluriversal knowledge systems. Her insightful analysis of the spiritual practices of the texts' main characters reveals how they achieve belonging and self-acceptance by drawing from African belief systems to reimagine traditional Christian and colonial interpretations of embodiment and sexuality. Addressing the carceral homophobic laws enacted in postcolonial African nations, Ellinger argues that there is a greater need than ever for creative cultural works that intertwine queer and postcolonial perspectives, particularly ones that help to show that these laws are more offshoots of colonialism than they are African.

Following Ellinger's article, which looks at ways in which practices of faith can become queer, Svea Türlings's "'To Persons Defiled and Faithless': The Dichotomy of Pleasure and Shame in Paul Mendez's *Rainbow Milk*" addresses queer people's rejection of faith within the context of Black Britain. In her paper, Türlings explores the impact of shame in Paul Mendez's queer Black coming-of-age story, paying special attention to the ways in which the text constructs notions of purity and impurity via distinctions between dirtiness and cleanliness. In her reading of this relatively under-researched postcolonial novel set in Britain, Türlings explores the relationship between religion, colonialism, and queerness by "illustrating how shame operates as a tool of control and oppression" (p. 106). Following a discussion of the interactions and intersections of pleasure and shame, race and sexuality, Türlings's reading shows how Mendez's novel goes "beyond shame" (p. 108) and presents a "queer politics of hope" (O'Rourke x, quoted in Türlings p. 121). In addition to highlighting the complex effects that queer postcolonial literature—particularly with respect to religion, colonialism, and sexuality—can have, Türlings's article also makes the case for the (queer) optimism that these works offer. In doing so, she offers a reading which takes seriously the implications of queer and postcolonial contexts as well as critical discourses on the novel.

The third essay of this issue, "Queer and West African Representations of Time and Temporality in Bernardine Evaristo's *Girl, Woman, Other*," features a multigenerational constellation of characters with mostly African and Caribbean heritage, who all engage with questions of identity, feminism, and family in a postcolonial Black British context. Focusing on the construction of time, Nele Grosch reads Bernardine Evaristo's Booker-Prize-winning novel through a narratological lens to

explore “how queer and (West) African temporalities are narrated, performed, and experienced” (p. 76) in the text. With regard to two subchapters of the novel in particular, Grosch asks how narrative representations of circular time are used to represent queer lives and a notion of constant becoming that counter linear and chrononormative understandings of time as progressive. Instead of remaining caught in “straight” time, this essay finds, Evaristo’s characters entangle past, present, and future by “feeling backwards” (Love) when remembering their pasts while simultaneously imagining queer utopian futures (Muñoz) for themselves. Bringing concepts of queer temporality and (non-)linearity into conversation with West African cosmologies of time such as that of Sankofa, Grosch emphasizes the need to approach the continuous becoming of *Girl, Woman, Other*’s queer and Black characters from an intersectional and transcultural perspective because doing so, they suggest, can contribute to efforts at deconstructing and decolonizing Western liberal notions of time, gender, and sexuality.

Moving from a focus on time and temporality to a focus on space, Alena Cicholewski and Krutika Patri read queer heterotopic and queer utopian spaces in Amitav Ghosh’s historical novel *River of Smoke* (2011). In their article “‘There is no better place on earth for friendships than Canton’: Painting Canton as a Queer Space in Amitav Ghosh’s *River of Smoke* (2011),” Cicholewski and Patri turn their attention to the often-overlooked peripheral character of Robin Chinnery, arguing that Chinnery’s epistolary exchange with his childhood friend Paulette throughout the novel provides a basis for a queer reading of the text. The second novel in Ghosh’s critically acclaimed *Ibis* trilogy, *River of Smoke* takes place in the city of Canton (present-day Guangzhou) against the backdrop of the impending First Opium War (1839-1842). Situating the novel within Queer Indian writing in English, Cicholewski and Patri note the role that Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code—a colonial-era law that criminalized homosexuality and was repealed only in 2018—has played in shaping queer discourses in the Indian context. Bringing Michel Foucault and José Esteban Muñoz into conversation, Cicholewski and Patri demonstrate “how Ghosh reimagines Canton as a space of queer potentiality and transnational cooperation” (p. 40). Echoing the discussion of queer hope in Türlings’s reading of *Rainbow Milk* as well as in Grosch’s analysis of *Girl, Woman, Other*, Cicholewski and Patri argue that Chinnery’s queer self-expression and descriptions of gay desire provide a basis for queer joy and hope within this historical novel.

The last article in this special issue focuses on the invisibility of lesbian desire and love within literature and film in South Asia. In “The Invisible

Lives of Desi Lesbians: An Overview of Literature," Apeksha Pareek examines the intertwined nature of Indian lesbian visibility and invisibility through an extensive literature review. She maps "the terrain of mainstream cultural productions responsible for highlighting the existence of lesbians" and "attempts to interrogate why such hegemonic structures [of lesbian erasure] exist even now" (p. 58). In noting how queer sexualities have a complex relationship with South Asian cultures, Pareek takes into account the history of colonialism within the continent and its effects on queer, trans, and gender non-conforming people there. Pareek points out that there is a lack in the way lesbian desire and love have been discussed, portrayed, and represented within literature and film due to the misogyny of heteronormativity that was transplanted to South Asia with colonialism. Through her overview, Pareek demonstrates that, to a large extent, "there is no space for any kind of sexuality that is based on women's desire for other women" within South Asian literature and film. However, she then shows that lesbian representations, while limited, do exist in South Asia by tracing a genealogy of cultural productions narrating female same-sex love and desire, from Deepa Mehta's 1996 film *Fire* to contemporary representations.

The issue concludes with a conversation between poet Logan February and guest-editors Rita Maricocchi and Dorit Neumann about February's bilingual (English-German, with Yorùbá elements) poetry collection *Mental Voodoo* (2024). Given how the interview deepened our own thinking about questions discussed in the articles of this special issue, we hope that it will create additional openings for further discussion on queering postcolonial worlds. While the articles gathered here focus mainly on prose texts, the interview asks what poetry can offer in terms of expressing and critically exploring queer postcolonial themes. February speaks about how aspects of poetic form and language, translation, and intertextuality can destabilize, mutate, or queer hegemonic and (hetero)normative ways of thinking and make "identity more consciously porous" (p. 126). Opening up a dialogue with Nadine Ellinger's and Svea Türlings's discussions of the role of faith in postcolonial African diasporic contexts, our conversation with February also reflects on tensions between queerness, religion, and family, specifically in the Nigerian context in which the poet grew up. Touching upon discourses that render queerness "un-African" (p. 134), February's reflections resonate with Apeksha Pareek's interrogation of Indian anti-queer politics and right-wing discourses that present lesbians as "un-Indian" (p. 69). Like Pareek, they thus expose postcolonial, heteropatriarchal nationalist politics that suppress queerness because of its challenges to "the reproduction of patriarchy" (Coly 110) within the logic of the nation state.

In sum, the contributions to *Queering Postcolonial Worlds* travel across various postcolonial contexts, spanning Nigeria, the Caribbean, the UK, India, and China, and various disciplinary and theoretical locations, ranging from affect studies and queer theology to African onto-cosmologies and Queer Indian writing in English. These disparate reorientations of contemporary queer and postcolonial narratives within existing disciplinary frameworks illustrate the breadth of queer postcolonial studies. The conversation with Logan February brings the issue's reflections back to Germany—where our initial conversations took place—as February reflects on the German translations of their poetry and their experiences as a DAAD Artist-in-Residence in Berlin. Taken together, the contributions collected in this special issue of *gender forum* probe and interrogate the overlaps and intersections between queer studies and postcolonial studies while at the same time maintaining a critical approach to disciplinary boundaries. In amending the false assumptions and limitations inherent to how these two fields of analysis and critique have been thought apart, the essays following this introduction gesture toward the possibilities of a renewed commitment to queering postcolonial worlds.

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