



CENTERING CONVERSATION

MACS Portfolio

PROMPT

“How/where do you locate yourself as an interlocutor or participant in one or more Cultural Studies conversations? Why? How does this location constrain you and what does this particular location open up?”

Chinazom Nwakaego Oleru

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I see myself located within the work of cultural studies as a conversationalist, a collaborator, a creative, and a co-conspirator. I center conversation as a site of productive and important cultural work, and adamantly declare that the personal is political. Conversation is a collaborative act and prompts all involved parties to engage in the meaning-making process, finding words that best fit the ideas they hope to convey. I envision my work as part of a larger conversation engaging Black women and femmes, encouraging discussion and discovery centering joy and expression.

I arrived into the conversation of cultural studies at birth, engaging in it as a child. I struggled with feeling out of place, never quite fitting in to the categories I had been assigned. I shifted uneasily between the responsibilities and expectations stemming from my Nigerian heritage, and those of my American nationality. Growing up a fat Black girl child, I felt limited by the expectations placed upon me to be dutiful, quiet, feminine, serious, studious, humble, and modest; attributes that I wore like an ill-fitting shield. Caught in the infinite loop that is trying to score a goal in a game where the goalposts are constantly shifting, I felt myself lost and constantly in flux, becoming familiar with the feeling of isolation, amplified by the fact that no one ever *talked* about it. The roles were assigned, the jobs defined, the rules were rigid, and the silence was deafening.

Frustrated by the lack of connection I felt in my everyday life, I searched for community. I found the greatest success online, and quickly became fascinated with social media and the allure of online communities. From dial up internet and AOL messenger rooms, Black Planet guest books, Myspace journals, BlogSpot sites, Twitter hashtags, Tumblr threads, Snapchat stories and Tiktok trends, I am forever enamored with the way communities form online. It was through the Tumblr threads of hundreds of children of immigrants where I found the first of many concepts that helped quiet the noise of confusion, third culture kid¹. Equipped with the knowledge that my story was not entirely unique, I ventured through the net to find those with similar stories.

I joined in conversation with my community by using the internet as a space of expression and exploration. I developed a love for memes², finding that a short visual could speedily express

¹ Third Culture Kid, coined by sociologist Ruth Hill Useem, is a term used to encompass individuals who have experienced an upbringing in multiple cultures. It has become a recognized concept in understanding the unique challenges, strengths, and experiences of individuals who grow up globally mobile and culturally diverse.

² Meme: an image, video, piece of text, etc., typically humorous in nature, which is copied and spread rapidly by internet users, often with slight variations. An element of a culture or system of behavior passed from one individual to another by imitation or other nongenetic means.

what might take hours to explain. I quickly gained a reputation for my expansive meme collection, finding the shorthand of a gif preferable to the long threads of early Twitter and Tumblr discourse. However, there were limits to how far the conversation could go.

Trying to engage in conversation with and hold space for community on open social media platforms presents a set of unique challenges. In order to expand the conversation to reach my intended audience, I needed to be on a platform that was easily and openly available, to prevent access from becoming a barrier. However, this openness can easily lead to chaos. Unrestricted access, in order to enable open conversation also means that Black peoples are often vulnerable to surveillance and suspicion under the white supremacist gaze. Zoom-bombing³, hashtag⁴ usurping, shadow-banning⁵ and account deletion are insidious elements of online censorship that can impede the continuation of conversation in Black virtual spaces. Additionally, the commercialization of engagement often means that capitalism and consumption drive creation. Ranging from the seemingly innocuous adoption of hashtags by multimillion dollar companies, to the infiltration and disbandment of organized mutual aid and community operations, Black peoples' conversation is monitored and measured. Additionally, online spaces are complicated by the creation of in- and out- groups; and I found that though the internet provided me with a wide net to capture my audience, web access is not distributed equitably, and I wondered often how to remain in conversation and community with those I could not reach online.

Coming to UW Bothell, I reentered the conversation of cultural studies as an adult. I grappled uncomfortably with what I viewed as competing identities. During my first quarter, I struggled with personally identifying with and as a feminist. I reluctantly read through Sara Ahmed's *Living a Feminist Life*, an assigned reading. Exploring ideas of how feminist theory could spring forth from everyday situations made perfect sense to me; I had grown up watching family members divide labor as close to equitably as they could, I had experienced the realities of holding multiple intersecting identities; and still, I felt reluctant to identify myself as a feminist. I

³ Zoom-bombing or Zoom raiding: the unwanted, disruptive intrusion, generally by Internet trolls, into a video-conference call.

⁴ Hashtag: a metadata tag that is prefaced by the hash symbol, #. On social media, hashtags are used on microblogging and photo-sharing services such as Twitter or Tumblr as a form of user-generated tagging that enables cross-referencing of content by topic or theme.

⁵ Shadow banning: the practice of blocking or partially blocking a user or the user's content from some areas of an online community in such a way that the ban is not readily apparent to the user, regardless of whether the action is taken by an individual or an algorithm.

had long believed that I had no place in the feminist movement, eyeing it suspiciously as a white cis woman's game, preferring instead to identify as a womanist. Reflecting on my vehement rejection of feminism, I wrote,

“My first reaction was one of resistance and repulsion. Feminism has long been something of a dirty word in my life. From my background in a heavily patriarchal community that viewed feminists as heretical to my experience as a Black woman that showed feminists to be racially exclusionary; I vowed to never refer to myself as such. I viewed feminism through feminists, rather than seeing feminists through feminism. Sara Ahmed's book allowed me to see feminism as not just a group of people, but as a framework through which I could both interpret and investigate the world I encounter. Individuals are often rigid and flawed, frameworks can be flexible.”⁶

I felt myself particularly drawn to Ahmed's discussion of strength, fragility, and the power of a breaking point. My moments of fragility, of reexamining and recognizing the vulnerability in my feelings of isolation in my younger days helped me locate myself within the work of feminism, of disconcerting status quo by embracing the feminist killjoy identity. I read further, firmly placing my work in conversation with third world feminist movement discourse.

I began to reimagine the conversation of cultural studies as I moved into my second quarter. Exploring performance theory and black queer sexuality through my electives helped me to further examine my personal politics and work through some of the complications I had previously seen in my work. Working through *Black Queer Freedom: Spaces of Inquiry and Paths of Desire* helped me to look deeply at art and creative spaces as sites of revolution, but also as spaces where carework happens. For the first time, I began to see clearly that, “art is part of the fight for freedom. Not just in the escapist, recreational, or pleasure-seeking lens through which many of us were taught to view it; but as a tool to be used to reimagine our political, social, and legal lives and systems. Art opens our eyes not only to what is, but what could be.”⁷

As I simultaneously worked through readings on performance theory, I questioned who my audience was, and who I aspired to reach. Early on into the quarter, I found myself troubled by the concepts of performance and audience. I had difficulty finding a place for cultural studies

⁶ Artifact 1: A reflection on Sara Ahmed's *Living a Feminist Life*

⁷ Artifact 2: A reflection on *Black Queer Freedom*

within performance theory and struggled to define concepts in new ways. I questioned my “performances” of womanhood, of femininity, of Blackness. I questioned who my audience was, and if it ever changed. Lastly, I questioned my perception of myself as an actor and participant; was I acting in a role that I inherited or that I willingly took on? Particularly emboldened by bell hooks and the way she deeply considered and wrote specifically for her audience, I realized I had been operating without recognizing the agency that I possessed; believing that my actions and options were limited and complicated by my race and gender, rather than being enhanced by them. My personal experience and background as a fat Black dark-skinned femme did not limit my conversation, it directed it. I began to see myself as a willing participant, and exercised control over my audience. Rather than fearing censorship from outside forces, I welcomed the idea that being silenced in one arena could open me up to others⁸. It no longer mattered who refused to recognize my work and worth as legitimate, or who my body remained illegible to; I focused intently on those intent on being in community with me. The conversation of cultural studies became intimate, rather than academic. I began to view the work of cultural studies as a work of love.

“Love has never been a popular movement. And no one’s ever really wanted to be free. The world is held together, really it is held together, by the love and passion of a very few people.” –James Baldwin

I have never called myself queer. Outside of the very real threats of physical, emotional, financial, and state sanctioned violence facing queer communities, I avoided identifying as queer because I feared I would be made invisible. It has always felt a bit disconcerting for me, to see myself, but remain unseen. My queerness was something that felt like Harry Potter’s invisibility cloak or maybe a one-way mirror; I could see out, but no one could see in. As someone primarily outwardly attracted to male identified people, I struggled with how to make myself visible. I did

⁸ Much like Trump used his banning from Twitter to capitalize on a deep-rooted right-wing fear of censorship and find a new audience on Telegram, I can use the spaces where I have been silenced or misunderstood to connect with others with similar experiences. I have seen myself using this strategy in spaces like open forums; ex. discussing my displeasure with current DEI policy and graduate student programming at UW Bothell at an open hiring committee meeting and subsequently connecting with others who felt similarly. Though my questions were shot down and answered dismissively, I was able to follow this up by holding space for these concerns at the larger Graduate School level and opening discussion to students at the larger UW Seattle campus.

not want to be seen as an outsider taking space from others, but I also wanted to be seen within queer spaces.

“Queer’ not as being about who you’re having sex with (that can be a dimension of it); but ‘queer’ as being about the self that is at odds with everything around it and that has to invent and create and find a place to speak and to thrive and to live.” – bell hooks

I found myself reflected most clearly in the works I encountered during my second quarter. The further along I got in my program, the more I realized just how important these readings were to me. As our cohort was asked periodically to imagine and define our praxis, our ways of being, and how we saw ourselves moving the work of cultural studies forward, I repeatedly came back to the work of bell hooks. As I moved definitively towards grounding my work in queer spaces, I pushed past the fear of being unrecognizable. *“The practice of love offers no place of safety. We risk loss, hurt, and pain. We risk being acted upon by forces outside our control.”⁹* If I truly desired to be in community, there could be no more hiding. To be seen is to risk being misunderstood; and relinquishing the control I imagined I had over my perception allowed me to make room for love as a choice and a practice in my scholarship. I moved forward with centering Black queer spaces as the site of my cultural work.

“People have loved me when I needed to be loved, so as an adult, I must give some of that love back to those who want it, or it would have all had been for nothing.” – Nikki Giovanni

I began to realign the conversation of cultural studies as I moved into my capstone. I waffled for months on how to carry out my project of holding space for conversation. I explored avenues like creating a book club, an informal think tank, and a cinema salon, trying to find ways to connect my ideas with my intended community. I decided to focus on film, and Nollywood¹⁰ film specifically, because it provided direct access to my audience. Film is a valuable tool; it is more easily accessible and widely available than traditional literature and can be used to translate ideas across many different languages and ranges of experience at the same time. I have always been very interested in Nollywood as a genre, growing up with Nollywood films as a primary source of entertainment. But with the expansion of worldwide internet access, their popularity

⁹ hooks, bell. (2000). *All about love: New Visions*. HarperCollins, New York. pp 152-153

¹⁰ Nollywood: a portmanteau of Nigeria and Hollywood, a nickname for the Nigerian film industry

has grown among the Black and African diasporic communities. Black people are exposed to Nollywood constantly, whether through watching films as they receive service at an African braiding salon, on the internet through the use of short clips as reaction videos and memes, the adoption and rebranding of ‘soft life’ language, or their expanded distribution on streaming platforms such as Netflix. I realized could use that familiarity to talk about my frustrations surrounding queerness and gender expression. Through my experience in Susan Harewood’s film course, I recognized the role film plays in the establishment and affirmation of colonial values, and also how it could be used to disrupt them¹¹. By continuously reexamining the innocuous film, Paddington, over the course of a quarter, I was able to see the ways that film could be deconstructed and reconstituted to tell a new story¹². I began to explore using film and media analysis as a tool, in order to explore my frustrations with what I considered the narrowing of possibilities that strict adherence to a gender binary brings¹³. The impact of anti-Blackness is global, and the transference of stereotypical Black American female archetypes from western to Nigerian film felt like a great place to start breaking down colonialist and white supremacist values in order to have a conversation with my audience about imagining possibilities beyond what they saw on screen.

I began to remix the conversation of cultural studies as I moved into my final quarter. Centering care and love of community had become the driving force of how I intended to carry out the work of cultural studies, but somewhere along the way I had lost sight of myself. I struggled throughout my program to advocate for myself, burying the signs of burnout underneath my pursuit of new information. After years of searching, I finally found a medical care team that took my concerns seriously and received a diagnosis of ADHD. Rather than the sky-opening, cloud-clearing, peace-inducing moment I thought it would be, I found myself deeply disturbed and depressed. Exacerbated by my doctor’s refusal to explore medicinal therapies, I became angry and withdrawn as I reflected on how my community had failed to hold me up along the way. It became impossible to ignore how overwhelmed and emotional I actually was. I spent my final quarter angry, most especially with myself for allowing my feelings to push me out of conversation and into chasing ‘busyness.’ Being busy allows me to focus on nothing and

¹¹ Artifact 3: BIS 490 final: Deceivers

¹² Artifact 4: BIS 490 Paddington film assignment

¹³ Artifact 5: Beyond the Binary

everything all at once. There are parents to take care of, siblings to look after, bills to pay, futures to prepare for, and none of it has me at the center. In all the spaces I have been permitted to occupy, all the roles I have been able to access, most of them had nothing to do with me, as a person. I remember being told in undergraduate; a man's worth comes from what he does. A woman's comes from who she knows. I remember thinking, "a Black woman's must come from who she serves."

To try and combat this, in the end I focused on centering my joy within my work.

"Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare." -Audre Lorde

As I fleshed out my MACS conference presentation, I decided to center play, and focus on what brought me joy. Though I was terrified that it would throw my panel off and seem out of place, I presented a playful take on my academic journey¹⁴. I brought in memes that had made me laugh over the years to explain how I intended to move my work forward and used Beyoncé's Renaissance album as a framework to explore my scholarship, using song titles as chapter markers and new names as I traced my intellectual journey. I brought in pictures of my family and friends, as a way to honor those who could or would not show up, and also to ground my presentation in my intention to remain in community and conversation with Black women and femmes. I delivered a deeply personal presentation, queering the conference by embracing the oddities and complexities that encompass who I am. I intervened on and troubled my ideas of what scholarly work could be by inserting myself into the middle of it. I found ways to center myself while still performing the roles of student, scholar, and dutiful daughter, and reshaped my vision for what my future could look like. I tasked myself with exploring the concept of rest as resistance.

I have always worked. Since the age of thirteen, I don't think I've gone longer than six months without some type of job. Daycares, churches, customer service, program management, student advising, I have done it all. At the end of every position, a new one followed immediately after. As I near the end of my graduate program, I am terrified by my decision to center rest and not jump back onto the job market. At the end of this month, I will leave my current position, and for

¹⁴ Artifact 6: MACS conference presentation

the first time in my entire life, I'll have nothing left to do. I made the decision to stop searching, in order to consider deeply what my next move might be. By allowing myself the opportunity to rest, and really, forcing myself to slow down, as opposed to rushing quickly into the next phase, I hope to push back on the idea that my work is what makes me worthy. Though I have spent the past two years in pursuit of an advanced degree, I hope that not having to immediately “sell myself” on the job market will allow me a bit of space to separate myself from my labor.

“Begin the process of deprogramming from your brainwashing under grind culture. Go slow. Learn history. Learn your own history. View your body as its own unique technology. Listen.” – Tricia Hersey

I hope to reignite the conversation of cultural studies moving forward. I hope that by centering rest, joy, and community within my work, I can slow down my tendencies to cycle and spiral through doubt, fear, and anger. I hope that my work can serve as an intervention into the persistent drive to constantly seek out new information and can be a resting place from which my intended audience can turn that information into knowledge. I plan to continue the work of cultural studies by using my scholarship as an archive from which to amplify anti-colonialist, anti-white supremacist, Black, queer, and feminist voices. I hope to use my voice to trouble traditional notions of academic excellence, whether through centering Black music, social media, and low culture in my work, or through deliberate actions like speaking directly to my community in the footnotes of scholarly writing. I hope to bring others into the conversation, by recognizing their experiences as valid sites of cultural production, and spaces of exploration where intellectual work happens. I imagine that my work, and my boundaries around my community may complicate notions of common sense, and I see an opportunity to carry out the work of cultural studies by holding space for difference.

“I think what I hope to do all the time, is to be so completely myself, which I hope am... to be so much myself that my audience and people who meet me are confronted with what I am, inside and out; as honest as I can be. And this way, they have to see things about themselves, immediately.” – Nina Simone

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