"Where is home?" Negotiating Comm(unity) and Un/Belonging Among Queer African Migrants on Facebook

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This research explores and examines the complicated processes, tensions and multifarious dynamics of building a queer safe space and a sense of belonging(s) among queer African migrant men in a closed Facebook group. Most postcolonial critics have focused on the disaffection suffered by African migrants in the U.S. and Europe, while others have dwelt extensively on queer issues, without a critical deliberation of how experiences based on migration, race, and sexuality intertwine. While being unable to fully integrate into the White Western LGBT community, queer African migrants also suffer discrimination within African migrant communities due to the extension of the hetero-nationalist cultural practices. However, social media sites such as Facebook have enabled queer African migrants to create transnational diasporic relations in a virtual space. Using the concept of 'home', this study explores how queer African migrant men discursively create deterritorialized queer safe spaces in order to enact their identity and also maintain a sense of belonging. It becomes evident that queer safe spaces are not only spaces where 'oppressed identities' find a 'home' or safety but also spaces where ideologies of visibility and recognition are contested.

Introduction

The creation of safe spaces remains an important area of discussion for those whose bodies are marked as 'other' and subject to both state-sanctioned violence and normalized forms of exclusions. For LGBT individuals, access to safe spaces can provide the relative security to explore and enact their identities, create networks and form political alliances (Cooper 2010; Oswin 2008). However, queer safe spaces have been theorized in opposition to and as transgressions of the white heterosexual space. This definition of safe space creates a binary

stabilizing heterosexual space and LGBT space as distinct spaces (Oswin 2008). The discursive framing of queer safe space in opposition to white heterosexual space assumes that queer safe spaces are outside the matrices of social hierarchies and power in both online and offline spaces. This study shows how power relations circulate and influence the construction of queer safe spaces through an examination of a queer African migrant virtual community.

While virtual communities construct imaginations of home, safety, belonging and togetherness to help LGBT individuals construct their identities and create alliances, these communities are not outside the regimes of normalization both offline and online (Duggan 2002; Skeggs 1999). Virtual communities, in particular, have been constructed as relatively 'safe' for LGBT people desiring safety from heteropatriarchal spaces infused with oppression and violence. For instance, research on virtual communities shows that such spaces provide the anonymity, privacy, confidentiality allowing for LGBT people to temporarily create an 'imagined safety' (Cooper & Dzara 2010) outside the white heterosexual space. While such studies have opened the door for further analysis of the internet as a relatively safe space for LGBT people, this study shows how power relations in the offline spills into the constructions of an online queer community complicating notions of queer safe spaces as 'safe' for all LGBT individuals.

This study relates to my experience as a queer African migrant in the United States. Understanding my black and queer identities in relation to racialized structures and institutions in the U.S made me yearn for a community comprising of African/African American queers. Therefore, I joined two Facebook closed groups and also began to meet with other queer migrants from continental Africa. Subsequently, we formed a physical community outside the virtual community and met once a year during our annual New Year's Eve party. During conversations at these parties, it became evident that we had multiple framings of the closed Facebook group as a space where inclusivity was encouraged. While the closed Facebook group was created as a space where queer African migrants could unite and form a community around their 'shared gayness' (Massad 2002) and Africannnes, social hierarchies in relation to nationality, class, and language saturated the construction of such imagine space.

The scholarly material on queer African migrants, as well as, how queer African migrants create safe spaces through virtual communities is rare. Even as there are scholarly materials which focus on queer Africans in continental Africa (Ekine & Abbas 2013; Epprecht 2008; Hoad 2007; Tamale 2011), queer blogging in Indian digital diasporas (Mitra & Gajjala 2008) and postcolonial, queer scholars who examine queer diasporas from Asia (Gopinath 2005; Puar, 2007). Therefore, this study builds on research on queer space (e.g., Hartal 2017; Oswin 2008; Valentine 2007), queer African studies (Otu, 2016), and queer African diasporic identity and belonging (Adjepong 2017; Asante 2015) In the following, I explore the concept of home; especially what it means

in the construction of queer African migrant communities. Next, I explain the literature on queer safe spaces and how it materializes online. Then, I explore the methods used in this study. Finally, I explicate the analysis and conclusions of this study.

Where is Home? (Queer) African Migrants and the Desire for Queer Safe Spaces

Since the 1990s the United States, in particular, has seen a significant increase in immigrants from the continent of Africa. Africans from Anglophone and Francophone countries, including those from various religious backgrounds (e.g., Muslim, Christian & Traditionalist) and ethnic backgrounds (e.g., Akan, Zulu and Igbo) have migrated to the United States. The changes in the immigration laws, beginning with the Hart-Cellar Act of 1965, the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986, and the Immigration Act of 1990 have opened the door for more immigrants, mainly from Africa, to migrate to the United States voluntarily. The increase in African migrants has complicated what it means to be black in the U.S. (Asante, Sekimoto & Brown 2016; Adjepong 2018). Queer African migrants have also questioned conceptions of diasporic home and identity in their African immigrant communities.

The structural dynamics of safety become reflected in the imageries of home. The meanings of home as multiple and fluid shift across a number of discourses: from private to public spheres, between the nation as an 'imagined community' to mythic spaces of belonging. 'Home' can mean 'where one usually lives', says Sara Ahmed, 'or it can mean where one's family lives, or it can mean one's native country' (2000, p. 86). In defining 'home', I side with Avtar Brah that home is a 'mythic place of desire and the lived experience of a locality, which evokes tensions inscribing a homing desire while simultaneously critiquing discourses of fixed origins' (2000, p. 192). The longing for a queer African migrant community is a 'homing desire' due to the symbolic representation of Africa as a space of return for black diasporic subjects in the West. The queer African migrants' attachment to Africa even though their relationship to Africa could evoke memories of violence and pain, is partially due to the forms of exclusions based on race and class they experience in the West (Asante 2015). In this way, home manifests itself as desire based on separation, and its potential antagonism—the split between the wish to return and the impossibility of its satisfaction shapes queer African migrants desire for a queer safe space.

Most postcolonial critics have focused on the disaffection suffered by African migrants in the U.S. and Europe, while others have dwelt extensively on queer issues, without a critical deliberation of how experiences based on migration, race, and sexuality intertwine. While being unable to fully integrate into the White Western LGBT community, queer African migrants also suffer discrimination within African migrant communities due to the extension of the hetero-nationalist cultural

practices. Epprecht (2008) argued that there is a clear privileging of a modern heteronormative African citizen that situates non-heteronormative practices into the margins of society. Within such a framing, any queer identity would be considered outside the mainstream. In this material context, queer African migrants feel such restrictions re-imposed by their immigrant community members. Consequently, creating an online queer community mitigates the intersectional oppressive structures influencing the queer African migrant identity. This means re-creating a community on the margins of their already ostracized identities as black, queer, and immigrant.

Constructing and (Re) Negotiating Queer Safe Spaces Online

In the mid-1990's, research from David Bell (1995), Joan Binnie (1997) and Gill Valentine (1996) revamped arguments that situated queer theory within geographical studies focusing on sexuality. Central to their argument was that spaces in and of themselves are not authentically straight or have pre-existing sexual categories. For instance, Binnie (1997) noted that spaces are rather produced and (hetero)sexualized through forms of spatial control. (Hetero)sexualized spaces are made possible through the diverse forms of mechanisms that restrict queer bodies to and in specific spaces. Subsequently, these social processes reconfigure queer desires, relationality, and embodiment in/into such spaces.

Feminist geographers, in particular, have called for the shifting of studies on queer space to focus on the 'mutual constitution of gendered identities and spaces' (Bondi & Rose 2003 p.234). Hartal (2017) asserted that much of the current debates on safe spaces are influenced by this body of knowledge. She contended that current work by feminist geographers opened the door for the examination of the 'mutual construction of LGBT subjectivities and their experiences in space, specifically, queer space' (Hartal 2017, p.3). Catherine Jean Nash's (2006) study of the development of Toronto's gay village shows how multiple subjectivities shape queer space. She argued:

> This place is not simply a battle over the ability to visibly inhabit and appropriate identifiable territories, but it's a location deeply scared by myriad battles fought over the social, political and cultural meanings attributed to the existence of individuals interested in same-sex relationships. (Nash 2006, p. 2)

In short, Toronto's gay village is a space where contestations of the "homosexual" identity become visible.

In contrast to heterosexual space, LGBT spaces are constructed and represented as safe, tolerant and inviting while in actuality, such spaces reproduce power relations based on heteronormative constitutions of identity (Oswin 2008). Nash (2006) contends that queer spaces are actually unfixed, contested and also a disciplinary space. Quinan (2016) asserted that queer spaces often goes unexplained and unquestioned which is applied as a broader concept in multiple settings

such as gay bars, LGBT community centers, and virtual queer communities. Unquestioning the discourses that frame queer safe spaces leaves room for dominant narratives of race, language, nationality and class to overshadow less dominant voices.

Fox and Ore (2010) argued that omitting intersectionality from the analysis of safe spaces leads to the reliance on a particular identity around which safe spaces are constructed. Stengal and Weems (2010) noted that power-relations constrain and enable certain ways of speaking and acting as it is connected to classroom or home. Therefore, applying intersectionality as an analytical lens shows how certain subject positions are imagined to inhabit the discursive boundaries of 'safe space'. Given the material context shaping what safe spaces mean in the offline, what does it mean to construct a safe space online? Do the negotiations of power relations and the hegemonic relations of power suddenly disappear online?

While there is growing scholarship on LGBT identity and online new media, they mostly gear towards a celebratory form of identity expression (see edited volume from Pullen & Cooper 2010). There is little literature available that problematizes the tensions arising from the intersectional performativity of class, language and gender or that addresses how new media shapes identity formation and senses of belonging both socio-culturally and economically (Gajjala 2003). Socio-cultural aspects of online activity and discursive formations online in relation to subjectivities that emerge online and in relation to such issues as voice and voicelessness still remain outside the scope of academic inquiry. This research complicates discussions of virtual communities as safe-spaces where LGBT identities are celebrated and emancipated.

Facebook provides the interface for LGBT subjects to create, negotiate, and construct their identities in virtual spaces due to its ability to create online profiles. These profiles represent who the users are, as the assumption is that users are creating and presenting their 'real' selves through what users post on their Facebook walls and accentuate in their profiles. Facebook also allows users to create an online community where users only allow members they trust and sometimes know face-to-face to be part of the group. Currently, there are many closed Facebook groups where participants can have access to and the opportunity to express their intimate desires and interests. For instance, Cooper (2010) discovered that rural lesbians who are married to men were now able to go online and seek out communities where they could gain information and support from others in similar situations. Dalsgaard (2008) wrote that Facebook allows people to display themselves not just as self-made individuals but as individuals. In one way, having a profile on Facebook permits users to be individualistic in the chance of being unique. Facebook allows for people to develop their identity (Buhrmester & Prager 1995) through the process of revealing their thoughts and feelings to their peers or their imagined community.

In order to speculate on the cultural meanings that emerge from participating in Facebook close groups, it is essential to carve out the complex notions of culture and technology. I argue that culture is a site of contested meanings (Moon 2010). This argument underscores the dynamic nature of culture and suggests that culture is made up of heterogeneous meanings, values that are contested and negotiated. In this sense, people's existence within culture is made up of a variety of practices that constitute the 'everydayness', and online social networks form part of living in that culture (Rybas 2012).

Online identities have often been studied with emphasis on difference: gender, sexuality, and race. Gender identity is often studied in relation to sex and sexuality as well as race (Kolko, Nakamura & Rodman 2000). These kinds of research have argued that race matters both offline and online because we are already shaped by racial and cultural values, and we bring that knowledge to online spaces when we log on. Given the knowledge that queer safe spaces are entrenched with hegemonic relations of power, such re-workings of power spills into online safe spaces. In virtual communities, doing identity differently could have consequences. Valentine (2007) contended that 'when identities are done differently in particular temporal moments they rub up against, and so expose, these dominant spatial orderings that define who is in place /out of place, who belongs and who does not' (p. 19). In this study, I situate race, class, gender, and sexuality in the trans-national to highlight how hierarchies of nationality, language, class, sexuality, and other markers of difference are highlighted in the construction of queer safe spaces.

Method

I participated in and analyzed two Facebook closed groups; AB and ACST with about 200 members in total. Both are closed Facebook groups for same-gender loving African men only. These groups differ from hookup sites such as Grindr, tinder, and planet Romeo among others. These groups do not have a political presence outside of social media and only function as a networking platform for same-gender loving African migrants. There are two reasons why I choose to analyze these groups. First, they are a representation of how queers appropriate a mainstream site such as Facebook. This shows the resilience of queers of color, in particular, to construct their marginalized identities in and against majoritarian spaces (Munoz 1999). Second, these groups provide the opportunity to study the offline and online interactions of the members, while also pointing out the strategic voices that are given credence and those that are silenced.

There is an ethical dimension to this study. While these groups accept members who are known to be same gender loving to other members, their membership is based on their actual Facebook accounts which show their face and real names. Therefore, I sought permission from the group administrators and members to conduct research in AB and ACST. To protect confidentiality, I have disguised the names of the

groups under study. All names of the participants have also been changed. However, posts from members in this study are quoted verbatim. The anonymity of the members was central to my study in these groups because sometimes, journalists from conservative African newspaper organizations lurk in such closed groups to eventually publish the names of the members. Since I am publicly known to most of the members and also attend parties organized by some of the members, my presence in the group was not unusual. Thus, I have become a trusted co-participant and a participant observer of these two groups.

AB was the first group to emerge in 2013. ACST emerged later after a conflict between some of the members of the group. The two groups comprise of same-gender loving men from continental Africa who have migrated to the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom as international students or permanent residents. Some of the members are also located in different parts of Africa. The first group, AB, was started by a U.S. based member who wanted to create a platform for queer Africans migrants in the U.S. and U.K. to get to know each other and also be able to enact their 'authentic' and 'true' selves in the closed Facebook group.

The Internet is an open context for social interactions where practices, meanings, and identities are intermingled on a local and global scale (Atay 2015). Social interactions in virtual environments present a challenge for social researchers and open up a new field for qualitative research. The internet provides an interesting platform to study the making and un-making of identities and communities. Boyd (2008) cautions that ethnographers of the internet must work to acknowledge the internet as a context in their work and also to let it go. She posits that ultimately, it is about the cultures being studied and not the technology. Therefore, I supplant my ethnographic work with interviews which I translate as conversations with the members of these groups. Ethnographic interviews were conducted with 12 members of the closed Facebook group either through Skype or in person. Since members live in different parts of the world, Skype represented the most cost-effective way to reach some of the members who wanted to participate in this research.

To analyze, I read through the interview transcriptions, posts and comments to get a holistic picture. In so doing, I analyzed the content of the posts to see what is generally being talked about and identify micro level speech acts. During this stage, I noted statements describing queer African identities. I looked for implicit and explicit avowals and ascriptions about queer African migrant identity. Next, I noted how other members were positioned in relation to the norms of heteronormativity, Africannnes, and sexual freedom. For instance, some members wrote that they did not want the group to be represented as LGBT African Americans, indicating a clear delineation of queer African migrant identity. I then conducted inductive coding to uncover forms of identity negotiation. After doing both inductive and

deductive coding, I looked for similarities in comments and claims and organized them into preliminary categories; these became preliminary themes. When satisfied with a theme, I looked at how thematic categories emerged in context to one another. Two themes became salient, and they are explicated below.

Analysis

Negotiating 'Home' and Belonging(s) in the Offline and Online

There have been debates on the liberating potential of the internet as a way that has broken down the physical barriers which obstruct the construction of certain identities in physical space. Wakeford (2002) wrote that the LGBT community was among the first to adopt cyber technologies because it provided the space for anyone to be what they wanted to be. So, the internet has always been a place to seek networks, potential sex partners, and relationships. For the queer African migrants in this study, it became evident the internet is a way to temporarily satisfy the (im)possibility of their 'homing desire', to 'return home'. In other words, the internet is a way to construct an identity where they can both be African and queer.

David Eng (1997) wrote that despite 'frequent and trenchant queer dismissals of home and its discontents, it would be a mistake to underestimate enduring queer affiliations to this concept' (p. 32). For the queer African migrants in this study, there is a simultaneous avowal and disavowal of a sense of belonging to an 'imagined Africa' and a global queer community in the West. Nonetheless, the construction of a queer African migrant identity is worked and reworked within the dynamics of an imagined home and its extension online. Therefore, it is never fixed but redefined and reconfigured in specific contexts. In this case, the internet provides the relative safe space for queer African migrants to negotiate their multiple identities within the contours of being a queer black/African immigrant in the West.

Interview discourse from participants in this study suggested that queer African migrants encounter racism and homophobia within the context of their otherness as an immigrant. For instance, in a conversation with John from Liberia, he mentioned that he hardly associates with other African migrants because they are more likely to be religious and not welcoming of his sexuality. Hence, most of his friends are white Americans, because as he stated, 'They [white people] are more likely to understand his sexual orientation'. Kwame from Ghana also stated, 'I stopped going to the Ghanaian church because they are all gossips, they want to know if you are gay and then bring it up in church sermon'. I asked John, where he attends church now. He mentioned that he attends another church with 'a lot of white people'. The comments from John and Kwame position white bodies as more liberal and accepting of their sexual orientation. This problematic assumption could be the result of what Jasbir Puar (2007) critiques as homonationalism—the merging of nationalism and global LGBT politics, which positions the

West as friendlier to queers than typically, Muslim countries. In this intersectional complexity, sense of belonging is not about one's national or racial background but directed at White bodies, which have been continually represented as progressive towards LGBT human rights politics and brown bodies as backward (Eng 2010).

However, another participant mentioned that he would rather stick to the 'ignorance' of African migrants because 'Americans' do not understand him and his sexual identity. James from Nigeria said the following when I asked why he joined the online Facebook group. 'Sometimes I get tired talking to Americans. I have to explain everything. So I will rather stick to my people [African migrants]. They are ignorant, but I can deal with them. They understand me to a point, or I can talk to African Americans'. James's statement sheds light on the politics of belonging. He explains his association with other African migrants who might be homophobic as better than experiencing social exclusions based on race. James, John and Kwame's statements show that queer African migrants' sense of belonging is rather fluid and complex. These statements juxtapose earlier communication research on identity and identity negotiation which emphasize the will of immigrants to assimilate or adaptation as a form of learning and growth (Kim 2001). The complex negotiation of multiple selves as African, queer and immigrant cannot be reduced to the binary of assimilation or resistance. This notion reinforces Eguchi and Asante's (2016) argument that 'intercultural negotiations of identity and practices of belonging are never a simple process of life learning and growth; they are on-going complex and paradoxical dialectics of life struggle in historical and ideological spaces' (p. 187). Thus, the desire to join an online queer community can be a way to negotiate the self, to give the queer African migrant identity a form of coherence, which is not achievable offline.

The articulation of the internet as the space to envision a coherent queer African identity was expressed by a member. During a conversation at a yearly party organized by the Administrators of AB, I asked Tangy why he joined the online group. Tangy migrated to the U.S. from Ivory Coast and he said the following:

> Sometimes, I want to talk to my African people about my [queer] life, but it seems they want to know everything except that part of my life. For instance, I wanted to take my African friend to pride parade last year, but he did not want to go with me. He said 'Africans don't do these kinds of stuff'. I mean … where can I be myself without losing one part of me? So, that's why I go online; I can say anything I want.

Tangy's statement shows how the internet space provides the relative safety for him to negotiate his queer African migrant identities. In his study of online behaviors of queer youth, Alexander (2004) found out that users were writing online in complex and provocative ways which exceeded the limits of just coming out. Similarly, the internet space allows the members of these groups such as Tangy to negotiate

seemingly polar identities and belongings as black, queer and African migrant.

Some of the members did not want to go online to express themselves, others wanted a space to speak about whiteness and sexual desire. Kokovi is from Togo, and when asked about why he visits the closed Facebook group regularly, he said the following:

> Somehow, I am always attracted to old white men. They are always coming for me at clubs. Every time I am at a bar or club, they talk to me and ask me questions about Africa. In fact, some of them are so dumb, and I am so tired of answering questions about where I am from. At least online, I know I will not be asked any stupid questions about Africa. Also, it is always difficult to have a relationship with them. They just want to taste Africans but not looking for real relationships with us.

Angel is from Burkina Faso, and he dated an older white man for seven years. He mentioned the following when I asked him why he regularly visits the closed Facebook page.

> Angel: I know them (white gay men) very well. I have lived with one for a while. I know his friends were jealous of me and all that. I am sure that contributed to our break-up.
>
> Researcher: Why did you break up?
>
> Angel: He said, I am too feminine for him. He wanted a real man. I was like…. I am the same person from 7 years ago. I am sure he wants another African… fresh meat.

Angel's and Tangy's statements are symptomatic of black experiences of being desired in a racialized society. hooks (1992) wrote, 'Certainly from the standpoint of white supremacist capitalist patriarchy, the hope is that desires for the 'primitive' or fantasies about the Other can be continually exploited and that such exploitation will occur in a manner that reinscribes and maintains the *status quo*' (p. 367). Racialized desires for queer African migrants by particularly white older men, as described above, could be a form of commodification, that constitutes an alternative playground where the older white men affirm their power-over intimate relations with the other. For queer African migrants navigating the racialized desires of white supremacy, the internet provides an assumed de-racialized space where 'real' relationships can be pursued. Thus, the members use the closed Facebook space to seek relationships interpreted as 'real', 'genuine' from the gaze and desires of white supremacist capitalist heteropatriarchy.

Some of the posts and comments to posts in the two closed Facebook groups also pointed to the *queering* of 'coming out'. There are several posts showing pictures of some of the members with their boyfriends, attending gay pride parades and gay events. Since I am friends with Tangy on Facebook, I realized he does not post anything regarding his

boyfriend on his main profile wall. I asked Tangy why he would post pictures of himself at gay events and gay pride in the closed group but not his main Facebook page. He mentioned that he wanted to keep his sexuality away from the scrutiny of his Facebook profile by his family and friends. The fragmented spaces of Facebook provide the safe space for the presentation of selves to public and private audiences. Code-switching and dis/identifications with communal meanings of gender and sexuality are not new to racialized queer bodies who have had to constantly negotiate their intersectional identities at the margins of racialized, gendered and sexual normalities (Cohen 1997; McCune 2014). Thus, the members of the closed Facebook group do not 'come out' of the closet per se when they visit these online closed Facebook groups. Rather, they collapse the binary between the closet and coming out. The internet provides the space where a particular kind of queer African migrant subjectivity can be imagined and fantasized which does not include a 'coming out' to family and friends.

Negotiating Comm(unity) and Identity Online: Class and Language Struggles

As explained in the previous theme, some of the members of this group explained that going online to network and form relationships with other queer African migrants helped them construct a sense of coherence in their multiple identities as black, African, queer and immigrant in the West. With 'home' as an organizing principle, the members of the closed Facebook group transcended both regional, national and ethnic boundaries to construct a sense of belonging around their queer African migrant identity online. The dis/embodied performativity of cyberspace provided a temporal safe-space where queer African migrant identity can be re-configured.

However, meaning-making in cyberspace intersects with offline communities and global formations shaped through transnational flows of capital and media. This means offline social hierarchies based on class, sexuality, and language intersects with the creation of cyber communities as well. Writing about cyberqueer communities in India, Mitra (2010) contended that the construction and representation of such digital queer communities involve 'critical silences' and strategic negotiations where particular queer identities and voices are valorized, and others are left out. While the internet provides the safe space for queer African migrants to construct and represent their identities, it became evident that class and language hierarchies intersected with such construction. Members who were perceived to be 'over-expressing' or 'loud' (which is linked to being less classy and uneducated) about their sexuality were overwhelmingly scrutinized and sometimes removed from the group. This theme shows that while diasporic home is an organizing principle for the negotiation of a queer safe space online, the construction and representation of such spaces are not free from social hierarchies existing in face to face communities.

In this theme, I specifically examine the discourses of inclusion and exclusion which emerged from a conflict in AB. I recount this event to consider the politics of visibility and invisibility which marks it. This conflict led to the creation of another group, ACST, another closed Facebook group. The 'break-up' was initiated by a member who felt his posts and engagements with the group were being controlled and over-regulated by the administrators. In March 2014, the administrators of AB began to post concerns about what members can and cannot post. The issue of what to post and what conversations were allowed, showed the merging of offline and online discourses of ethnicity, civility, and professionalism, which are used to silence queers of color in mainstream offline conversations about social inequalities and oppression (Jones & Calafell 2012).

In a statement by an administrator of AB to the group during the conflict, he asserted that he does not want group members to post nude photos or highly sexual content because, according to him, 'it offends other members'. In a conversation with him after the conflict, he opined that he is aware of other black closed Facebook groups which have turned out to be 'posts' about nude men and conversation about sex. He stated, 'we are Africans, not African Americans, so members of this group should have conversations beyond sex'. I asked him what he meant and he explained that other closed Facebook groups with predominantly African American members do not engage in conversations beyond sex so if queer Africans want to establish their space it should be more professional. His statement shows how tensions around race, class, and ethnicity between African Americans and African migrants (Langmia & Durham 2007) are re-activated in discussions of online queer safe spaces. Referring to 'professionalism' also points to issues of class hierarchy.

In his research about queer cyber communities in India, Dasgupta (2017) explained that class is linked intrinsically to sexual identity. He explained that identities such as 'hijra and kothi are seen as non-metropolitan subaltern sexual identities as opposed to the neoliberal modern urban and socially mobile gay identity' (p. 78). In his research on queer subjectivities in Ghana, Asante (2017) also found out that masculine gender conformity was desirable and associated with class. In the context of Ghana, queer men who are feminine and also open about their sexuality were characterized as less classy and deserving of social stigma and violence. These two studies point to how class hierarchy shapes queer communities. In the context of this study, class hierarchy is linked to sexual openness. Those who shared more information about their sexuality through posts depicting nude men or shared stories about gay sex were portrayed as lacking class.

Consequently, an inter-group conflict emerged about the unnecessary restrictions being imposed on the members. In response to one of the administrators of AB, Johnson stated: 'I cannot talk to many people about who I like or what I like, I feel I can share my feelings [desires] here but again, I am not allowed to do that. Where should I go now?'

Johnson is worried that while he is restricted to enact his sexual identity offline, he also has to conform to another set of rules and regulations online. The conflict presented a conundrum to queer African migrants' construction of the closed Facebook group as an inclusive queer safe space.

Hall (2002) wrote that identification—the process of building the self is always strategic and positional in relation to others because institutional and historical sites allow or limit specific discursive formations and practices and invite specific enunciative strategies. Although most of the members explained how they found a sense of 'home' and belonging in AB and ACST, where they can safely share information and have 'real' conversations, it became evident that class tensions shaped how the members framed the closed Facebook group as a queer safe space. For instance, Ike is from Sierra Leone, during a conversation, he said the following:

> Some of these young people think they can control what I want to say and write. I like to post things I can't share on my page ... like sexy men's bodies, but the administrators say I cannot post this because it offends other people. I mean c'mon, this is a group for gay men not some businessmen on a trip. So, I left the group and joined another group where I can post what I like.

Kojo is from Ghana and he lives in Boston with his partner. During our conversation, I asked him why he left AB and joined ACST:

> I was so tired of the drama; this Liberian boy wants to tell us what to do and what to post. In fact, I was disappointed in this decision to delete some people because he did not like their post. Some of us did not go to Ivy League schools, but we are confident in ourselves. Just leave us to post what we want.

Digital spaces like Facebook contribute to negotiating issues critical for constructing queer safe spaces. However, power, authority, knowledge and representation spill over into digital sites. For instance, the statement from Kwame shows how offline tensions can spill into the formation of online queer safe spaces. Kojo is from Ghana, which has a larger population of Liberians who relocated to Ghana due to the Liberian civil war from 1999-2003. This ignited nationalistic rivalries between some Ghanaians and Liberians due to the representations of Liberian refugees as criminals. Given this context, Kojo's reference to 'this Liberian boy' is pointing to the administrator's social positioning in relation to him. Even though their queer identity unified them in virtual space, their offline social hierarchies in relation to nationality emerged in discussions of inclusion and exclusion.

Another discourse linked to class that emerged during the conflict is 'educated' and 'uneducated'. In one of the comments replying to the post by the administrator, Albert from Cameroun said the following, 'Why are we making a fuss about this issue like we are uneducated people? I mean … just don't post anything about sex here. You can use

other platforms for that. Let's just get over this and move on'. Above, Kojo from Ghana stated that not all members are educated or have college degrees from Ivy League Schools indicating how educational status is linked to class. Even though Facebook has constantly been in flux, adding more features and lines in menus, individual users who do not fit the standards of the program have to choose the least conflicting variants or delete the differences in order to meet perceived audience expectations. As Rybas (2012) eloquently states, participating in the online network, creates and erases difference at the interface. Albert's comment above 'let's just get over this and move on' signifies the multiple erasures which members who do not meet the expectations of the neoliberal modern, urban and socially mobile gay identity have to endure in order to participate in this imagined 'unity'. While scrolling through the comments to see which members' comments were receiving more attention, I realized that members from English speaking African countries received the most feedback. I also witnessed one member jokingly mocking the grammatical errors of one of the members from Togo trying to enter the conversation with an unfamiliar language. The exclusions and simultaneous mocking of the Francophone and Portuguese speaking members, echoes Gajjala's (2003) argument that there is an accepted norm that the internet is a White English speaking space. The persistence of English as the un/official queer language of the internet means that access to these sites is limited to particular queer subjects.

Although not directly stated as the only means of communication, English remains the only language used in both AB and ACST. The unquestioned acceptance of English overwhelmingly makes other members who are Francophone and Portuguese speaking, practically, voiceless. In November of 2016, a member of the newly formed group, ACST posted a news story written in French about gay bashing in Senegal. While other French speakers responded to the post, the members from English speaking African countries jokingly typed in fake words in French. During a conversation with Idris from Burkina Faso, I asked him what he thought about that experience. He mentioned, 'Actually, I do not care, it seems everyone assumes we should all type in English. But we do not mock them when they type in English. They assume it's just normal to type in English'.

Although in ACST all members can post anything they want, participation in the group by members from Francophone countries is significantly less than members from Anglophone countries. This is despite the fact that there are more Francophone countries than Anglophone countries in Africa. However, there are fewer Francophone members in the two virtual communities. Idris's comment suggests that even though most of the Francophone speakers left AB for ACST because the administrators stated that English is the official language in AB, exclusions based on language are still prevalent in ACST. It is also important to note that the struggles over European languages and queer African identities is a remnant of the colonial re-arrangement of African borders and spaces.

Conclusions and Implications

This study points to the conceptual, representational, and material limitations of queer safe spaces as it is produced online. By connecting safe spaces to the process of building a queer African migrant community in the West, I have shown that queer communities as they exist online and offline carry meanings which are problematically not shared by all members in the group. While virtual communities that act as safe spaces such as AB and ACST can provide the needed space for queer African migrants to reconfigure their African identity outside the scrutiny of their migrant communities and families, these virtual communities also reproduce power relations that recreates social hierarchies and exclusions. Thus, this study shows the importance of interrogating queer safe spaces through intersectionality to complicate abstract calculations of domination and resistance (Oswin 2008).

The first theme explored how queer African migrants negotiate their intersectional identities as black/African, queer and immigrant in the West. Some of the members mentioned that joining the virtual community provided a sense of coherency to the queer African migrant identity. Hence, the internet space provides the interface for queer African migrants to speak back to issues of racism in the U.S. white queer community and homophobia in the African migrant community without jeopardizing their relationships with them. As indicated by Cohen (1997), race and class labels act as vehicles of resistance which queers of color strategically deploy to dis/identify with interlocking oppressive systems.

The second theme examined the processes of building a queer community and the intricacies of building a coherent identity without considering the specific lens of intersectionality. Using the conflict which emerged in AB as a context, I unraveled how meaning-making in cyberspace intersected with offline social structures and global formations shaped through transnational flows of capital and media. This research makes visible the duality of queer communities as spaces for exploration, identity construction, visibility, and as spaces where forms of normalization and social boundaries are drawn.

The findings from this research imply that queer safe spaces are not outside the matrices of social hierarchies and power. Furthermore, academic inquiry that examines safe spaces based on identities obscure particularities since identities cannot but work within the confines of power and normativity. Oswin (2008) notes that the task of queer theorists 'is to embrace the critique of identity to its fullest extent by abandoning the search for an inherently radical queer subject and turning attention to the advancement of a critical approach to the workings of sexual normativities and non-normativities' (p. 96). In other words, identities that normalize particular ways of community participation should be the subject of queer critique. As it became evident, notions of what it means to be 'African' became the points of contention. Without examination of how Africannnes has been

constructed through colonialism and whiteness, the members of AB and ACST could not envision a radically queer African subjectivity. Rather, the closed Facebook group became a reflection of the social hierarchies which engulf queer safe spaces. This shows the necessity to continually critique how sexual normativity and power relations shape queer safe spaces. Gloria Anzaldúa (1987) pushes scholars to envision an alternative to safe spaces where bridges are rather constructed and not the illusion of safety. She asserts:

> There are no safe spaces. To step across the threshold is to be stripped of the illusion of safety because it moves us into unfamiliar territory and does not grant safe passage. To bridge is to attempt community and for that we must risk being open to personal, political and spiritual intimacy, to risk being wounded. (2002, p. 3)

I share Hartal's concerns that there will always be conflict in the processes of creating queer safe spaces because of its reliance on identity politics and liberal discourses (2017). However, I postulate that queer theorists should endeavor to destabilize the binaries and sexual normativities which engulf such queer safe spaces to create a space that resists normativity.

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