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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Debunking Eurocentrism in Organizational Communication Theory: Marginality and Liquidities in Postcolonial Contexts

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This article centers marginal organizational actors—the disenfranchised of the Global South—to remedy their theoretical erasure and disrupt the Anglo-American grand narrative of organizational communication. This task is urgent amidst discussions of decolonization and whiteness in the discipline. We reengage Western theory on liquidity, hereby conceptualized as shape-shifting and adaptive organizing, moving like a liquid at the margins. We draw on fieldworks in Nigeria and Liberia to unearth three properties of liquidity in postcolonial contexts: motion, solvency, and permeability. Motion refers to movement, solvency refers to the ability to dissolve into one’s surroundings, and permeability refers to organizing that infiltrates life and vice versa. This article bears three theoretical contributions. First, it provides a blueprint to dislodge Eurocentric biases (Anglo-American) in organizational communication theory. Second, it models what decolonizing theory may look like. Finally, it provides more complex, nuanced, and inclusive theoretical accounts of liquidities in global landscapes.

Keywords: Eurocentrism, Marginal Organizing, Liquidity, Decolonize, Africa

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Despite a theoretical engagement with marginality in health communication (Basu & Dutta, 2007, 2008; Dutta-Bergmann, 2004), a similar discussion is lacking in organizational communication. If a debate on the inclusion of alternative voices surfaced more than a decade ago (Broadfoot & Munshi, 2007; Grimes & Parker, 2009), little is known about how marginal actors organize, with exceptions (Pal, 2016; Pal & Buzanell, 2013; Pal & Dutta, 2012, 2013). Our definition of “marginal organizational actors” is two-layered: It refers to disenfranchised subjects of the Global South who

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are framed as being “outside of organization” or incapable of organizing. We thus use “actors” to confer agency to the marginalized and make their organizing practices visible in theory.

Such a move is urgent for two reasons. First, marginal organizational actors are part of the informal economy and make up for most of organizing in today’s global contexts ([International Labor Organization, n.d.](#)). The informal economy includes a breadth of economic activities, enterprises, and jobs that are unregulated by the state ([Women in Informal Employment Globalizing and Organizing, 2018](#)). In West Africa, the largest and most dynamic sectors are informal ([Benjamin & Mbaye, 2014](#)). Despite their notable role in the informal economy, marginal organizational actors are absent in organizational communication theory. In turn, this absence sustains an elitist and Eurocentric organizational narrative ([Imas & Weston, 2012](#)). It also closely aligns theoretical endeavors with neoliberalism. By overlooking the disenfranchised, we suppress connections between the socio-economic struggle and suffering of poor people and global capitalism (e.g., structural adjustment policies in the Global South).

Second, because inequalities are heightened at the margins ([Sassen, 2014](#)), a focus on the disenfranchised can enrich theoretical insights pertaining to the “grass roots.” Perhaps more than any other group, marginal actors face intense threats due to the aggressive nature of capitalism at the periphery ([Banerjee, 2008](#)). Thus, a focus on how marginal actors—facing ongoing political, economic, social threats—have adapted their organizing to precarious global contexts can shed theoretical insights on novel forms of resistance.

Because much resistance occurs in “flight” in the margins ([Haro & Coles, 2019](#)), we draw on organizational “liquidity” ([Bauman, 2000](#); [Clegg & Baumeler, 2010](#); [Steele & Dredge, 2017](#)) and “fluidity” ([Dobusch & Schoeneborn, 2015](#); [Wilhoit & Kisselburgh, 2015](#)) to conceptualize marginal organizing as moving and shape-shifting in postcolonial landscapes. While the term “liquidity” originates in sociology and is often used in Management Studies, the term “fluidity” centers work that has provided communicative explanations on the constitution of identity ([Dobusch & Schoeneborn, 2015](#)) and spatial materialization ([Wilhoit & Kisselburgh, 2015](#)) in fluid collectives. However, this work has overlooked Western assumptions in theory, erasing the normative liquidity and fluidity amongst disenfranchised groups. Drawing on postcolonial approaches ([Broadfoot & Munshi, 2007, 2014](#); [Munshi, Broadfoot & Hall, 2017](#)), we reengage existing literature by debunking Eurocentrism in theoretical explanations and providing a complementary discussion on power. In the tradition of illustrative cases ([Flyvbjerg, 2006](#); [Presskorn-Thygesen, 2015](#)), we derive theoretical insights from ethnographic engagements in Liberia and Nigeria.

We use “liquidity” as our umbrella term for organizing—so intertwined with political, economic, and cultural contexts at the margins—that it shape-shifts and moves like a liquid. “Fluidity” refers to the process of adaptation shaping liquidity differently in situ. As such, it is an imbricated term, implied in our use of liquidity. We feature vignettes showcasing three properties of liquidities as negotiated by the marginalized in context: *motion*, *solvency*, and *permeability*. Thus, we consider liquidity and

fluidity as intrinsically connected to marginality. Second, we speak of “liquidities” instead of “liquidity” to anchor the contextual nature of marginal organizing. In Nigeria and Liberia, organizing is liquid literally; actors cannot establish a set routine and have to restart processes of decision-making daily (Imas & Weston, 2012). In summary, we reengage liquidities as communicative power sites, where struggles between marginal organizational actors and external constituencies—government, transnational agencies, non-governmental organizations—are manifested through motion, solvency, and permeability. These questions inform our query: How can “a view from the margins” destabilize Western-based understandings of liquidity and fluidity? How does this change in perspective—from dominant organizational actors to marginalized ones—nuance and enrich existing theory?

Reengaging liquidities from the margins

A view from the margins

Building on postcolonial endeavors in organizational (Broadfoot & Munshi, 2007, 2014; Grimes & Parker, 2009; Hall, 2011; Hanchey, 2018; Munshi et al., 2017) and communication studies (Dutta & Dutta, 2013; Shome, 1996; Shome & Hegde, 2002), we flesh out a view from the margins, centering the voices of disenfranchised organizational actors (Imas & Weston, 2012; Imas, Wilson, & Weston, 2012). For example, Dutta-Bergmann (2004) anchors the subaltern voices of the Santali tribe—a disenfranchised community in India—to destabilize dominant health communication theories. We take a situational approach (Cruz, 2014, 2015a, 2015b, 2017) by resisting the tendency to construct the margins in an essentializing fashion. We thus update a generic postcolonial stance by acknowledging various intersections of neoliberalism, globalization, indigeneity, and locality (Hanchey & Berkelaar, 2015; Yousfi, 2014).

Beyond the mere inclusion of marginal spaces, populations, and organizations, marginality is an endeavor focused on knowledge production and representation (Chakravartty, Kuo, Grubbs, & McIlwain, 2018). It challenges underlying Western-centered assumptions in organizational communication, which has had limited engagement with marginality, with exceptions (Dutta & Pal, 2010; Pal & Buzzanell, 2013; Pal & Dutta, 2012). Thus, the view from the margins is powerful, uncovering universalisms in dominant theories (Mohanty, 2003). For example, Nkomo (2011) notes, “the error occurs when one group is studied but the knowledge generated then represents the whole concept—leadership. The prefix ‘American’ is suppressed when we speak of leadership theory or management theory in organization studies” (p. 371). Similarly, Imas et al. (2012) explain how entrepreneurship literature weaves a “great [white] man narrative of progression (. . .)” (p. 567). These universalisms erase marginal organizational actors like working children and beggars (Imas et al., 2012). Interrogating the de-facto centering of Global North organizational subjects—white men—and the erasure of disenfranchised subjects is thus key. In sum, the view from the margins creates spaces for theorizing, naming, and writing marginality into our theoretical explanations.

Nkomo (2011) provides a concrete example of how one can deploy this analytic to revisit organizational scholarship. She performs a postcolonial reading of “Africa” in entrepreneurship literature and surfaces tropes of deficiency, underdevelopment, and ineffectiveness. She concludes that much of the literature frames Western interventions in African management as necessary. In organizational communication, scholars have seldom attended to Eurocentric assumptions in dominant literature. Instead, an existing critical tradition has debunked gendered (Marshall, 1993) and raced (Parker, 2004) assumptions. Building on this tradition, we reinvestigate liquidity for Western assumptions.

Reengaging liquid organizing

Liquidity as a construct is embedded in Western modernity from the onset. Bauman (2000) defines “liquid modernity” in contrast to “solid modernity,” marked by stable structures such as the government, organizations, and institutions. Liquid modernity occurred through a breakdown of structures of modernity, leading to fragmentation. In sum, structures were dissolved, rendering bonds “fluid, unstable, and insecure” (p. 3). By extension, liquid organizing refers to a type of flexible organizing with hybrid arrangements, flexibility in goals, and equivocal identities (Steele & Dredge, 2017).

A related debate in organizational communication is fluidity. A prelude to this conversation includes ontological issues connected to the appropriateness of the moniker “organization” to refer to fluid, boundaryless, and shifting organizing (Schreyögg, & Sydow, 2010). Two interrelated debates are noteworthy: organizationality (Dobusch & Schoeneborn, 2015; Schoeneborn, Kuhn, & Kärreman, 2018) and materiality (Wilhoit & Kisselburgh, 2015). Dobusch and Schoeneborn (2015) bring forth organizationality to explain how fluid collectives can constitute identity and claim actorhood. In a study of the hacking collective “anonymous,” they identify three conditions of organizationality: the existence of connected cases of decision-making, attributions of decision-making to collective actors, and the accomplishment of collective identity. In another study, Wilhoit and Kisselburgh (2015) ask how fluid collectives—bike commuters—constitute organizing by materializing in space.

While we take no issue with the communicative explanations provided above, we shift our critique to Western-centered assumptions—context and subjects—that erase marginality. We thus ask separate questions about power. Regarding context, scholars link liquid and fluid organizing to societal shifts—cultural, technological—in Western spaces (Bauman, 2000; Dobusch & Schoeneborn, 2015; Schreyögg & Sydow, 2010; Steele & Dredge, 2017). This assumption is problematic on two levels. First, liquid organizing is normative in many non-Western contexts and anchored in alternative cultural logics (Cruz, 2014, 2017). Second, prior to recent societal shifts, marginal actors in Western and non-Western contexts relied on liquidity to escape multidimensional violence. In 18th and 19th century America, black communities built the underground railroad as a network to escape slavery. This

network was “(. . .) a flexible, decentered, heterogeneous movement that consisted of an oscillating patchwork of myriad local initiatives, organizations, and communities” (Haro & Coles, 2019, p. 10). In Brazil, the highly improvisational organizing of people in the favelas of Rio de Janeiro can be traced to the history of slavery and legacies of oppression of black and poor people (Imas & Weston, 2012). Thus, we frame context as central by claiming that there is a symbiotic relationship between marginality, liquid organizing, and power in different locations. We therefore counter the assumption that liquid organizing is derivative of context, framed as peripheral, ahistorical, and apolitical in existing literature.

An interrelated issue is how scholars construct organizational actors. Although “actor” applies to both individual (e.g., people) and collective levels (e.g., an organization) in the literature, we deploy the term to refer to the framing of people as legitimately organizational. Dobusch and Schoeneborn (2015) as well as Wilhoit and Kisselburgh (2015) center actors who voluntarily opt for fluidity, whether by commuting or joining a hacking collective. By contrast, marginal organizational actors resort to fluidity involuntarily to escape hostile conditions and make a livelihood. Instead of constructing fluidity as a choice only, the view from the margins connects it to “historic power struggles” (Imas & Weston, 2012, p. 209). In this scope, liquidity is inherently raced, gendered, classed and tied to the nation. In contemporary contexts, oppressive conditions fuel liquid organizing for poor actors, who have to be both reactive and proactive to threats. By extending liquidity beyond Euro-American contexts and applying it to marginal organizing, we contend that it takes multiple forms in contexts—social, political, and economic—and should not be essentialized. Thus, we speak of “liquidities” instead of “liquidity” to highlight various configurations.

Liquidities in Liberia and Nigeria

In postcolonial contexts like Liberia and Nigeria, intersections of colonialism, capitalism, and neoliberalism fuel extreme liquidities. A useful framework is necrocapitalism (Banerjee, 2008) or “practices of organizational accumulation that involve violence, dispossession, and death” (p. 1543). Necrocapitalism has historical roots in colonialism and colonies as states of exception, where violence was normative (Banerjee, 2008). In contemporary times, necrocapitalism encompasses legacies of Western imperialism, including neoliberal policies of the 1980s. In West Africa, structural adjustment policies informed the privatization of key sectors—health and education—as well as the removal of trade barriers through liberalization. These policies were more severe, given the structural fragility of these contexts and the absence of counter forces to mitigate neoliberalism. Effects included the shrinking of the formal economy (Skinner, 2008), the worsening of health, systems, the impoverishment of urban populations (Lourenço-Lindell, 2002), and the expansion of the informal economy (Heidhues & Obare, 2011). As a response, marginal organizational actors occupied urban spaces to sustain their livelihoods and clashed with local

governments (Lourenço-Lindell, 2002). On the one hand, governments saw the informal sector as a potential source of revenue (Lourenço-Lindell, 2002). On the other hand, officials cracked down on what they saw as illegal and chaotic activity, cleaning cities to transform them into neoliberal centers (Gillespie, 2016, 2017).

The violence of necrocapitalism informs multiple layers of marginal organizing. In Nigeria, the Lagosian government seeks to turn the city into a modern neoliberal center (Palmer, 2010) that can attract foreign and corporate investment. Consequently, it has waged war against informal organizational actors who occupy the streets, further pushing them into marginality (Palmer, 2010). Another effect has been the violent demolitions of slum settlements in prime waterfront areas such as the 2012 Makoko demolition (Ogunlesi, 2016) and the bulldozing and forced eviction of over 30,000 residents in the Otodo Gbame community between 2016 and 2017 (Amnesty International UK, 2018). In Liberia, necrocapitalism was at the heart of the Liberian civil war (1989–2003) through the trafficking of diamonds from neighboring Sierra Leone and the exploitation of timber by Firestone, which secured a 100 year-long concession from the Liberian government (Gaviria & Cohen, 2014). The protracted civil war led to a widespread collapse of the formal sector. In post-conflict times, avenues for formal employment have shrunk and it is estimated that close to 70% of all employment is informal (Liberia Institute of Statistics and Geo-Information Services, 2011). The Ebola crisis (2014–2015) has magnified this situation with strained governmental resources to assist people.

Because necrocapitalism is so aggressive, there is a symbiotic ebb and flow between contextual conditions and liquid organizing. Contexts—political, economic, social—fuel liquidity. In turn, organizational actors seek liquidity as a survival and thriving strategy. Families and individuals that are excluded from the formal sector attempt to survive in spaces marked by scarcity (e.g., resources, jobs, sanitation, health). Actors constantly develop strategies—rule bending, participative learning and solidarity, and shape-shifting—to evade neoliberal threats. Such strategies are exemplified through “barefoot entrepreneurs” and their flow-like organizing (Imas et al., 2012). These strategies are enabled by the adjacent “liquid” nature of urban life in Monrovia specifically, where the city moves with people (Hoffman, 2017). We draw on ethnographic fieldworks to ground liquidities in context.

Illustrative cases as approach

The illustrative case study approach (Johnsen & Sørensen, 2015; Flyvbjerg, 2006; Presskorn-Thygesen, 2015) informed our methodology. Presskorn-Thygesen (2015) explains that this approach is a reflexive exploration of theoretical constructs that illuminates their affordances and limitations. This perspective does not aim to generalize; rather it revisits existing empirical materials to find representative exemplars of a construct. The use of rich exemplars seemed appropriate to document marginal organizing, which is seldom understood in Western contexts. To this extent, we revisited existing ethnographic materials: participant observation notes and semi-

structured interviews. Prior to this task, liquidity as a theoretical construct surfaced through a lively discussion on organizational ethnographies in Liberia and Nigeria. We discussed the difficulties of studying elusive and ever-changing organizing and limitations of Western-based analytics for these endeavors. Building on fieldwork insights and literature, we broadly defined liquid organizing as shape-shifting and moving.

Following this conversation, the first author reexamined two projects spanning a range of marginal organizational forms in Liberia. First, were susu groups amongst disenfranchised market women in the community of Fiamah in Monrovia. Susu groups are community-based rotating credit associations: members contribute a set monetary sum to the group. The susu leader then pools all the money together and redistributes the totality of it to one member at a time. The cycle starts again after all susu members have cashed in their money. The groups are essential in many parts of West Africa because they allow disenfranchised communities, lacking access to banking, to secure important sums of money. Second, was an informal task force that the Old Matadi community created to fight the Ebola epidemic in 2014–2015. The Old Matadi taskforce was characterized by its improvisational nature and creativity while facing a dearth of material resources. The second author revisited a phenomenology of Lagos street traders and discourses of socioeconomic struggle (Utah, 2015). She focused on roadside food traders who provide foodstuffs—fruit, vegetables, meat—and cook local food in stalls called *bukas*. A key feature of the traders' experience is the constant struggle to find a sense of place and space for enterprise. Traders have to respond to constant threats of eviction and bribe-seeking from government officials, yielding highly adaptive organizing practices.

Analysis

As we identified exemplars of liquidity, we constructed vignettes anchored in both research sites. Because marginal organizing occurred all around us, we also used examples outside our fieldworks. Through vignettes, we sketched the lived and contextual nature of marginal organizing. Thus, our process involved reflective writing to describe this elusive and organic type of organizing. We were not attempting to “capture” organizing practices in an essentialist sense, but to create narratives that accounted for “the complexities and contradictions of real life” (Flyvbjerg, 2006, p. 237). Drawing on grounded theory tenets (Charmaz, 2014), we read the vignettes multiple times to refine properties of liquidity. Motion, solvency, and permeability emerged from this process. Instead of creating a summative and “closed” case study, we left this process open, resisting the “role of omniscient narrator and summarizer” (Flyvbjerg, 2006, p. 238).

Liquid organizing and marginality

Here, we feature properties of liquid organizing in postcolonial contexts. When delineating each property, we intertwined: (a) the theoretical uniqueness of this type

of organizing, and (b) our struggles to respond to these properties in our fieldworks. Beyond mere findings, this section serves a representational function. It works against the theoretical erasure of marginal organizational actors by anchoring what liquidities look like for them in situ. As we entered their worldviews, we juxtaposed our epistemological shortcomings as scholars trained in the United States to counter the usual construct of an all-knowing Western researcher.

Motion

Motion refers to movement across space—multi-sited organizing of individuals circulating through the city—and time—organizing that is interrupted and resumes through time. These vignettes from our respective fieldworks provide an illustration:

Moving organizing is vividly displayed in Lagos traffic jams that often stretch for miles. In the traffic aisles, hawkers (as they are called) sell a diverse array of goods: boxer shorts, bootleg DVDs of American movies, newspapers, kaftans, food, and cold drinks. They adapt their movement to the ebb and flow of traffic. When the traffic breaks up, hawkers wait on the roadside for the next jam. As soon as the cars slow down, hawkers resume their work, sprinting alongside cars to complete transactions. If a particular highway is too “free” on a particular day, then hawkers move to other congested areas of the city in search of other traffic jams. The traffic jam thus becomes a moving, living, unpredictable space of organizing, and navigating it is grueling and dangerous work.

Likewise, motion was a central property of marginal organizing in Monrovia, Liberia:

The market was a site of moving organizing in itself. I was struck by children and adults walking in and offering manicures and pedicures to market women, who had to sit down all day and remain immobile. Quite interestingly, the portable manicure and pedicure people had figured a loophole and created a job from this situation. They would carry all the necessary tools, including nail polish in different colors, and walk from stall to stall offering their services. Jobs of this informal nature abounded. For example, there was the daily itinerant movie seller, who sold the latest Nollywood DVDs as well as some sensationalist print media, like newspapers featuring graphic crime and witchcraft stories. There were moving susu men, who traveled from stall to stall and acted as a bank for the women. Amidst this activity, the susu groups I studied were also mobile in the sense that women would move from stall to stall to collect money every afternoon at 4:00 pm.

Following a motion turn in the social sciences (Urry, 2007), organizational scholars have questioned “(. . .) the spatially bounded conception of organization that traditionally underlies studies of organization” (Costas, 2013, p. 2). In organizational communication, scholars have pursued this idea by showcasing how organizing is communicatively accomplished, hence stepping out of preconceived boundaries (Wilhoit & Kisselburgh, 2015).

However, motion at the margins is different than the movement of elite kinetic workers and temporary laborers in Western contexts (Costas, 2013; Garsten, 2008). We argue that contextual conditions—opportunities and threats—are communicated through motion in a literal sense. Liquid organizing is opportunistic, itinerant, and ebbs or flows in space depending on the latest threats or opportunities (Hoffman, 2017). It is both bound to spaces like the traffic jam but also boundless in that it can occur in multiple spaces. Therefore, motion should not strictly be read as a lack of limitations but rather the quick adaptation to these limitations. It is also difficult to contain and merges with other types of informal organizing as reflected in the vignette on mobile manicure and pedicure activity bleeding into market work. Such a characteristic is referred to as “transorganizational” (Garsten, 2008), meaning that different motions crisscross and overlap complicating the idea of a contained research site. In extreme marginality, motion is normative rather than peripheral. The absence of regulations, policies, and infrastructure accentuates this process.

Epistemological shortcomings

As scholars who had lived in West African contexts, we were familiar with hawking and other forms of marginal organizing. However, we were not prepared for the realities of researching organizing in motion due to our training that predisposed us to immobility. The following vignette illustrates the choices one researcher made in Nigeria:

There is an ongoing struggle between Lagos street traders and the local government. Street trade is seen as unsightly and a poor reflection on the city. After “clean-up” sweeps, traders temporarily lay low to avoid punishment but ultimately reemerge. Street traders have no legal claims to the space that they use and often sustain their use of the space through bribes or informal rents. As a result, street trade occurs on a continuum of mobility; from hawkers who are always on the move to roadside traders who set up stalls on the roadside. My initial desire was to speak to a variety of street traders, but hawkers proved to be very elusive. Eventually, I focused on traders on the more stable end of the continuum that I could easily approach. I had to admit that I was out of my depth and had not considered the physical and mental requirements of research on the move. I had also planned to spend time building rapport with the traders and return to them several times during the course of my fieldwork. However, I was cautioned by friends and family to avoid revealing too much about my movements for security reasons. Eventually, with some of the traders, I had to adopt a form of interviewing where we spoke in shorter bursts interspersed with their trading activities and interaction with customers.

The other researcher made similar choices in Liberia:

I selected market women, a group whose mobility varies on a continuum. I opted for a subset of sedentary market women who sell food for retail at market stalls and therefore sit down throughout the day. As such, their movement is limited to particular occasions. By contrast crossborder market women travel

to neighboring countries including Côte d'Ivoire and Guinea to buy tomatoes, peppers, and other produce. Although this research opportunity was available to me, understanding such an experience would have required I travel alongside the women to border areas. At the time, this was an endeavor I was not willing to undertake.

As highlighted in both vignettes, we opted for more immobile informal workers due to our unfamiliarity with highly mobile forms of work and our underlying assumptions about “organizing,” which we still associated with staticity. As such, motion requires significant methodological developments in organizational communication scholarship such as reimagining the traditional interview process.

Solvency

Solvency refers to the ability for marginal organizational actors to “dissolve” into surrounding environments thus creating complex and syncretic modes of organizing. This vignette illustrates solvency:

Susu groups had dissolved during key periods of the Liberian war (1989–2003). As some of the women explained to me, the priority was not to save money but instead to survive. During quieter periods of the war, the groups resumed their activity, often picking up exactly where they had left, with the same members. Shortly after the end of the war, the women re-established their groups in a more continuous manner. To me, the process of dissolving and reassembling the groups in relatively short fashion was rendered possible by the fact that they required little in the way of infrastructure including money and facilities. Instead, the groups were deeply embedded in community and personal relationships, which seemed to be their fabric.

Solvency was also salient in Nigeria:

Since street traders do not have any legal claims to public space, they occupy it in ways that blend into the existing flow of the city. For instance, ice-cream and snack sellers wait outside of schools, places of work and worship ready to sell refreshments at closing time. In some residential areas, mobile bread sellers roam through the streets at breakfast time. Another feature of many residential neighborhoods are gatemen who sell sweets and biscuits to neighborhood children outside the gates of the homes they guard. By capitalizing on opportunities in their environment street traders have become a part of the cultural landscape and experience of Lagos.

In the first vignette, solvency is enabled by the absence of material resources such as buildings and equipment. The ability to blend into settings unremarkably is characteristic of environmental isomorphism (Cruz, 2017). Solvency is an intrinsic property of liquidity in marginal contexts because it is tied to neoliberal policies and governmental measures—economic, political, and cultural—which specifically target the disenfranchised. They negotiate constant threats of taxation, eviction, and destruction. Furthermore, they are denied the spaces and resources that allow a stable

and predictable organizing environment. Thus, organizing stops and resumes at any time depending on external (e.g., government cracking down on informal structures, war, trauma) and internal factors (e.g., loss of material resources, personal tragedies, familial contingencies). Perhaps more than in any other context, marginal organizational actors have to assemble and disassemble organizing rapidly in postcolonial settings. For roadside traders in Lagos, this process involves the physical dismantling of stalls and other temporary structures to avoid discipline from clean-up officials. Solvency is not the manifestation of chaotic disorganization; rather, our ethnographic engagements reveal an underlying system that is “a product of intelligence, resilience, self-organization, and group solidarity, and (. . .) follows a number of well-worn though unwritten rules” (Neuwirth, 2012, p. 18). Nevertheless, solvency is difficult to navigate for Western-trained scholars.

Epistemological shortcomings

A key challenge was the temptation to treat this type of organizing as “immutable” or fixed and therefore taking it as a given. This issue can obliterate the fragility of solvent organizing and vulnerability of its actors:

For a Nigerian street trader making a very small profit margin, every hour of the day counts. A fruit seller I talked to would arrive at her stall early in the morning and sometimes not leave until it was close to midnight. As I began to realize the depth of difficulty in their circumstances, I was surprised that they bothered to talk to me at all. I remember approaching a young woman who at first seemed eager to talk. However, she ended the interview because her aunt was “watching” her and she needed to get back to work. Following that experience, I was more tentative in my approach for fear of exposing or outing traders who were just trying to stay out of trouble. I was also frustrated because I had anticipated being able to have long conversations with the traders.

In Liberia, the researcher spent time thinking about this vulnerability without necessarily reaching a resolution:

What is an appropriate amount of money to compensate someone for a research interview in precarious postcolonial contexts? What if the interview takes away from their livelihood significantly? What of the people I interviewed who did not have jobs? This latter question dawned on me in the midst of Ebola as I interviewed individuals whose economic livelihood had vanished due to quarantine guidelines. Would my study help them pay for their children’s school fees and alleviate their hardships? The answer was “no.”

Another immutability challenge is tied to writing. There is a danger to normalize marginal organizing by overselling discourses of resilience, which minimize or trivialize the harsh socioeconomic realities of informal workers (Cruz, 2015b). These realities were brought into sharper relief with each interaction in Nigeria:

I did not want my presence in their stalls or our conversation to get in the way of a sale or cause any undue stress. Some of them seemed so weary. One of the

women I spoke to was so angry that she shouted about her plight during the whole interview. She screamed about her concerns, the injustices of the government, the fact that many of the youth had only crime and prostitution as job options. The only appropriate response in this setting was to keep my mouth shut. I remember a trader yelling at me when I asked her for an interview. After some reflection, it occurred to me that I had assumed I would be able to impose my presence on her without consequences. I would never waltz into someone's office for an interview. I think my underlying attitude was "of course she will talk to me." I had failed to imagine that there might be some underlying codes of conduct that I might inadvertently break. Sometimes, you just graciously walk away and admit that the person's livelihood is more important than your research study.

In short, solvency brings into relief concerns tied to vulnerability. This property of liquidity can encourage scholars to further engage with issues of poverty and survival in organizational communication (Hanchey & Berkelaar, 2015; LeGreco & Douglas, 2017).

Permeability

This property refers to the embeddedness of liquid organizing in context and local communities. In this sense, organizing infiltrates context and vice versa. The following vignette from Liberia illustrates this property:

Market women lived in the same community, which was a five-minute walk away from the market. I had accompanied two of my market women friends—Kebbeh and Adelaine—to their homes before. Both the intendent and superintendent of the market also lived in the community; it was not uncommon for the women to go fetch for George—the superintendent—from home when there was business to be attended to. Such business included visitors who dropped by on occasions. In sum, the workspace was close and embedded in community. The women stored all market goods at home at night and transported everything to the market in the morning. Because there was no clear separation between private and public realms, it was common for children as well as partners to stop by the market when they needed something. In a sense, the market was life and the women's community; they were friends with other women sitting right by them. It was common for them to celebrate each other by throwing graduation parties for some of their children. In summary, it was not a "research site" for the participants but their livelihood, communities, and families. As a result, I was baffled throughout my fieldwork because I could not initially identify the organizations I was studying. They were so deeply embedded in the fabric of daily life that they were indistinguishable from it. For instance, susu groups are only visible when market women exchange daily susu money. At 4:00 p.m., susu mothers walk from stall to stall and ask women for their dues. Even in that case, it takes a trained eye to identify such activity as susu practice because money transactions take place in the market all the time.

Another exemplar of permeability is the case of scavengers—individuals recycling garbage from dumpsites in Lagos—who have created habitable communities at their worksites. They live and shower on site and there is an entire parallel economy, which includes food shacks and barbershops. By centering on permeability, we understand organizing as life rather than a separate domain (Reedy, 2014). Individuals blurred distinctions between work/friends, self/community, and public/private domains. Similar to anarchist organizing in the West, personal bonds played a significant role in constituting and sustaining informal organizing rather than “hierarchy, authority and other conventional structural elements” (Reedy, 2014, p. 650). Theoretically, these vignettes challenge the usual assumptions regarding the prerequisites for organizing to take place: i.e., that decision-making and an ability to act purposefully upon the world are the preserve of the complete organization and require hierarchy, stable structure and authority in order to do so. They also challenge the idea that organizations are distinct entities with certain independent attributes in which organizing takes place and which can be studied as things in themselves.

Epistemological shortcomings

Permeability brings forth the following question: How can we study organizing in itself when it is a full part of daily life? The following vignette narrates how blurred boundaries affected our research process and our attempts to respond appropriately. It captures the confusion this blurring of public/private boundaries can elicit and the temptation of impermeability or framing life and organizing as discrete categories:

I had traveled to the community of Old Matadi to interview task force members about their responses to Ebola. Today was Dexter's interview. Dexter was a 30-something grave and serious school dean. He was my key informant and had been actively connecting me to other task force members. Once I arrived, I found that he was sitting with two other task force members on the porch of his house. I had previously indicated that the interview would be private; However, Dexter had invited two more men who participated in the interview as well. In the end, I found myself facilitating a focus group instead of a one-on-one interview. The other two men validated Dexter's answers and expanded on some of them at times. It was a strange situation to me and I did not know how to deal with it; there was no qualitative research manual addressing these issues. Slightly similar scenarios would repeat themselves throughout fieldwork. I would sit on porches, which were the only available place to conduct interviews. A friend of the interviewee would walk by, see me recording the interview, and approach us by saying “hi.” They would overhear some answers, chime in, and then leave in a natural fashion. A similar experience had happened when I was interviewing market women in Fiamah. I had initially arranged to conduct interviews in the market office, which was supposed to be a private setting. However, we were often interrupted by people looking for information or coming inside to take care of market business. They would recognize the interview situation yet continue to chat or volunteer information. Sometimes, the interviewees would volunteer

a friend to come to the market office to provide additional input, corroborate some answers, or provide clarifications. I realized that this process challenged and reversed conventional relationships between researcher and participant, particularly in connection to power and expertise. I began to rely heavily on their understandings and explanations to make sense of organizing.

In Nigeria, the second researcher also experienced this communal sense-making:

My first interview was a complete disaster by traditional standards. I was interviewing a young man who sold tomatoes and peppers on the side of the Lekki-Ekpe highway. He had a lot of difficulty understanding me and as we struggled to make sense of each other, he fetched a friend to help him translate. As a graduate student, I was horrified. This was not what I indicated in my IRB. When the first friend could not understand a question, he fetched another friend, and together, they attempted to decipher what I was talking about and respond. Through this interview, I was confronted with the inadequacy of my methodology and the limitations of how I had learned “research.” In subsequent interviews, I realized that I could not create boundaries around my interviews the way I had imagined or been taught. I was in their stalls and on their territory and I was going to have to be okay with their friends, families, and colleagues chiming in on interviews or listening intently with nods, frowns, and smiles. Many street operations are often family-based. Toddlers are strapped to backs with wrappers and older children often stop by to help after school. One of the traders told me that her husband came by every evening to keep her company during the long hours. Another trader’s stall was erected outside the gates of the compound where she lived. These relationships take the place of the institutional supports that people in traditional organizations depend upon their organizations or governments to provide. To silence these supports during an interview would be disrespectful. I began to yield to the lifeworld I was studying, welcoming the camaraderie and randomness of these encounters while learning to facilitate them.

As highlighted by these last vignettes, liquid organizing—perhaps more than other types—places a heavy burden on participants. They are needed to identify and name this type of organizing, pinpoint how it moves through space and time, when and how it dissolves, and its permeability with life.

Discussion

We have centered marginal organizational actors from Liberia and Nigeria—market women and street hawkers—and how they organize through liquidities. This move is urgent for three reasons. First, it can dislodge ingrained Eurocentric biases (Anglo-American) in theoretical premises. Second, it can actualize the long-awaited decolonization in the subfield amidst the current debate on the whiteness of Communication Studies (Chakravarty et al., 2018). Third, it can contribute more inclusive theoretical insights that account for the organizing practices of the disen-

franchised. If [Ashcraft and Allen \(2003\)](#) uncovered race-based assumptions, similar deconstructive work is lacking, especially in regards to Eurocentrism. Additionally, the adjacent decolonization debate in organizational communication has remained abstract ([Broadfoot & Munshi, 2007](#); [Grimes & Parker, 2009](#)), with no modeling of what decolonizing theory could look like. Postcolonial endeavors in this tradition remain limited. They are grafted to an American center in terms of assumptions ([Norander & Harter, 2012](#)) and overlook issues of colonialism, indigeneity, and locality.

A first contribution is a template for dislodging Eurocentrism through a systematic unearthing of cultural assumptions. We advocate for intersectional thinking that considers the interlocking of Eurocentrism with other systems of oppression (e.g., colonialism/neocolonialism, racism, sexism, homophobia). Necessary questions to assess theory include; “How is the ideal subject Western and/or American?” “What attributes—nation, class, race, gender, sexuality, language spoken—does the subject possess?” “Which marginal subjects—considering nation, race, gender, sexuality, language spoken—are outside of organization?” and “What types of ideologies tied to American contexts—individualism—does the theorist reproduce?” These questions also apply to scholarship centering the disenfranchised, because it can distort different organizational experiences through the superimposition of a white American normative lens.

We showcased how the literature on liquidity and fluidity favored “elite” forms of mobility ([Garsten, 2008](#)) and centered Western subjects, who moved freely, unconstrained by context—framed as apolitical and ahistorical. The notable absence of marginal organizational actors in this work obliterates power. Contrary to privileged groups, the disenfranchised lack protections against financial ruin due to contextual threats and reduced access to vital resources (e.g. substantial business loans from financial institutions). As [Martin \(2014\)](#) notes, there are disparities in the treatment of gourmet food truck owners and immigrant vendors. As stated, “the right of the chefs and their customers to use the city for their economic gain and symbolic production is acknowledged more leniently (. . .) than that of the immigrant vendors” (p. 1881).

A second contribution models a path towards decolonization by considering marginalized others as generative of theoretical insights. Market women and street hawkers possessed expertise we lacked. Their experiences were key to redefine and destabilize Western-based understandings of “liquidity” and “fluidity.” By providing a rich account of liquidities in situ, we demonstrate how theory can take multiple forms. Because marginal actors from the global South in general and Africa specifically have been absent from organizational communication, it is essential that they fill theoretical spaces and pages figuratively and literally. Thus, in-depth description serves a powerful theoretical purpose; representation.

A third contribution paints a more complex picture of liquidities in global contexts. If scholars have provided communicative explanations pertaining to fluid collectives, they are incomplete without considerations of power, history, and context.

We feature the three properties separately in the findings; however, they are interconnected and provide a continuum of liquidities, from fluid to viscous. Marginal organizing that moves seamlessly following the city flow dissolves quickly and enters the social fabric inconspicuously; it is highly fluid. Actors are more likely to escape contextual threats in precarious contexts in this configuration. By contrast, marginal organizing that moves conspicuously dissolves slowly and cannot enter the social fabric; it is viscous. Viscosity complicates escape attempts. These insights speak to an important definitional debate in the organizational literature. [Costas \(2013\)](#) favored the term “stickiness” over “liquidity” to emphasize frictions over free-flowing movement. This piece showcases that liquidities encompass a range of fluid and sticky possibilities.

Understanding liquidities in context bears theoretical implications for adjacent bodies of work in organizational communication: (in)visibility and resistance. First, scholars have examined how actors communicatively negotiate invisibility by receding from view and visibility by revealing their identities to outgroup members ([Jensen & Meisenbach, 2015](#); [Schoeneborn & Scherer, 2012](#); [Scott, 2013](#)). This work is yet to fully engage with the margins. For the disenfranchised, leveraging (in)visibility can have significant material implications; the ability to hide is necessary for survival. This article showcases how liquidities constitute the natural corollary of the (in)visibility debate. Through the three properties, we answer questions pertaining to “how” marginal actors become invisible or visible.

Both discussions of (in)visibility and liquidities can encourage organizational communication scholars to provide theoretical explanations for new forms of resistance in “flight” ([Haro & Coles, 2019](#)). If postcolonial scholarship brings forth “subaltern resistance” in organizational communication ([Pal & Dutta, 2012, 2013](#)), little is known about its various forms in complex postcolonial contexts. In an adjacent body of work, [Ganesh, Zoller, and Cheney \(2005\)](#) argue for a “globalization from below” perspective focused on people and collectives resisting “globalization from above” or totalizing neoliberal policies that dominant stakeholders put in place (e.g., governments and institutions). Where this work has centered more frontal forms of resistance through activism ([Ganesh & Stohl, 2013](#)), we add liquidities as forms of resistance that challenge globalization less explicitly. In particular, liquidities help grasp a symbiotic relationship; globalization and neoliberalism push disenfranchised actors further into liquidity and in turn, actors use liquidity to circumvent survival threats and operate outside the realm of official actors (e.g., local governments, transnational corporations).

In praxis, studying liquid organizing in the margins is challenging. [Imas and Weston \(2012\)](#) describe “hazardous, emotionally demanding and compromising” work (p. 213) due in part to the oppressive situations their participants endure. In response, their ethnography is dialogical, emphasizing the importance of the participant speaking in his/her own voice with less interference from the researcher. As indicated by [Kang and Sodeke \(2017\)](#), dialogical research principles are easier espoused than executed and require counter-intuitive shifts such as allowing

participants to question researchers. A practical suggestion is to rethink familiar methodological conventions in dialogic terms (Kang & Sodeke, 2017). A research protocol might be constructed using words, phrases, or ideas that are meaningful to the community of interest. These are steps we wish we had taken before fieldwork.

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