Postcolonial Partnerships or Neocolonial Collaboration?:
A Position Paper on International Nonprofit Organizing

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In this position paper on communication in nonprofit organizations, I argue for integrating attention to culture and power in the study of nonprofit organizing. Drawing on ethnographic research on international peacebuilding processes in Sierra Leone and Liberian diaspora, I argue that postcolonial theorizing provides a trenchant theoretical lens through which to understand nonprofit partnerships, particularly between partners in the West and the developing world. Postcolonial theorizing problematizes “location, voice, and agency” from the standpoint that “the encounters of the everyday are framed by the larger narration of political, economic, and cultural processes” (Shome and Hedge, 2002, 262, 265).

Partnerships are a key aspect of nearly all nonprofit organizations “as a means of tackling complex social problems” while functioning in an environment of fiscal, resource, and personnel limitations (Tomlinson, 2005, 1170). Therefore, it is imperative that nonprofit organizations partner provide financial, operational, programmatic, temporal, and technical resources to augment the effectiveness of any single organization. Eisenberg and Eschenfelder (2009) observed, “Partnering effectively with stakeholders is the single-most significant communication challenge facing leaders of nonprofit organizations” (917). Similarly, Krohling Peruzzo (2009) noted that “connecting with allies” as an issue of particular relevance to organizational communication in the third sector (667).
In considering the issue of nonprofit partnerships, I examine American and African organizations collaborating in peacebuilding processes. This position paper draws on field research related to Fambul Tok and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Liberia (TRCL) Diaspora Project as contexts from which to understand the international partnerships involved in the organizing of peacebuilding. This position paper contributes to Lewis’ (2005) call to examine “the specific unique features of NPOs” (241). Using postcolonial theorizing, I focus on how location, voice, and agency in nonprofit partnerships are mediated by political, economic, and cultural issues that reflect postcolonial conditions.3

In the aftermath of its Truth and Reconciliation Commission and the ongoing work of the Special Court, Sierra Leoneans still lacked “grassroots practices of reconciliation, reintegration, and healing … that are more locally effective in dealing with the aftermath of conflicts” (Shaw, 2008, 1). Fambul Tok, a community-based reconciliation project is the result of an ongoing partnership between a nonprofit foundation in the United States and a nongovernmental organization in Sierra Leone. It “draws on traditional methods of reconciliation at the community level” around culturally significant rituals and symbols such as bonfires and cleansing ceremonies (Hoffman, 2008, 132).

Following Sierra Leone’s example, Liberia established a nongovernmental organizing process tasked with helping the country transition from war and dictatorship toward peace and democracy. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Liberia (TRCL) an independent, non-judicial body, was formally enacted in 2006 and mandated to provide an “opportunity for both victims and perpetrators of human rights violations to
share their experiences in order to create a clear picture of the past so as to facilitate genuine healing and reconciliation” (National Transitional Legislative Assembly, n.d.). Its major innovation was taking the Commission outside Liberia, collecting testimony from refugees in Ghana, England, and the United States and holding public hearings in Minnesota. To accomplish this, the TRCL partnered with the Minnesota-based nonprofit organization, Advocates for Human Rights (AHR), to facilitate the Diaspora Project.

In approaching these peacebuilding partnerships, the issue of location is important. Although they intend to expand their work to numerous post-conflict contexts, it was important to both American and Sierra Leonean leaders of Fambul Tok that the program headquarters be in Sierra Leone, where it began and the Executive Director lives. However, headquartering an international organization in a country that is still developing is no easy undertaking. For example, the process of getting a satellite internet connection, took more than six months. Local service providers tried to charge exorbitant rates for installation. The European hardware provider sent the wrong part to connect the satellite to the building, further prolonging the installation process. While these seem like small things, Internet connectivity is of critical importance in allowing members of Fambul Tok in Sierra Leone and the United States to communicate on a daily basis. It is indicative of the material difficulties of organizing internationally, particularly in the developing world. Even now, when the power goes out—as it often does in Freetown—the wireless signal also goes out, interrupting Skype conversations while employees manually switch the building’s electricity over to generator power. In committing to a partnership that is not dictated or determined by Western needs and
interests, Fambul Tok has experienced financial and temporal costs because of its commitment to locating the organization in Sierra Leone.

In contrast, the partnership between AHR and TRCL highlighted the partners’ respective locations in the United States and Liberia. AHR took on the role of organizing and implementing the collection of testimony from Liberians living outside of Liberia. AHR collected statements in diaspora communities in the US, UK, and Ghana. The bulk of their efforts were focused in collecting testimony from Liberians resettled in the United States. The participation of AHR, who funded the Diaspora Project, made it possible to collect diaspora testimony with minimal cost to the TRCL. Because of their location, AHR focused on testimony from those living in the United States and Great Britain. While they did take some testimonies in a Ghana, they made no effort to include the vast majority of the Liberian diaspora who occupy peripheral spaces in refugee camps of neighboring states, as well as living illegally in cities and towns in African countries outside of Liberia. In this case, AHR chose to limit itself by its location in the United States, rather than using its considerable resources to capture the scale and scope of Liberian diaspora communities.

Postcolonial theorizing also attends to whose voices are solicited and recognized in organizational contexts. During my fieldwork with Fambul Tok, I accompanied the Executive Director on meeting with IGOs and INGOs to discuss funding opportunities. In numerous meetings, I was often greeted first (and mistakenly) as the President of the organization. This was particularly surprising given my wardrobe of tank top, cargo pants, messenger bag, and generally informal appearance, while the Executive Director wore dress pants and button-down shirt and carried a briefcase with him to these
meetings. In these interactions, there was considerable deference to me as a white American, with the assumption that I would be speaking for and about the peacebuilding partnership. This was particularly true of IGOs/NGOs and organizational members from the West. Even when partners aim to resist Western ascendancy over local interests and equal partnering in the process of peacebuilding, enacting this is difficult and ongoing. Partners committed to equal collaboration in their work together function within systems that still reflect colonial relationships and ideologies.

In contrast, the AHR often spoke for the TRCL. When listserv participants questioned the Commission’s process and outcomes, Laura Young, AHR staff attorney, responded. Young’s message attacked participants personally, asserting that they were not “committed individuals” engaged in “hard, thoughtful work” in their listserv discussions. While defending the TRCL and AHR, Young failed to address participants’ substantive criticisms. Further, Young ignored how her participation in the Diaspora Project informed her criticisms or her defense of the Commission’s work. Young’s message was markedly different in tone and content than those previous to it; she criticized those questioning the Commission’s work. She was the first person to speak on behalf of the TRCL, reflecting an entitled leadership role, as if the Commissioners were unable to defend or speak for themselves. Her actions embodied postcolonial paternalism, treating the TRCL as weak and in need of protection from the American human rights organization.

The concept of agency is integral to understanding action, decision-making, and implementation in partnerships. The American-based Catalyst for Peace (CFP) and the Sierra Leonean Forum of Conscience (FOC) jointly administered Fambul Tok at the
program’s outset. FOC had a decade-long reputation as a human rights organization. The creation and implementation of Fambul Tok took its focus away from being a human rights watchdog in Sierra Leone. Ultimately, in 2009, the leaders of CFP and FOC decided to establish Fambul Tok as an independent nonprofit organization in its own right. This preserved the FOC’s integrity as a human rights organization, while allowing them to focus on developing the Fambul Tok program. The founder and head of FOC resigned his position there and took the role of Executive Director at Fambul Tok International. The head of CFP, who continues to head the foundation whose primary recipient is Fambul Tok, also serves as the President of Fambul Tok International. The new Fambul Tok is an international organization with corporate headquarters in the United States and program headquarters in Freetown, Sierra Leone. This new organizational arrangement highlights these leaders’ commitment to sharing, as fully and equally as possible, their expertise and leadership in partnering to organize peacebuilding.

Using a different approach to agency, AHR’s facilitating the diaspora aspect of the TRCL’s work constrained the commission’s attention and focus. In contrast to Fambul Tok, the AHR exerted a sense of ownership and control over the Commission’s work. The Diaspora Project was undertaken by a Minneapolis-based nonprofit organization focused on legal representation of refugees and immigrants, violence against women, and human rights education. Building on experience documenting human rights violations, AHR’s partnership with the LTRC was its first project in the area of a truth commission. Its participation was driven by its own human rights agenda rather than by interest in post-conflict peacebuilding: “The Advocates undertook the Diaspora Project
primarily because the group believed that Liberians outside of their home country were
important constituents of the LTRC process. In addition, the Advocates believed that
documenting violations related to flight, refugee life and immigrations could be an
important part of a truth commission process” (Young and Park, 2009, 344). The
organization had no real experience from which to assert the importance of diaspora
communities to the Commission. Further, their approach to the Diaspora Project was
legalistic and rights-based, reflecting the organization’s core issues rather than the needs
of post-conflict Liberians.

Within organizational communication, there has been consideration of the
dynamics that inhere in the partnerships of nonprofit organizations. Cross-border
nonprofit partnerships must reckon with organizational issues related to project
management, management structure, forms of governance, decision making, and
sustainability, as well as partnerships participants’ views of their “roles, responsibilities,
and authority” (Birrell & Hayes, 2004; Cobb & Rubin, 2006, 93). A postcolonial view of
these issues highlights how Western agendas and interests are often integrated into
organizational dimensions of these partnerships. Even as international partnerships
expand the scope and scale of nonprofit organizations, postcolonial theorizing reminds us
that such collaborations reflect prevailing power relations embedded in politics,
economics, and culture. The creation and maintenance of collaborative structures often
mirror these inequities and complicate the already complex governance of nonprofit
organizations (Lewis, 2005). The “cooperation and competition” that often characterize
partnerships between nonprofit organizations (Eisenberg & Eschenfelder, 2009, 928) are
mediated by the political and economic inequalities that stem from—and continue to
reflect—colonial systems of domination and distortion. Western organizations tend to have more monetary resources, access to communication networks, technical expertise, and thus status and power both within and without the partnership.

International organizing, whether on issues of peacebuilding, public health, environmental conservation, or sustainable development, often involves partnerships between Western organizations and organizations in the developing world. My field research shows that these international partnerships have postcolonial implications, and that issues of location, voice, and agency highlight how these partnerships reflect or resist the postcolonial condition. Though well intentioned, the collaboration between Advocates for Human Rights and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Liberia illustrates the prevalence of neocolonial attitudes, which often function as the default for international partnerships. While Fambul Tok provides positive examples of working to neutralize and transform relations between Western and West African nonprofits, their work also demonstrates the difficulty of doing so. Since partnerships are integral to nonprofit organizing—whether domestic or international—it is important to pay concomitant attention to how issues of culture and power are embedded in these organizational relationships.
References


In referencing Shome and Hegde (2002), I do not mean to assert that they are the center or circumference of postcolonial theorizing. Generally speaking, postcolonial approaches involve “a contestation of colonial domination and the legacies of colonialism” (Loomba, 1998, 16). Young delineated postcoloniality as attending to “the economic, material and cultural conditions that determine the global system in which the postcolonial nation is required to operate.” He also deploys postcolonialism as a critical term that “names a theoretical and political position which embodies an active concept of intervention within such oppressive circumstances” (Young, 2001, 57). A postcolonial approach attempts to get at the discursive, social, political, economic, spatial, historical, and organizational aspects of colonialism and its aftermath on places, people, and phenomena under study.

Scholars have approached the study of organizations from postcolonial perspectives. The foundational postcolonial theories of Said, Spivak, and Bhabha provide insight into the field of international management in an increasingly globalized world (Frenkel, 2008; Ozkazanc-Pan, 2008). Similarly, the collection edited by Prasad (2003) engages power and subjectivity in the organization using postcolonial perspectives, engaging discourse, interaction, and organizational practices. These scholars apply postcolonial theorizing to corporate, profit-driven settings. In contrast, my postcolonial approach engages processes that reflect forms of nonprofit organizing.

Attention to location, voice, and agency are not the exclusive purview of postcolonial theorizing. Organizational communication scholars have drawn attention to issues of location, voice, and agency in the context of critical and feminist theorizing (Ashcraft & Mumby 2004, Buzzanell, 1994; Ganesh, Zoller, & Cheney, 2005; Mumby & Stohl, 1996; Townsley, 2003; Trethewey, 1997). What distinguishes a postcolonial approach is its focus on understanding these issues as interpolated with larger discourses of politics, economics, and culture. In this position paper, I aim to enact postcolonial scholarship, defined by Broadfoot and Munshi (2007) “as a way of articulating resistance to dominant, Eurocentric perspectives that are seen as the norm,” which seeks to “bring the marginalized Other—the quintessential subaltern…—closer to the center of academic theorizing” (253-254).

Of course, not all partnerships involve other nonprofit organizations. Many nonprofit organizations partner with governmental organizations, as well as companies, communities, and individuals. However, my focus in this paper is on nonprofit organizations that partner internationally in their work.

Although the format of this position paper does not lend itself to an extensive discussion of location, voice, and agency, each of these terms has been richly conceptualized in relevant theorizing, which I can only allude to here.

Said (1995) drew attention to the politics of location in his foundational work on Orientalism. He focused on the discursive production of the Orient/als and its material effects, which inherently defined the West as superior. This discourse has remained so strong that even the impact of actual experiences with the Orient/als “fail to impact the view that it is a locale that requires Western attention, reconstruction, and redemption” (Said, 1995, 193, 206). Location is an area that continues to be discussed in research on globalization and postcolonial studies. Kraidy and Murphy (2008) offered the term translocalism to describe the simultaneously local and global aspects of power. Space
matters, argued Shome (2003), drawing attention to the political and power relations inherent in space.

5 Spivak (1988) is most well-known for her delineation of the concept of the subaltern, which refers to those who are not “merely” oppressed by hegemonic powers, but are so thoroughly outside the structures of hegemony that their voices cannot be recovered. The subaltern, according to Spivak, describes those people whose “languished forms of knowledge [are] so far removed and so violated by the machinery of imperialism that they cannot even be accessed, let alone subjugated” (Shome & Hegde, 2002, p. 252). Although she does not adopt a postcolonial framework, such a position resonates with Dempsey’s (2008) analysis of the demands for accountability in an INGO. Mumby and Stohl (1996) offered a critical approach to organizational communication. Their problematic of voice attends to the rules—both formal and hidden—that shape who can talk, about what, and in what ways.

6 Engaging the concept of agency, Fanon focused on the corporeality of colonialism and its material effects on people and places under colonial rule. He contributed to a postcolonial understanding of agency by articulating of colonialism as a physically aggressive act and its effects on the minds and bodies of the colonized. Fanon understood colonial dislocation and cultural alienation both linguistically and corporeally. Fanon highlighted the lack of agency that colonialism creates: “… completely dislocated, unable to be abroad with the other, the white man, who unmercifully imprisoned me, I took myself far off from my own presence, far indeed, and made myself an object” (p. 112). More recently, Kraidy and Murphy (2008) emphasized the importance of understanding global forces as integral to local subjectivities.