Backlash or reverb? What undoing binary understandings of 'opposing movements' can tell us about heteroactivism in Ghana

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In September 2019, the Ghanaian public caught wind of Ministry of Education guidelines on how to include comprehensive sexual education (CSE) in the national school curricula. This sparked a media firestorm. At the height of the controversy, political and religious leaders held that year’s Africa regional conference of the International Organization of the Family’s World Congress of Families in Accra, 31 October and 1 November 2019.

In light of these events, I wrote this piece to contribute to the growing literature on ‘heteroactivism,’ as new forms of ‘pro-family’ and ‘LGBT’ activism proliferate, shifting sociosexual landscapes across the globe. I study how Ghanaian political and religious elites use heteroactivism to shore up political capital, while tying post-colonial and anti-imperial nationalism to ‘compulsory heterosexuality’ (Gosine, 2009). The majority of work done on heteroactivism has concentrated on Australia, Canada, Ireland, the U.K. and the United States (Browne et al., 2018; Nash et al., 2019). Extending the focus to Ghana is an attempt to reveal how the call to substitute ‘homophobia’ with the new imperative of ‘inclusion’ is also observable in the heteroactivism seen in non-Western contexts, albeit shaped by national realities. As these shifting landscapes act as vectors for competing sexual politics, in this article I ask, what are the roles of religious (inter)national organizations that promote ‘religious freedoms’ on the one end, and (inter)national NGOs that promote ‘sexual/LGBTI rights’ on the other, in shaping debates about changing norms?

I offer up the notion of ‘reverb’ to draw attention to two sets of observable conundrums, as actors attempt to facilitate, resist and/or endure these rapid social changes: the first set is the apparent similarities between practices and political framings of both LGBT advocates and heteroactivists, who seek to achieve different political outcomes. The second are how seemingly diametrically opposed worlds can exist at the same time, and in close proximity: where in one milieu, actors vehemently present LGBT as a category which jeopardizes the country, and in another, actors curate safe and highly visible digital spaces that accommodate queer representations. My exploration of these themes is an attempt to move beyond common notions of ‘Africa’ as a ‘singular place’ (Williams, 2011) that is uniformly homophobic, while offering a more complex alternative to the binarity of the ‘opposing movements’ framing.

REFERENCES
Browne, K., Nash, C. J., & Gorman-Murray, A. 2018: Geographies of heteroactivism: Resisting sexual rights in the reconstitution of Irish

