

Embracing Failure: Improvisational Performance as Critical Intercultural Praxis

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This essay engages performance studies and critical intercultural communication. Specifically, I turn to the potentiality in improvisational performance and speculate on its efficacy as an embodied approach to intercultural communication. Assuming a performance perspective, I maintain culture is embodied. As a result, an improvisational performance seeks to dislodge the sedimentation of cultural scripts in our performance of self in mundane contexts. Furthermore, this essay embraces the prospect of failure arguing that improvisation provides a creative means by which we might envision and perform difference differently in response to failure. In so doing, this essay desires coalitional strategies that affirm difference.

Imagine the power of our actions if each one contained one hundred percent of our attention.
—T. Nhat Hanh

In this essay, I theorize a tie that binds performance studies to critical intercultural communication studies. More specifically, I explore the potentiality in a performance-infused critical intercultural praxis. This praxis is intended for use in mundane, everyday contexts and is informed by improvisational performance sensibilities that are born of the potentiality of failure (Muñoz, *Cruising*). Indeed, performing improvisationally requires attentiveness to failure in the process of becoming—wherein interlocutors meet a context on its fleeting terms of engagement, what Arnett, Fritz, and Bell describe as “intense attentiveness to the historical moment before us” (91). Similarly, Berry makes a compelling case for

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practicing mindfulness, “[T]he simple but challenging practice and process of becoming more present with/for others and ourselves, noticing as much as we possibly can in experience from one moment to the next, and working to interact more compassionately” (“Storying” 88). This intense, attentive, mindful orientation welcomes failure by marking the limits of our knowing, which inevitably ensures that communication remain open-ended, creative, and hopefully transformative (McIntosh and Hobson). To be clear, failure here refers to a means rather than to an end. That is, failure emerges as a critical point of departure. It demands that we move through the world with a sense of uncertainty, open to the possibility that the “narrative ground” on which we reside may very well be limited (Arnett, “Fulcrum”). Arnett defines narrative ground as “a dwelling that gives rise to a worldview” (111). In this way, failure marks the discursive limits of our narrative ground. As a result, failure offers us a choice.

Do we refuse to embrace the limits of our knowing and take failure as the end, thereby reifying a host of cultural systems and institutions performatively sedimented through our embodiment of them? Or do we embrace the uncertainty that is the result of failure, thereby desiring new modes of embodied cultural performance that might resist the sedimentation of cultural systems and institutions? If the latter is the goal, and I argue that it ought to be, then improvisational performance—a performative response to failure—emerges as a means by which we might navigate the terrain of uncertainty in intercultural contexts. Absolutely, this labor is every bit about meeting difference on its respective terms of engagement; it is about affirming otherness, and it is about realizing relationality in an era of neoliberalism defined in part through individualism (Dean). Arnett elaborates, “Individualism suggests a communicator’s attempt to stand above the community, the social environment, and existence in an effort to avoid the influence of others. . . . [It] stems from denial of narrative ground of another” (“Fulcrum” 114). To add, Jones and Calafell remind us, “[C]ritically minded people, scholars and citizens, must move beyond an individualized location, expanding their accountability from self, to others and self” (976). As I exhibit, improvised performance offers a means by which critical cultural scholars, artists, and activists might resist the neoliberal impulse toward individuation that Arnett and Jones and Calafell caution against. In this way, improvised performance as critical intercultural praxis emerges as an “ethic of everyday being” (McIntosh and Hobson 4).

In this essay, I argue that improvisational performance provides a creative means with which one can effectively destabilize the sedimentation of embodied hegemonic ideological structures in mundane contexts. Such a dislodging allows one to perform difference differently (Warren, “Performing”). Drawing on Arnett’s articulation of dialogic ethics (“Beyond”; “Fulcrum”), I exhibit how an improvisational sensibility uses “the weight of the historical moment against itself by refusing to resist what is offered” and instead working toward embracing the moment in all of its messiness, confusion, and sedimentation (Arnett, Fritz, and

Bell 91). An improvisational sensibility assumes a collaborative agreement wherein multiple players agree to basic terms of engagement (Quinn). I'm certain you will agree, communication is never so easy, nor agreeable. And this is precisely the tension I seek to engage. As a result of the discontent that binds communicative contexts — multiple *assumed* communicative expectancies clashing in a moment — I am writing directly to you, one component of a vast communicative assemblage. Our respective positionalities, our posture toward context, toward difference and otherness, determine in part the potentiality in a given communicative exchange. We can only ever control our own posture in a given intercultural context. And so I offer the following as an embodied modality for scholars, artists, activists, friends, and lovers laboring to affirm difference even when that desire is not reciprocal. Indeed, Arnett, Fritz, and Bell remind us, the goal is to privilege learning from the other, to attend to another's monologue, which reveals the narrative ground on which they reside. In this way, improvising through failure denotes a desire for learning, which Arnett, Fritz, and Bell describe as "the anchor in an era that rebels against universalistic foundations. Difference opens the door to learning. Dialogue opens the door to other persons and ideas" (81).

This essay is presented in four sections. First, I discuss dialogic communication, drawing on the works of Arnett ("Beyond"; "Fulcrum"), Arnett, Fritz, and Bell, and Schrag, who provide the theoretical ground from which to grasp the potentiality in a fleeting communicative context. Second, I explore the intersection of critical intercultural communication and performance studies. This intersection of thought and practice highlights the ways in which we perform and embody culture. Third, I turn to improvisational performance with particular attention paid to the potentiality of *failure* as an ontological posture as articulated by critical cultural scholars McIntosh and Hobson. And fourth, I tie the larger threads of the essay together gesturing at the potentiality in an embodied critical intercultural praxis that holds improvisational performance at its core.

The Praxis-Oriented Self in Dialogue

Dialogue has long been a source of interest to communication scholars and philosophers. Assuming a critical and performative positioning, I maintain dialogue to be an embodied means of negotiating difference (Witteborn). In this way, dialogue is an intercultural interaction. And that culture is "continuously under (re)construction and (re)negotiation" suggests that dialogue is an equally incomplete cultural project (Ganesh and Holmes 82). Taking the capoeira dance-fight-game as metaphor, MacLennan describes dialogue, "*It is a contradiction: unity in opposition, collaboration through conflict and competition*" (147). Dialogic labor is thus a relational labor desired (and hopefully realized) through communication.

Arnett fleshes out the intersubjective labor necessary for dialogic communication by offering three focus points that move us toward dialogue: (1) alterity,

(2) communicative praxis, and (3) existential servanthood (“Fulcrum”). Taken together, these focus points reveal the difficulty in realizing dialogic communication that affirms difference. Arnett warns of the importance of this labor: “If dialogue is to assist the human condition, we must learn to participate with and in worldviews in collision” (122). I will address each of these focus points in turn.

First, alterity (otherness). Drawing on Levinasian philosophy, Arnett illustrates the vastness of dialogue, a “conversation bigger than those immediately involved in the discourse” (“Beyond” 152). As a result, alterity “begins before the discourse begins” (Arnett, “Fulcrum” 119). It begins with monologue—one’s (and another’s) respective narrative ground that gives rise to subjectivity. In this regard, difference “does not come from the person, but from the narrative ground upon which that person stands” (“Fulcrum” 109). Said differently, negotiating difference requires wrestling with multiple monologues: one’s own and that of another and of another and so on (Witteborn). The first “principle” toward dialogue is a “monologic demand” (Arnett, “Fulcrum” 118). That is, to recognize that (a) one’s sense of self is derivative of one’s narrative ground and (b) affirmation is the result of having one’s narrative ground acknowledged on its own terms. Arnett adds, “Monologue is the shadow that demands acknowledgement of one’s worldview in order for the possibility of dialogue to emerge” (“Fulcrum” 119). And so, dialogue begins with demanding that one’s own monologue be affirmed *while* wrestling with the recognition that alterity demands the same of another. Thus, the monologic demand reveals the intersubjectivity of alterity. In this regard, alterity, the monologic demand, is a pedagogical imperative that requires a desire to learn from the other.

Second, communicative praxis. Drawing on Schrag’s philosophy of subjectivity, Arnett reminds us, “[W]e are not in control of the communication—we are participants in the communication” (“Fulcrum” 120). Thus, the goal is to be present in the moment, open to potentiality in the moment of its becoming, learning from alterity, refusing to know difference (of self and of other) with any certainty. In this way, dialogue can be better described as “monologue that wrestles with openness” (“Fulcrum” 120). For Schrag, the “self” is an entity constituted within a space of communicative praxis. That is, the self constitutes itself within and gains its expression and texture from and through “the interplay of thought, language, and action . . . contextualized in a world” (6). Pensoneau-Conway and Toyosaki describe the foundation of a praxis-oriented self: “We are constituted through our embodiment, which is a response to others with whom we are intersubjective coemergents” (384). For Schrag, the subject is de-centered in the sense that they are never an entity solely alone but rather always already intersubjectively constituted. The de-centered subject that emerges in the space of communicative praxis is constituted through *temporality*, *multiplicity*, and *embodiment*. First, the de-centered subject thrives in a *living present* (temporality), which is informed by “a past projecting into a future. As such it is the enabling of repetition and anticipation,

preservation and creation, conservation and invention” (Schrag 146). In this way, the embodiment of culture can be thought of in terms of temporal arrangements that inform the effecting performance of an intercultural engagement.

In their compelling bid to historicize experience, Berry and Warren write,

An experience is always spatiotemporally rooted in (or informed by) given locations (physical, emotional, thoughtful contexts), subject to divergent meanings, and is necessarily subject to change over time as reflection (and further reflection) changes *what* happened more and more toward *how* what happened made me who I am. (601)

Berry and Warren encourage us to consider the ways in which our lived experiences inform who we are based on a number of intersectional identity vectors and their respective attending histories. Indeed, their introspective call gestures at an alternative rendering of time—time as embodied and processed as opposed to measured or possessed.

Sekimoto explores the co-constitutive relationship between temporality and subjectivity writing, “Time establishes—or mediates—the relations between the perceptual subject and the world at large” (237). Similarly, Bruneau argues, “All communicative behavior has an underlying temporality, as time in its many forms is central to human beings and their lives” (“Chronemics” 90). In this regard, time is not a thing that is measured (e.g., “What time is *it*?”), but rather a phenomenon realized through change; or, in Bruneau’s astute wording, “time is not a constant,” it refers to the process of perpetual change (“Theoretical” 84). From an intercultural perspective, each culture (including all of the many intersectional layers therein) orient to time differently and these differences are complex (Bruneau, “Time”). As a result, I conceptualize time as “an embodied intersectional through line” that highlights relational ways people experience privilege and disadvantage simultaneously (LeMaster 164). Explicating the idea of “temporal (un)certainty,” I show how normative temporal embodiments (e.g., marrying at a “right” age, etc.) work in service to securing the Nation’s stability through cultural expectancies. Simply put, many folks are denied the seemingly-neutral option of planning for a future. As a result, different people orient to—embody—time differently. Returning to Schrag, the living present shows us that subjectivity is informed not explicitly by identity but additionally by temporal demands, which are sedimented through embodiment. This sedimentation of time, coupled with identity, propels our movement toward a future in the present.

Schrag adds that the de-centered subject is concurrently *multiple* and *embodied*. The temporality of the living present infers a multiply complex subject that can never be understood as a lone entity. Rather, they are always already constituted by multiple trajectories intersecting through one’s living present. To complicate this just slightly, we must consider affect; that is, the “ability to affect and be affected” (Massumi xvii). Like time, affect is an embodied modality that

gestures at the emotive and corporeal feeling of place—do you feel as if you belong? How do you come to know this? Muñoz explores this quandary as “brown feeling,” a racial performativity that he describes as an “ethics of the self that is utilized and deployed by people of color and other minoritarian subjects who don’t feel quite right within the protocols of normative affect and comportment” (“Feeling” 676). Muñoz exhibits how feeling brown as a depressive state is anything but depressive. Rather, feeling brown is a mechanism born of survival that recognizes the material realities of living within a white supremacist culture as a body of color. In sum, temporality, multiplicity, and embodiment collaboratively constitute the praxis-oriented self. Whether conscious or not, we make choices to perform our most productive selves in the unfolding, ephemeral living present.

Third, existential servanthood. Taking the metaphor of servitude, Arnett writes, “Existential servanthood requires one to take existence on its own terms” (“Fulcrum” 121). That is, to accept one’s own positionality, much like that which is demanded of a servant. As a critically oriented scholar, I would be remiss to not highlight the problematic mechanism inherent in this rendering, existential as it may be: that servitude is every bit about exploitation of power. Critique notwithstanding, Arnett’s existential argument suggests attentiveness to the moment as an imperative with particular attention paid to meeting alterity on its own terms, without imposing one’s own narrative ground. That is, the goal is to listen and to learn from the moment. “It is a kind of performance that resists conclusions, it is intensely committed to keeping the dialogue . . . open and ongoing” (Conquer-good, “Performing” 9). In this regard, I would like to suggest a slight shift in discourse from that of *existential servanthood* to that of *mindfulness* (Berry, “Seeking”).

To take existence on its own terms requires attentiveness to the context; that is, to be mindful of the context in its perpetual becoming. Nhat Hanh defines mindfulness as “the energy of attention. It is the capacity in each of us to be present one hundred percent to what is happening within and around us” (“Power” 42). To be mindful is to be present, taking existence on its own terms, without imposing judgment. Berry elaborates from his own lived experience,

I practice relating mindfully to reflexive struggle by abiding in ways that are more patient and okay with not knowing for sure, or not knowing at all. I seek useful answers, but I search for them in ways that are more open and at ease, and less protective and urgent. (“Seeking” 22)

In this regard, Berry describes a communicative posture similar to that theorized by Arnett wherein the “reflexive struggle” refers to a power-laden tension between self and other and of being receptive to the moment as opposed to imposing on the moment. Nhat Hanh elaborates:

The other person may say things that are full of wrong perceptions, bitterness, accusation, and blaming. If we don’t practice mindfulness, their words will set

off irritation, judgment, and anger in us, and we will lose our capacity to listen compassionately. When irritation or anger arises, we lose our capacity to listen. (“Communicating” 43)

To be clear, mindfulness does not operate alone. “Mindlessness and mindfulness dwell as twin impulses present in communication and communicators. Each is not possible without the other” (Berry, “Storying” 88). Elsewhere I describe a mindful approach to communication as an intentional, “acquired sensibility” (LeMaster 70) that, in Berry’s words, resists the “[j]udgment, stereotypes, and cultural scripts[that] comprise mindlessness” (“Storying” 89). He continues, “Persons interact through overly strict rules and automatic or habitual behaviors. Doing so often closes persons to possibilities for living and learning” (“Storying” 89). In short, a mindless approach to communication forecloses on the potentiality of the ephemeral moment preferring to slip into normative cultural scripts that can reify the status quo. Mindful labor is not easy. It requires recognizing “the individual communicative agent is not in control, but nevertheless responsible” (Arnett, “Fulcrum” 120). Indeed, a mindful approach requires reflexivity. Critical intercultural communication scholars have crafted some rather insightful work highlighting the importance of what Jones calls “intersectional reflexivity” (“Putting”; “Queering”; see also Jones & Calafell) and what Calafell characterizes as a practice of “vulnerability, love, and care that allows us not only to see our reflection in the ‘I’, but also in a ‘we’ that may be based in an Otherness that is not our own” (“(I)dentities” 11).

For Jones intersectional reflexivity “requires one to acknowledge one’s intersecting identities, both marginalized and privileged, and then employ self-reflexivity, which moves one beyond self-reflection to the often uncomfortable level of self-implication” (“Putting” 122). Jones clarifies, “Self-implication can include acknowledging our privileged position and/or how we perpetuate racist, classist, or sexist ideologies even as we work to subvert them” (“Queering” 767). Indeed, self-implication welcomes the charge of being wrong with a desire for change; it is an exercise in accountability with pointed attention given to the pervasive flows of power in culture.

In total, dialogue is realized through three points: (1) alterity, (2) communicative praxis, and (3) reflexive mindfulness. For dialogue to take root, we must acknowledge the presence and prevalence of our own narrative ground and that of another. Even though each entity embodies a different narrative ground, they derive meaning in relation to one another. As a result, our sense of self is realized in the space of communicative praxis where we gain subjective meaning through affects, temporalities, and corporeality emerging in a given context. That our subjectivity is dependent upon alterity, our sense of self is better described as *intersubjective*, a co-constitutive sense of self dependent upon otherness. Finally, recognizing the co-constitutive relationship between self and other we are present to *an* other, desiring to be present, mindful, and reflexive. In essence, the moment is

all we have. Thus, each fleeting moment holds within it the capacity to collaboratively and relationally shift communicative norms that sustain power and privilege. With that, we turn now to the performance of culture.

Performing Culture, Embodying Ideology

Recent scholarship in critical intercultural communication reflects what can be characterized as a turn to performance (Halualani and Nakayama). Within intercultural communication, performance emerges as an iteration within the “methodological vastness” that comprises the “constellation” of intercultural communication research, thought, and praxis (Willink et al). Conquergood explains, performance “takes as both its subject matter and method the experiencing body situated in time, place, and history” (“Rethinking” 187). Pineau adds, performance “requires performers to think about how and why their bodies are behaving in ways that they are” (“Critical” 51). In this regard, a performance approach is a sensuous way of knowing that muddies the Cartesian mind/body split (Conquergood, “Rethinking”). Responding to the performance turn, critical intercultural communication researchers have embraced and crafted “theories in the flesh” for their analyses (Moraga and Anzaldúa 23; see, for instance, Calafell and Moreman; Eguchi; Ghabra; Gutierrez-Perez; Moreman). This shift has led to interesting, performative, experimental, and creative interrogations of culture. A few examples will illustrate.

Calafell explores the potentiality in the trope of monstrosity as a queer woman of color through performative writing (*Monstrosity*). Through lived experience and popular cultural representation Calafell troubles normative renderings of monstrosity as a cultural mechanism that secures hegemonic power relations. In another monograph, Calafell theorizes the performance of everyday in the context of Latina/o performance of identity effectively “reclaiming identity as a fruitful site of knowledge” (*Latina/o* 5). In a collaborative effort, Calafell and Moreman co-edited a special issue of *Text and Performance Quarterly* exploring Latina/o performativities. This important collection includes autoethnographic performances of self as well as interrogations of performance of identity. In the introduction to their special issue, Calafell and Moreman note the institutional limitations of writing through lived experience as minoritarian subjects. As a result, they challenge scholars to affirm stories “that do not repeat the stylizations of dominant discourse[, which] get coded as narcissistic because they do not reify those who benefit from dominant narratives” (125).

In addition, Johnson, Rich, and Cargile explore the performance of white racism in college classrooms. They offer a typology derived of the performance of resistance to critical race pedagogy by white students for instructors seeking means by which to engage such difficult conversations. Elsewhere, Esquibel offers a critical performance ethnography of US Midwestern sundown towns, “the

idea that people of color were only allowed in town during the day and had to leave by dusk" (1). Turning to the oral histories of an elder white man and an elder Black man, Esquibel argues attending to embodied narratives offers insight for intervention within the sedimentation of cultural belief. Turning inward, Johnson critically and autoethnographically interrogates their experience as a video vixen. Telling and re-telling their story through all of its problematics and productivities, Johnson reflexively interrogates ways in which power and culture work to construct our experiences. Considering staged performance, Powell unpacks his own performance of autoethnography as a Black man. Taking the Jena Six incident as his point of departure, Powell explores lynching as a theatrical performance of cultural power that is performatively linked to Black masculinity. These seemingly disparate examples of performance-infused critical/cultural labor reveal in McIntosh and Hobson's words, "Performance is embedded in cultural norms, and yet, through performance, we often aim to critique the cultural systems of which we are apart. Performance is one avenue for shedding light on these cultural systems" (2). It is in this vein of performance-infused critical intercultural communication that I explore improvisational performance. But first, the task at hand includes elucidating the link between culture and/as performance, which echoes the dialogic labor outlined earlier.

Freeman reminds us that our pasts cannot be unknown, and they certainly do not exist external to our bodies; rather, we are performative sedimentations of our respective and intersecting temporalities who perform our pasts, presents, and futures; in short, "time binds" to and informs our mundane performances (3). Temporalities, so conceived, are enfolded and performative accomplishments in which "naked flesh is bound into socially meaningful embodiment[s] through temporal regulation[s]" (3). In a similar way, McLaren offers "enfleshment of meaning," which refers to the "mutually constitutive enfolding of social structure and desire; that is, the dialectical relationship between the material organization of interiority and the cultural modes of materiality we inhabit subjectively" (*Schooling* 273-4). To reiterate an earlier sentiment through Schrag and Arnett, subjectivity is constituted in the space of communicative praxis where we gain bodily meaning through affects, temporalities, and the immediate context. To attend to enfleshment is to attend to the physical ways that individuals navigate ideological structures in the present based on their unique histories with various ideological structures.

McLaren elaborates, "Ideology is not realized solely through the discursive meditations of the sociocultural order but through the enfleshment of unequal relationships of power; it is manifested intercorporeally through the actualization of the flesh and embedded in incarnate experience" ("Schooling" 153). Drawing on McLaren's work, Pineau defines enfleshment as "the process through which a body acquires certain habits over an extended period of time. These habits become sedimented such that they appear to ourselves and to others as if they were

natural rather than culturally constructed” (“Critical” 44). Said differently, en-fleshment is a materialization of performativity. Pineau is clear that we are not bound to our immediate en-fleshment and that we are capable of “refleshment” or the ability to alter our performative behaviors in new and innovative ways (“Critical” 44). I would add that refleshment occurs as we interact with our surrounding socio-cultural worlds and is thus an ongoing performative accomplishment itself.

Similarly, Warren writes, “The body performs as a site marked by political, ideological, and historical inscription” (“Body” 257). Our mundane cultural performances are comprised, at least in part, of reiterations of multiple, intersecting cultural ideologies including white supremacy, capitalism, heteronormativity, neoliberalism, cis-sexism, and dis/ableism, for instance (McIntosh and Hobson). Automatic cultural engagements are pre-scripted, mindless enactments of culture (Berry, “Storying”). That is, mundane performances of self can draw on performatively constituted cultural scripts imbued with their attending ideology/ies. To be clear, my intent is not to erase nor evade the very real material effects of institutionalized oppression including, for instance, homelessness, abuse, murder, starvation, lack of access to healthcare, and/or any other oppressive machination. Rather, I am interested in enactments of systemic oppression as they manifest in the ephemeral mundane everyday, often leading to and perpetuating systemic oppressions. Indeed, seemingly-innocuous mundane interactions are what undergird and maintain systemic oppression including its concomitant material effects “whether intentional or unintentional” (Sue 5; see also Holling, Moon, and Nevis). That the offending party is more often than not unaware of their slight, intervening in a moment’s becoming can be difficult, though not impossible. We, in essence, have the opportunity to repeat and reify oppressive cultural scripts while mindfully engaging those same oppressive scripts in slightly different ways with a desire to transform them in future, similar utterances. However, because our corporeal presence is pre-determined via performativity—understood through the sedimentation of cultural scripts and embodied ideological structures—performing culture differently is admittedly difficult (Warren “Performing”). In achieving such a feat, we turn to improvisational performance as a “reflexive engagement” that frames failure as a productive means by which to “craft [...] new solutions to the ideological problems of misogyny, sexism, racism, classism, heterosexism, and homophobia” (McIntosh and Hobson 2).

Improvisational Performance and Critical Intercultural Praxis

We have established thus far that our living present is the materialization of cultural performativity. As such, intercultural interactions that may feel “normal, neutral, natural, or necessary” are anything but (Gingrich-Philbrook 454). Rather, intercultural interactions unfold in relation to sedimented, memorized, and embodied ideological scripts; scripts that are often informed through normative

and dominant cultural channels. Bateson describes the sedimentation, “What we call the familiar is built up in layers to a structure known so deeply that it is taken for granted and virtually impossible to observe without the help of contrast” (31). Developing what Chávez characterizes as “queer intercultural studies” (83), I posit that developments in what queer theorists call “queer failure” provide a productive means of shifting the sedimentation of cultural scripts so as to envision a contrast to normativity’s grasp (Halberstam, *Queer*; Muñoz, *Cruising*). Queer failure highlights the normative ways in which culture is patterned thereby privileging some embodiments and subjectivities over others.

For instance, that culture is constituted by and through heteronormativity suggests that I, a queer subject, will always already inevitably fail at that which is normatively demanded of me (e.g., heteronormative reproduction). In this way, failure is understood as ontological; it is an embodied realization of one’s out-of-placeness in culture (LeMaster). Similarly, folks of color will be understood as failures in a white supremacist culture, folks with physical and/or cognitive disabilities will be framed as failures when they are unable to meet normative ability-based demands, and so on. Attending to failure, thus, requires attending to the ways in which folks perform survival amidst normative cultural demands. In this regard, failure provides a productive ground from which to trace the contours of normative cultural relations so as to envision “dialogic possibilities” secured through an improvisational sensibility (McIntosh and Hobson 19).

Conquergood suggests “play” as a performative cultural means by which we might envision and enact cultural transformation. For Conquergood, play is “linked to improvisation,” which can help us understand and expound upon the concurrent reiterative and resistant components of culture in the process of its own becoming (“Poetics” 83). Bateson adds, “The ability to recognize any situation as representing both continuity and change makes it possible to play that double recognition in tune with changing needs” (93). That is, improvisational performance as play reveals the potentiality in a given moment—that each of our micro-performances of self will inevitably reify and/or challenge cultural sedimentation. Pineau adds, “Performative play privileges full body involvement—literally, learning from the inside—combined with keen self-reflection on the nature and implications of one’s actions” (“Teaching” 14). Play is intentional and as such holds within it the capacity for transformation by playing with sedimented cultural scripts.

Rancière writes on the core impact of improvisation, “Learning to improvise [is] first of all *learning to overcome oneself*, to overcome the pride that disguises itself as humility as an excuse for one’s incapacity to speak in front of others—that is to say, one’s refusal to submit oneself to their judgment” (42). A critical intercultural praxis infused with an improvisational sensibility opens oneself up to judgment—judgment in terms of critical implication and of being held accountable for one’s maintenance of systemic oppression in mundane contexts. It is a reflexive exercise

that “cuts to the bone. It implicates you. Reflexivity is uncomfortable because it forces you to acknowledge that you are complicit in the perpetuation of oppression” (Jones, “Putting” 124). Thus, in Conquergood’s words, I want to “seize the opportunity and play the moment” while remaining reflexive of the ways in which one’s cultural positioning and living present delimits *and* actualizes cultural performances of self with a critical difference (“Poetics” 82).

That we communicate ideologies through our embodiment of them suggests that we can intervene in their reiterative expectancies through mundane performative enactments. Drawing on developments in woman of color feminisms and coalition building, McIntosh and Hobson offer an important explication of “reflexive engagement” or the critical embodiment of reflexivity in everyday life. They suggest three attributes of reflexive engagement: embodiment, failure, and coalition building. In short, these attributes serve as anchors informing the critical manifestation of reflexivity in everyday contexts. The subject affirms their body (and another’s) in space, place, and time, cognizant of the flows of power that privilege particular embodiments and subjectivities over others while laboring toward coalition. With coalition as the goal and reflexivity at the heart, we are equipped and encouraged to stumble through and fail at the messiness that is dialoguing through difference because ultimately we accept that failure is a point of departure as opposed to a point of foreclosure. McIntosh and Hobson elaborate, coalitional labor includes

acknowledging failure through reflexivity, opening dialogue within our failures and making alliance work productive because *of* our failures. Certainly, reflexivity is possible without failure. The relational truth of culture projects the reality of failure within and through relational difference. Thus to truly embody the ethics of reflexivity we must come to see how to negotiate failure reflexively. (20)

In this way, failure is productive and absolutely necessary for cultural transformation. If for no other reason, failure reveals the contours of normative cultural performance, which effectively reveals an infinite number of possible divergent cultural performances.

As we explored through Arnett, differential narrative grounds inform respective communicative means (“Fulcrum”). As a result, dialogue is the result of competing monologues striving for affirmation. In working toward coalition, our respective narrative grounds will inevitably cloud the potential for openness in intercultural interactions. In short, “relational failures are inevitable” (McIntosh and Hobson 4). But with coalition as the goal and reflexivity and mindfulness in hand, “We are called to join in a dance whose steps must be learned along the way, so it is important to attend and respond. Even in uncertainty, we are responsible for our steps” (Bateson 10). Improvisational performance is such a dance; it “engage[s] the body as a pedagogical site that breeds possibility for educational

and social change” (Warren, “Body” 258). That ideologies are embodied and sedimented through our enactment of them suggests that change requires a degree of playfulness such that we can perform them with a critical difference. Indeed, we cannot escape ideologies’ discursive grasp in total as it performatively informs our relative performances of/with self and/as Other.

According to Quinn, improvisational performance is informed by a “yes and . . .” principle in addition to collaborative agreement between cultural performers. Quinn describes the “yes and . . .” principle: “When one player makes a statement, the next player is obligated to validate that statement by agreeing to it and then adding an additional piece of information to it” (3). The larger intent is to build upon the unfolding discourse by adding “information in the form of a detail, feeling, or consequence” (Quinn 3). Quinn continues, “While saying ‘no’ stops the action through denial and saying ‘yes but . . .’ stops the action through qualification, saying ‘yes and . . .’ works to advance the action with full cooperation through building onto a scene partner’s creation” (3; see also Park-Fuller and Pelias). In this way, the “yes” can be used to signal the presence and prevalence of embodied ideology while the “and” seeks to foster and sustain a critical engagement with the problematics of enacting a particular ideological script.

Critical intercultural improvisational performance involves more than affirmation (yes) and asking for further elaboration (and). Indeed, I argue that deploying improvisational performance as critical intercultural praxis necessarily involves turning to and drawing upon lived experience, including specifically, one’s negotiation with the privilege-disadvantage dialectic (Martin and Nakayama, “Thinking”, Martin and Nakayama, “Intercultural”). In this way, an improvisational critical intercultural praxis can be conceptualized as a performance of self that negotiates mundane moments informed by lived experiences as they are intentionally mediated by concurrent privilege and disadvantage in relation to others. In short, how we respond in/to a fleeting moment matters.

Schrag might frame these fleeting choices as a “fitting response” (207). A fitting response, according to Schrag, “grasps the moment as the proper time for deliberation and action” (207). Because we are intersubjectively co-constituted, the fitting response is necessarily informed by and informing the living present between self and other. Schrag adds, “The response is a *response to* the attitudes, behavior patterns, meaning-formations, and moral assessments that define the space shared by the rhetor and the interlocutor, the self and the other” (207). Critical intercultural subjectivity is actively present in the interstitial space that co-constitutes self and other enacting a fitting response that will enable self and other to be and become what they desire or, at the least, to articulate meaning to the other in a fleeting moment. To reiterate an earlier point, not all players will be amenable to improvisational performance in everyday life. That is, while staged improvisational performance assumes collaborative agreement as detailed by Quinn, improvisational performance as critical intercultural praxis refers to an

embodied posture, an approach to dialogue. Bateson writes, “Each person is calibrated by experience, almost like a measuring instrument for difference, so discomfort is informative and offers a starting point for new understanding” (17). However, not all persons are in an adequate space in which to embrace such uncertain, unscripted means no matter how pedagogically promising. Assuming a mindful approach, we recognize that this is an inherent limitation, a fact; a reflection of our own privileged location as scholars who spend our lives studying affirming communicative means with desired ends. That said, improvisational performance functions as a life-long pedagogical journey: “Lessons too complex to grasp in a single occurrence spiral past again and again, small examples gradually revealing greater and greater implications” (Bateson 31). And so, I draw on improvisational performance time and again through each difficult conversation I have with my religious and politically conservative family, with each cisgender person who cannot make sense of my transgender body or that of my transgender wife’s body, and with each member of the support group I attend who draws on racist scripts to assuage their own sense of internalized hate. In this way, a critical intercultural improvisational performance draws on a fitting response that is reflexively resistant to oppressive systems but that is open to failure time and time and time again.

In McIntosh and Hobson’s words, reflexive improvisational performance “acknowledges that we cannot control our limits or failures within relations with others, which is why we must become comfortable in the reflexive improvisation through them” (10). That is, we cannot control nor deny our privilege and/or disadvantage in a given context. We can however denote those privileges and disadvantages, demark the embodied and cultural means by which they are reified and sedimented, and intentionally seek to fail those machinations so as to realize an improvised performance of self in context that desires alliance through affirming difference. The goal for such an improvisational performance isn’t criticism itself. Rather, the goal is relational while the cultural criticism emerges as a potential effect. Indeed, as Uçok-Sayrak writes in their important work on maintaining otherness *as* a critical intercultural posture, “It is only when the self is put into question, its egoism turned over, that the Other is welcomed, and the ethical relation emerges” (127). Critical intercultural performances infused with an improvisational sensibility desire to be with others in an ethical and compassionate manner wherein relational privilege and disadvantage are reflexively accounted for as a contextual cultural performance unfolds in its own becoming. In this way, an improvisational sensibility functions as a critical ontology of becoming in intercultural contexts.

As a critical ontology of becoming in intercultural contexts, improvisation functions as a narrative ground from which we engage self and/as Other. Warren proposes a theory of difference *as* an ontological state where ontology, understood through Gilles Deleuze and Judith Butler, is “essentially, a repetition of

difference—that is, ontology is a transformative and fluid state, characterized by repetitive acts that are always unique, even if they are historically informed repetitions” (“Performing” 296-297). In this framework, every communicative utterance, though historically repetitive and thus culturally articulate in a given moment, is innovative. In Bateson’s prophetic words, “one can learn from each return” (44). For example, a racist sign is made meaningful precisely because of its historical, repetitive use, including the repetitive power relations that maintain its cultural significance. Nonetheless, each utterance of the racist sign, Warren argues, is unique in its particular moment (“Performing”). Similarly, our performance of self is a perpetual performative accomplishment, unique in each of its continuous iterations. This understanding of difference “takes into careful account the effects of difference’s production” and of our becoming in each fleeting moment (Warren, “Performing” 291).

As researchers, this understanding of difference—from one moment to the next—asks that we attend to our role in the perpetual constitution of self and/as Other in fleeting contexts. Warren adds, “We can respecify how, in communicative interaction, difference is produced and conceptualized. By embracing difference and understanding the repetition of difference as the ontological status of humanity, we might be able to refigure what we mean when we discuss who we are and how we understand our relationships with each other” (“Performing” 304). Improvisation as the foundation for critical intercultural praxis points to an ontological posture wherein researcher, activist, artist, pedagogue understand the space of communicative praxis, where subjectivity is constituted, as ripe with potentiality precisely because of the deliberate uncertainty that accompanies improvised performance. As each utterance gives way to the next, we are provided opportunities for improvised intervention.

Improvisational sensibilities highlight what is possible (sedimented ideology) while playfully working to envision something other: an improvised alternative, a potentiality (Muñoz, *Cruising*). Rancière writes, “In the act of speaking, man [*sic*] doesn’t transmit his [*sic*] knowledge, he [*sic*] makes poetry; he [*sic*] translates and invites others to do the same. He [*sic*] communicates as an *artisan*: as a person who handles words like tools” (65). The sentiment is clear: whether we recognize it or not, our communicative unfolding is an intentional act, a series of performatively rendered communicative choices setting the performative limits of discursive and material existence. An improvisational sensibility thus highlights the capacity that we have as cultural performers in actively maintaining, or challenging, our cultural positionings regardless of the normative communicative expectancies we too often fail to recognize until it is too late. That is, improvisational performance opens up the ontological terrain to consider the potentiality in not knowing how the “scene will unfold” (McIntosh and Hobson 10). It accomplishes this by helping us to recognize that there is always already an alternative route; a route that is unpaved and uncertain, often scary. Though, with reflexivity as our navigation

instrument and coalition as our goal, we are equipped to improvisationally traverse even the most uncertain of intercultural terrain.

The open-endedness of such an enterprise is precisely the goal for a critical intercultural praxis infused with an improvisational sensibility. Such labor necessarily requires, at least in part, forgetting. “Forgetting,” Halberstam writes, “allows for a release from the weight of the past and the menace of the future” (*Queer* 83). Said differently, forgetting as an improvised mode requires learning to recognize the embodied repetition of hegemonic cultural scripts while consciously working to unlearn them so as to imagine the potentiality in alternative utterances and articulations. In terms of the past, forgetting signals a need to recognize that which we know through both our minds *and* our bodies. In terms of the future, forgetting signals a need to embrace uncertainty: the uncertainty that accompanies fleeting intercultural contexts and the uncertainty in being wrong and desiring to be held accountable accordingly. In recalling Rancière, forgetting signals the process of “*learning to overcome oneself*,” it opens oneself up to the vulnerability of simply not knowing how to move forward, but laboring to do so not with the goal of self-preservation but of maintaining, in Levinas’ words, “absolute otherness” (39).

Levinas is clear on the importance of mundane communicative interactions: “The *relation* between the same and the other—upon which we seem to impose such extraordinary conditions—is language” (39). Thus, forgetting does not refer to demands to forget about one’s oppressive past (or present) evidenced in such articulations as “slavery was so long ago,” or “just get over it,” or “you’re so sensitive, let it go.” Rather, forgetting understood here is much more about recognizing, and then reflexively forgetting, the performatively sedimented cultural scripts that seek to inform, and thus limit, the potentiality in interacting with difference in a given intercultural context through communication (e.g., forgetting the script, “slavery was so long ago,” so that we might envision an alternative response: “in what ways does slavery persist today”). Bateson considers, “Trusted habits of attention and perception may be acting as blinders. Resources we have relied on to shape our lives may turn out to be dangerous addictions or spin into new shapes as the earliest versions of emerging patterns” (8). As such, forgetting, in this critical register, opens one up “to a new way of being” (Halberstam, *Gaga* 129). In the end, the spirit of improvisational performance can be useful in articulating the intentional embodiment of culture as a critical posture that desires coalition by challenging us to position ourselves more actively in the moment of our becoming in relation with others.

Admittedly, improvised performance does not lead to automatic success. However, as McIntosh and Hobson remind us, “Embracing failure does not mean we accept it without change. Failure alone is hurtful and unreflexive. Reflexive failure presses us to recognize that we will fail” (19). Indeed, we know that failure is inevitable in intercultural engagements. But we also know that failure can be

productive, and it certainly is in the case of improvised critical intercultural praxis, especially when those failures implicate us and highlight our active role in maintaining or changing sedimented ideologies. To be clear, we cannot know with any certainty “whether a given improvisation will stand as a work of art or be rejected as an aberration” (Bateson 8). As such, we must be open to failure in its many forms. It is only through failure that we are offered an opportunity to realize change. To stop at failure or to refuse the potentiality in failure merely “continues the separation” that disallows coalition and affirmation of difference to manifest (McIntosh and Hobson 20).

Closing Remarks

Performing critical intercultural labor with an improvisational sensibility requires critical openness that desires change through self-implicature. It is a reflexive critical cultural praxis that critiques culture through embodiment (Warren, “Body”). In everyday interactions, the improvisational impulse is one that desires a dialogic interaction that is sustained at the level of the ideological. Doing so ensures that critical discourse does not slip into the neoliberal trap of individualizing oppression. We absolutely must sustain critical cultural dialogues at the level of the ideological. This includes attending to the ways in which we embody ideologies and oppressive systems as well as the ways we are concurrently privileged and disadvantaged by them. Of course, shifting discourse is difficult. After all, our mindless responses and defenses are pre-scripted and memorized. Racist, heteronormative, cissexist, dis/ableist, and other intersecting oppressive scripts were/are drafted and perfected and developed over long periods of time and sedimented through our concomitant embodiment of them. Thus, responding to charges of racism, sexism, heteronormativity, transphobia, dis/ableism with a “yes and . . .” response will be necessarily difficult.

Like improvisational performance, this work requires intentional daily rehearsal (e.g., mundane intercultural contexts) and a dedication to process. Improvisational performance requires being open to the unknown while guided by a desire to change the social. To reiterate, improvisational performance requires a degree of critical openness. While improvisation takes a “yes and . . .” approach, I want to be clear that I believe that we can say “no” to oppression. Indeed, Rancière warns “above all” to avoid and resist the “improvisations” of those whose performative sedimentations are “formed by chance or routine” (121). That is, of those whose mundane utterances draw on mindless registers, unawares of the cultural impact that one might have on a particular context, to a particular person, or in service to a particular ideological structure or institution. Anchoring our improvisational performance in our own simultaneous embodiment of privilege and disadvantage will help to guide us when we say “yes and . . .” and when we need to say “no.” For instance, I say “yes and . . .” with the intent of changing my own

problematic embodiment of competing ideologies. The “and” implores my fellow friends, allies, accomplices to work with me as I work with them in bettering our relative and intersubjective performances of culture. Conversely, we say “no” to problematic enactments of oppression (e.g., racist discourses) because they are predicated on harming the discursive constitution of dissimilar others even as we embody the simultaneity of similarity and difference in one body. That is, meditating on, and nuancing, the “yes and . . .” and “no” responses to embodied ideology have far-reaching implications for our respective embodiments of an oppressor/oppressed identity in one body.

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