A Gedenkschrift for John T. Warren

Deanna L. Fassett

Loss and sacrifice are, on some level, sensations everyone knows. Such things make us feel like victims, like we’ve given of ourselves more than we knew we could offer, more than we received in return, like we’ve given up something valuable and can’t ever get it back. Inevitably, loss and sacrifice are also what most of us would identify as isolating events; we tend to see ourselves as living loss and sacrifice alone… [That said] loss, in many ways, is about gain… Loss and sacrifice, if they are to matter—if they are to have meaning—should be remembered, should be acknowledged, should be appreciated. (Fassett and Warren 139)

John and I wrote the above insights about loss nearly ten years ago, knowing that we had already and would continue to live these lessons, but not in such a sudden and painful way. John’s death at age 36 from advanced esophageal cancer was a surprise for us all—his family and friends, his colleagues and disciplinary community. This special issue of *Liminalities: A Journal of Performance Studies* is a gedenkschrift, a collection of writings that serves to honor and extend the scholarship of our colleague and friend John T. Warren (1974-2011), Professor of Communication Pedagogy at Southern Illinois University, Carbondale. While John’s death is a profound loss, the writings in this issue stand as a powerful reminder that there is still more work for us to do.

In order to remember, acknowledge, and appreciate John’s work, I invited colleagues from across and outside our discipline to share how they believe his work matters. As we acknowledge and appreciate John’s contributions to our understandings of the social foundations of education, communication pedagogy, intercultural communication and performance studies, we recognize that his work meaningfully serve us in praxis—in agenda-setting and in principled and ethical engagement with others for a more humane existence for us all.

**On Social Justice, Loss and Healing**

Kathy Hytten, Southern Illinois University

In one of his last essays before he passed away, John weaved together storied accounts of his research, teaching, identity, passions, and life (Warren, “Social Justice”).

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I remember talking to John about that essay as he was writing it, knowing he was seeking some kind of holism and meaningfulness to his life, and a kind of balance that often eludes many of us academics. He was at a crossroads in his life and career, soon to be tenured and promoted to full professor, and feeling like he should take more conscious control over the trajectory of his future work and the second half of what he imagined to be his life. I had crossed that academic threshold recently enough that we would often talk about questions of the future, of what we both thought would be long careers to come. We wondered about the aspects of our work that mattered most, the legacy we might leave to those around us (students, colleagues, friends, and family alike), and how we could avoid the petty bickering, jealousy, competition, self-flagellation, and sense of victimhood we saw among so many around us. We both strived for genuine academic community and talked about projects that we might undertake together in the future, especially as we were again on the same campus after John’s five years away at Bowling Green State University.

I first met John when he was a young, eager student in one of my graduate seminars my second year teaching at Southern Illinois University. By the fourth class he took with me, he was already more of a colleague, as we started writing together while he was in the final stages of his doctoral program. By the time he graduated, he had become a close friend, and over the years, a sounding board, a collaborator, a conspirator, and a first reader of many of my essays. While I may have been some kind of mentor to him in the beginning of his career, I know I learned as much from him as he ever learned from me.

The desire we most shared was for fluidity between our academic work and our everyday lives, and for a healthy sense of perspective about what matters most in the world. For us, this is, and was, lives committed to social justice. While we both teach/taught about what social justice means and looks like, we were even more challenged and compelled to try to embody our commitments in our everyday lives, daily habits, and relationships with others. Ours is a vision of a world without unnecessary human suffering, where diversity is treasured, community prevails over excessive competition, kindness is omnipresent, generosity is the norm, creativity and passion are celebrated, hope triumphs over despair, and the struggling are cared for while the affluent embrace notions of moderation and sufficiency.

The challenge John left us in his large body of scholarship, and for those of us who knew him personally, with his ways of being in the world, was to continue to work toward this vision of social justice in healthy, balanced, and thoughtful ways. This means while we work hard, we put work in its proper perspective, knowing that making a life is much more important than simply making a living. As part of making meaningful lives, we remember to be fully present with others, and to find value in seemingly simple moments: in the classroom, in the hallways, in faculty meetings, over lunch, in interactions with friends and colleagues who are struggling, and in the times we spend with friends and loved ones. In light of his untimely death, John’s own words provide me with some comfort and a path forward. He writes that “social justice is all about seeing the world in all its loss and imagining ways of healing...Social
justice is about love, about leading with a critically engaged love that seeks not just community, but community with a purpose, a goal, a hope, a vision of equality that trumps hate and division” (p. 30). Continuing to work towards this vision, in my work and in my everyday life, is the best way I know to honor John’s legacy.

John Warren and a Path to Critical Intercultural Communication
Thomas K. Nakayama, Northeastern University

John Warren and I crossed paths many times in the communication field. His interests were far ranging and perpetually fascinating. His interests in whiteness and pedagogy have important implications for our understanding of intercultural communication. Let me highlight a few of the main dialectical tensions that I saw in his work that informed the development of the larger project of building critical intercultural communication.

First, he explored a more complex way of thinking about “difference” in intercultural communication (Warren, “Performing Difference”). Rather than reinforcing a more static notion of difference, Warren worked on a more dynamic notion of difference that was placed in dialectical tension with identity. In order to build a more affirmative notion of difference, and therefore identity, Warren framed it as part of the performance of repetition. This repetition was the dynamic engine behind reconfigurations of differences and identities. The power of his insights here lends itself to a wide range of applications across many social and cultural identities, as well as how we think about social and cultural differences.

Second, he was very engaged in an anti-racist project that underscored the power of white alliances and the refusal of those alliances. His work in Performing Purity, and “The Social Drama of a Rice Burner”, is able, in nuanced ways, to explore the subtleties of how white bonding occurs in the classroom. He also understood the importance of not-so-subtle ways that other white students refuse that racialized bonding around racist messages and the powerful feelings of anger and betrayal that result. By focusing on the performative aspects of these communicative messages in the classroom, Warren was able to explore the ways that this dialectic of bonding and refusing bonding functioned and what it means for the continual, repetition of reconfiguring whiteness.

Third, Warren’s work is driven by a deep commitment to social justice over simply studying about others. Our interactions with others are a part of a much larger, global world in which our navigation of cultures much be guided by a caring and commitment to others. In this sense, his work lies at the heart of a critical intercultural communication, as he was driven by a vision of a better, more just world. He was not satisfied to simply study and know about others. He wanted our relationships to be building blocks to a better life.

In a much too short life and career, John Warren enriched our work with his wonderful insights into the complexities of intercultural interaction. His writing will continue to be instrumental in the larger project of building a critical approach to in-
tercultural communication because it was driven by a commitment to social justice and a real caring and commitment to others. Unfortunately, a life cut short means a voice silenced, a voice that had so much more to contribute. He certainly had much more to say about all kinds of differences and identities, but he has shown a path on the task for all of us to continue moving forward with the critical intercultural communication endeavor.

Changing the Way We Interrogate “Difference”: John T. Warren’s Contributions to Intercultural Communication Studies
Rona Tamiko Halualani, San José State University

“What did you think?,” he asked with a soft tone.
I paused.
He moved closer. “Seriously, Rona, what did you think of the paper?”

John wanted to know. He wanted to know my thoughts about his paper on difference for NCA’s Summer Critical Cultural Studies Conference. The year was 2007 and Tom Nakayama and I were the coordinators of the "Critical Intercultural Politics" seminar for that conference. John was one of our seminar participants.

Again, he was not letting go. “So what did you and Tom think?”

John needed to know. He had been thinking about the concept of difference and its undertheorization in intercultural communication for a long while. His paper represented his attempt to reconstruct for us how we examine and talk about difference as more than apoliticized shells of identity (or the mantras of “isms”).

I finally “fessed up” and told John that his paper was intriguing and in that form, perhaps, hard to trace the entirety of his argument. But that in our seminar, we could work out those issues. This was, after all, John’s first iteration of an essay that would later become what I deem as one of the most important works in critical intercultural communication studies to date: his (2008) article, “Performing Difference: Repetition in Context” in the Journal of International and Intercultural Communication. This essay is the one I keep going back to year after year to bolster my own arguments about tracing power structures and framings in critical intercultural communication studies. This is the essay that will influence intercultural communication and the entire discipline for years to come.

What John accomplishes in this article is tremendous. While many of us articulate the need to situate culture within power, context, and specific historical/political moments, John takes it even further. He establishes difference via Judith Butler and Gilles Deleuze as discursive and performative chains and logics that we call up and invoke (via repetition) but not in foreclosed or predetermined ways. Instead, the dynamic nature and potency of difference is that an unpredictable number and range of articulation sequences are possible and those sequences can oftentimes represent new forms of subjectivity and power albeit in familiar, hegemonic expressions (“I don’t even see race. I’m color blind”). For instance, an Asian American female who seeks to
be treated against the dominant grain of xenophobia may articulate those previous statements as a strategy to access and project equality towards others. Just as an African American woman may engage in those expressions not necessarily as evidence of false consciousness but as a counter example (or preferred mode of living) to the frustrating ways in which she may experience race on a daily basis. Engaging difference in the way John Warren spells out allows us to trace newly emerging articulations as well as their effects. John’s work excavates a path for meaningful critical scholarship on situated difference and identities in line with embedded cultural politics.

So if John were here today asking, “So, Rona, what did you think of my piece?”, I'd smile and say that it was “invaluable” in opening up our analytical frameworks and the ways in which we dialogue about difference in specific power-placed ways. That his *IJIR* essay gave us a way to name, locate, and inhabit claims (whether as denials, proclamations, erasures) of difference. That because of his work, we are closer to realizing a critical intercultural communication goal of connecting the macro structures of power to the micro-processes of communication and interaction.

The fact that John is not around to see the impending activity around difference in deep connection to power is disheartening. We won’t know of the new and sustained conversations we will have about difference with our students, stubborn colleagues, and individuals outside of the academy who see difference on the surface and feel comfortable addressing it only in its embedded structure of dominance. We won’t know of the true gift he bestowed upon us—a gift that is simultaneously a critical consciousness and form of social agency for groups that want to articulate their needs but feel stifled within a naturalized, demarcated discourse. I can only hope this essay stands as the next best thing. Thank you John for the generosity of your brilliance, passion, and insatiable need to push the boundaries of intercultural communication studies.

Oh what I wouldn’t do to hear yet another one of John’s incessant “So what do you think, Rona?”

**Reflections on JTW’s Work for Communication Education**

Ann Darling, University of Utah

John was my friend and I especially miss him this time of year when many of us are sending e-mails back and forth looking for precious time to connect in our busy NCA schedules. John was also my teacher and mentor; he, along with his colleague and friend Deanna Fassett, midwifed my nascent need to ask questions about how power and pedagogy are connected in communication education. More importantly, John felt a lot like my moral conscience. Whenever I began to feel like I’d become a little complacent, maybe even a little lazy, I’d look to John and remember how important it was to persevere.

Early in John’s career (it is so painful to talk about the early moments of a career that was, itself, so early in its development), there was a transparent voice of stridency. His projects seemed driven by the need to reveal oppression wherever it hid and
rid the world of its violent impact. They also seemed guided by a deep knowledge that we could all do better. In this phase of his career, his work calls up my imagined impressions of the 14 English teachers who wanted to teach and do scholarship about public speaking and were willing to risk the security of their positions and careers to form a new professional association. I think John carried their spirit in his body when he formed new relationships with others, creating spaces in the most unlikely of places for us to teach critically and do critical scholarship about learning communication. For me, John's scholarship insists that we continue to ask difficult questions and forge unlikely relationships so that we can explore those questions wholeheartedly.

After John’s death I was asked to facilitate a conversation about critical communication pedagogy in a colleague’s critical methods course. Without knowing about my friendship with John, she assigned one of his last essays, published after his death. Because I do not believe in accidents, I knew this was John teaching and mentoring me again. In that essay, he took an elegant position on reflection in critical pedagogy and, in so doing, revealed that his stridency had softened a bit. He wrote about the privilege and joy of teaching and of the great power in compassion and intellectual generosity. He confessed that, like Freire, teaching and learning were acts of love for him. There is too much violence in this world and too much of it happens at the hands of communicators in classrooms; I think John’s spirit emerges in the progressive hope that we can lessen the violence in the world by using communication to make classrooms places of joy where all voices are heard and celebrated and all hearts are known. If John’s time hadn’t been so short, I think he would have continued to write about compassion and intellectual generosity. I think he would have borrowed from the Dalai Lama and bell hooks to help us understand the discipline and hope that communication education can bring to the project of peace.

Yes, John, it is important that we persevere. Thanks for showing us how.

Vigorous, Generative and Performative
Keith Nainby, California State University Stanislaus

As interim editor of *Liminalities*’ “Performance and Pedagogy” section, founded by John T. Warren, I have grappled with a possible editorial statement that honors his vision for the section. One point of departure I find useful: the liminal qualities common to both learning and performing, qualities that involve continuously moving in the present, through and with difference from ourselves and others, as the past becomes different, becomes the future. These liminal qualities help define what is vigorous, generative and transformative in both learning and performing.

In learning and in performing we begin—as John began with me in the very weeks we first met one another in the fall of 1997, onstage with the cast of *Alias Grace* as directed by Elyse Pineau—with scripts that precede us and that enfold us within established roles and norms. But learning, like performing, is liminal in that, when learning, we are always becoming someone other than who we are now. So we must reimagine our scripts through being alert to our enfleshment in classrooms and other
educational spaces—historicizing and redefining our roles as students and teachers, interrogating norms that naturalize ways of relating to one another so that we may relate in more equitable and humane ways instead. This effort to reimagine learning shapes John's numerous autoethnographic explorations of the texture of learning—learning that does not somehow “leap” smoothly from mind to mind through narrow, mystical channels of communication but that deforms the skin, excites the nerves and enfames the senses as we are becoming. Future research that traces the contours of the learning body will, similarly, do the work of moving us closer to pedagogies that honor whole people.

In learning and in performing we circumscribe special places—classrooms and stages, for example—that become places of careful, focused engagement of a subset of the myriad forms of life that thrive beyond those special places. This often leads to tropes that Platonically trivialize classrooms and stages as poor reflections of the “real.” But learning, like performing, is liminal in that when learning, we make new forms of life that move us just as deeply and permanently as those beyond our classrooms and stages. This conception of making—through—learning shapes John's sustained investigations of how racism and heterosexism are not merely perpetuated in many learning environments but are actively remade, again and again. Infusing this research trajectory is the belief that we can, therefore, unmake such systematic oppressions as we remake the world through learning.

In learning and in performing we bear daunting responsibility for what we make, because in learning and in performing we make with others and for others; our attention to the weight of long-standing systems and to the force of distributed networks of power cannot elide this responsibility. But learning, like performing, is liminal in that bearing responsibility for one another entails naming the future, bearing that future as a mother bears a child, giving the future life through coordinated action. This is the unique power of communication. John helped lead the way in showing what the study of communication can, therefore, bring to critical pedagogical scholarship—and dialectically, what critical pedagogical scholarship can bring to the study of communication. Specifying a liminal connection between these disciplines is itself a liminal act, an act that makes each discipline something other than what it was. My most fervent hope for new work in “Performance and Pedagogy,” work that honors John's vision, is that it becomes as vigorous, generative and transformative as his work has been.

When Do We Start?
Amy K. Kilgard, San Francisco State University

John and I made our print debut within the community of performance studies scholars simultaneously with the publication of our co-authored essay, “Staging Stain Upon the Snow: Performance as a Critical Enfleshment of Whiteness,” in Text and Performance Quarterly in 2001. The essay ended with this snippet of dialogue (a dialogue that, while clearly staged for the essay, actually happened in my relationship with John so many times that it reverberates to me as a specific conversation):
The essay could speak back to the show *Stain Upon the Snow*; a show John directed and in which I performed, but more importantly it should speak to the future. The essay should make space for hope, make possible a critical interrogation of whiteness, invite a dialogue about what it means to talk about whiteness as a visceral, sensual, and vitally important part of our collective social world.

*So, when do we start?* (275, italics in original)

John’s work has influenced and continues to influence performance studies scholarship in ways that are clearly outlined in that aspirational passage. It is the intersecting nexus of whiteness, race, performance, and pedagogy that John passionately worked to interrogate and enact in his scholarship, mentorship, and teaching. Ample evidence of this exists not only in John’s own published work but, even more importantly, in the burgeoning scholarship within performance studies in the areas of performative pedagogy, performance of identity, critical ethnography, and autoethnography.

Throughout his scholarship, John consistently reminds us that everyday performances of the naturalized elements of our identities and subject positions depend on forgetting their origins, on taking them for granted. He teaches us that the work for performance studies scholars must always attend to a crisis in everyday performances of race, class, gender, sexuality and ability. I frame this crisis as follows: We must continually, individually remember what is always already culturally forgotten while we fight to change the hegemonic structures that create that forgetting in the first place.

It is within this liminal space and time of forgetting and remembering—of momentarily being betwixt and between remembering and forgetting our comfortable or not-so-comfortable identity positions of privilege—that I most feel John’s presence in my own work. It is precisely because of the need for repetition of these processes that I sorely miss John’s physical presence. Again and again he initiated conversations about privilege, his own, my own, our own. And we needed to have these conversations again and again because the liminal moment—the moment/space of infinite possibility—is momentary, fleeting, ephemeral. Performance studies scholars are clearly positioned to interrogate the ephemeral. And if John’s life and untimely death teach us nothing else, it is that we must answer the question above:

*We start today.*

**The Enticement of John T. Warren**
Frederick C. Corey, Arizona State University

In the 1980s, I abided by a 3x rule in the classroom. According to this rule, which was a fabrication on my part, I could mention gay things once without incident, twice with minimal risk, but if I talked about gay issues three times or more during a semester, my student evaluations would take a hit. I did not view this phenomenon as good or bad, right or wrong, just or unjust. It simply seemed to be. The 3x rule seemed to function in that space between performance and teaching. It seemed my enactment of
the educational text screeched through the room like two drunken guys at brunch calling each other “Mary.”

This liminal space between performance and pedagogy is where John T. Warren’s voice speaks forcefully. His scholarship does not fit neatly into any micro-disciplinary box. Performance, culture, communication education, studies in sexuality and the analysis of race intermingle, interact, collide at times and moments later move in unison. His body of work is marked by curiosity rather than allegiance to a disciplined interest.

I enjoy John’s writing the most when I do not necessarily agree with him, or when I think he has pushed too far. In “Naming Our Sexual and Sexualized Bodies in the Classroom,” John and his co-author document a set of classroom experiences to demonstrate how we name our sexual and sexualized bodies as teachers. John describes his preparation of a “performance of self that would force folks to question themselves,” and he says he wants to “to fuck with these students [sic] minds, to fuck up their notions of gender, sex and sexuality, to fuck them—not literally, but, but rather playfully—to mess them up, to encounter the realm of these personal, yet political, issues with a sense of wonder and enticement” (118). Seriously? What is this, John? Are you some kind of jerk?

John’s legacy is not as a jerk, of course, but as a provocateur. He challenges us, as he challenged himself, to fuck with ourselves, with our own perceptions, with constructs we hold near. Of his own whiteness, in a foray into the suspect discussion of “abolishing” whiteness, John writes, “Doing whiteness differently means living in constant struggle, always working with self and those around you. [. . .] It is a process that is based in an ethics of respect and care, building from the notion that all benefit when whiteness inflicts less violence to others in the world (“Performing Whiteness Differently” 466). Through his writing, we continue to struggle through complex issues of race, gender, sexuality, and we do so with his sense of wonder and enticement.

I no longer worry about the 3x rule, but I worry plenty about my performance in the classroom. How do we challenge students in meaningful ways? How do we discuss matters of race, power and sexuality in a manner that does not silence disagreement? How does curiosity serve as our guide? On these matters, and so many more, I turn to the writings of John T. Warren.

On Praxis: Grappling with/in the Liminal

It’s tempting to take even our very best friends for granted. We weave them so seamlessly into the fabric of our lives that we sometimes forget where we end and they begin. I’ve had nearly two years now to reflect on my scholarly partnership with John T. Warren, and I still have trouble remembering who did what, who said what, what was whose. I couldn’t unravel our thinking if I wanted to, if I tried. And, more importantly, I feel certain John wouldn’t want me to: More than anyone I have ever known, John grappled with—sometimes painfully and sometimes pleasurably—the liminalities, the unpredictable in-between and both-and spaces, the contradictions, the
paradoxes. He would want for me to explore the places where people and ideas and experiences join, the fabric that emerges from our connections with one another. John taught me many lessons, but they all follow the common thread that liminal spaces are opportunities for learning and growth.

I learned from John that it is important to treat every moment and every conversation as an opportunity, a possibility for collaboration and growth. He and I went to a lot of conferences and conventions over our fifteen year friendship, and I know that disciplinary boundary policing caused him some pain. For John to be a performance studies scholar and an intercultural scholar and a communication pedagogy scholar meant to some in our field that he was not fully any one of these. But I never knew John to put a lot of faith in other people’s easy and neat dividing lines; this always made him more, not less, in my eyes. John asked questions that span culture and power, body and mind, movement and stillness, and because his work engaged intercultural communication, performance studies, and critical communication pedagogy, it is both timely and timeless in ways I can only hope my own scholarship mirrors and extends.

I credit John’s work with my awareness of and interest in the degree of agency any one of us has in the shape and feel of who we are and how others regard us. While initially John and I read many of the same writers and writings, I’m not sure I would have thought to move from gender as accomplished to ethnicity or dis/ability or other aspects of our identities as accomplished. It was in reading his early writings on white privilege that I began to understand the central role communication scholars must play in better understanding human commitments to one another, and I came to realize that his contribution (and mine as well) might be to serve an important bridging function, knitting one question to another, one scholar to another, one area of our field to another.

Perhaps the most significant lesson I’ve learned from John is about vulnerability, about asking myself the questions I would ask of others, about asking myself the questions I am afraid to answer. I think that many people, when they look at John’s scholarship, see someone who was methodical and dedicated to a meaningful research agenda; when I look at my friend’s work, I see someone who cared deeply about relationships, about living together in a world where there is both love and pain—when I look at his scholarship, I see scars, I see frayed ends. Original artistic creations always bear small reminders of the person or people who made them, like the occasional loose strands of a hand-knit scarf. In and around his work, John helped me understand this about vulnerability: that I will be imperfect; that, in learning and caring deeply about the world, I will be hurt just as I will hurt others. Vulnerability may be a powerful interruption in our assumptions. It is a place where we assert, often unexpectedly, our differences, as well as our commitments to one another. We cannot wield vulnerability like a weapon or contrive its occurrence—we can only sit quietly and invite it to teach us. John’s scholarship shows me the mending and healing that we owe one another as humans, whether in our relationships as researchers and study
participants, as leaders and constituents, as teachers and students, as parents and children, and friends.

I think John would have found this special issue of *Liminalities* unsettling; in reading about himself, the work he has inspired, and the directions we might take in relation to his work, John would have squirmed…in both discomfort and delight. His friends—contributors to, and reviewers and readers of this issue—will, I believe, agree. I am forever thankful to Michael LeVan, Editor-in-Chief, for this opportunity for us all to spend more time with John T. Warren.

Of all the liminal spaces, I understand least the space between being and not being, but, in this, too, John has helped me learn. As the voices in this issue attest, as you find in your own memories and meanings, John is still here.

**Works Cited**


