

Warren-ting A “Dinner Party:” *Nepantla* as a Space In/Between

Robert M. Gutierrez-Perez

It is here
that I realize
that my task is
more complicated
than I originally thought.

How do I
look
at these bodies
in new ways?

How do I
work
to see
the mundane
in new ways?

How do I
find
the ruptures
that I know must be
there—

there in the skip
of the record,

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there in the glitch
on the film,
there in the gap
of the machinery?
I know they
are there,
but
I have to find a way
to make them visible
to myself
and others.

(Alexander and Warren 338)

Dear Reader,

In the opening quotation, I transformed the words of Bryant Keith Alexander and John T. Warren into a poetic transcription because I (the writer) am struggling to engage you (the reader) in/between text to co-construct meaning from the untimely loss of John T. Warren. We are creating this space together, so I do not know what is going to happen. It is a space where our imaginations meet and co-construct meaning, so we have to work as a community. Can you *feel* our grief on your eyes as you read? Can you *touch* our discomfort in the emptiness? As a bisexual man of color who is married legally to another man in the state of California, I am interested in the everyday experiences that shape/influence/resist larger social structures (e.g., whiteness, gender, heteronormativity, marriage) yet are shaped/influenced/oppressed by these same systems. "Credentials aside, shoved to the back, like a footnote of my past that grants permission to speak, I am often not the teacher students desire me to be—I am not an open book, even as I stand ready for the reading" (Gust and Warren 118). In my classrooms, I am nervous to reveal my LGBTQ¹ affiliation with my students because of work that suggests this type of disclosure lowers my instructor ratings and leads to misreadings of my classroom agenda (Gust and Warren; Russ, Simonds, and

¹ Amy Kilgard explains that "the abbreviation LGBTQ stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, and questioning or queer, and is frequently used to represent the connectedness of members of these disparate yet linked categories of sexual identity" (qtd. in Gust and Warren 117).

Hunt; Warren and Fassett, "Spiritually"). However, as a bisexual Xicano², my identity politics are not exclusively tied to sexual orientation, gender, and sex.

I cannot separate my race/ethnic/geographic location from my theorizations of queer interlocutors or the classroom space. This critical humanist stance is embraced by queer Chicana feminists (Keating, *Anzaldúa*; Keating, *Transformational*; Calafell; Carrillo Rowe), and my use of autobiographical performance and performative writing techniques within this document is supported by Latina/o communication studies scholars (Calafell; Calafell and Moreman; Moreira and Diversi; Moreman and Persona Non Grata) as well as John T. Warren. As a Xicano, I have a mixed-raced (mestizo) body that claims a heritage from Central America, Africa, and Europe, and, in attempting a feminist politics, I have realized that Latinas/os come in various skin colors including white and that men as part of *la familia* have a role to play in this movement too. I understand that sometimes listening to queer people of color makes folks feel guilty for centuries of eurocentric colonial oppression, and I think that this is good ("If I can't get rid of my oppression, then why do you think you can get rid of your guilt?"). However, I believe that guilt limits resistive possibilities to whiteness, sexism, and heteronormativity because it forecloses coalitional politics.

As a reader, you have to hold your ground and "figure out, literally, where your feet stand, what position you're taking: Are you speaking from a white, male, middle-class perspective? Are you speaking from a working-class, colored ethnic location? For whom are you speaking? To whom are you speaking? What is the context, where do you locate your experience?" (Keating, *Anzaldúa* 193). For instance, I (the writer) typed the words you are reading with my brown Xicano fingers oftentimes alone in bed waiting for my husband to get off of work; however, I also gave a first draft to a few mentors and a few fellow graduate students for feedback and edits, so they are here as well. Further, as a multi-raced man from a working-class background, my body is privileged and able in ways others are not. What have you learned about my body? Did you catch my queerness? Are you sure? Questions of subjectivity and privilege are part of how we meet betwixt and between the text but perhaps are not enough to warrant a "Dinner Party."

Warren-ting A Dinner Party

A Dinner Party is a performance that I utilize in my communication studies classrooms to discuss issues of whiteness, advocacy, queer-of-color feminism, and communication theory. I do not claim to own or to have discovered this performance. It came to me from a close friend and colleague named Brittany Coleman-Chávez who utilized this performance to help our class understand an assigned reading for our performance aesthetics course. The class had hit a performative impasse and was in

² "Throughout this text, I spell *Xicana* and *Xicano* (Chicana and Chicano) with an X (the Nahuatl spelling of the "ch" sound) to indicate a re-emerging *política*, especially among young people, grounded in Indigenous American belief systems and identities" (Moraga xxi).

dire need of critical dialogue. In a white-dominated space, the instructor and students could not meet in the middle because they could not *feel* their privileges or *touch* the oppression they (re)produced with their everyday performances of identity. If we are to meet on this page, *feeling* and *touching* are necessary for critical dialogue (hooks 129-31). My colleague learned this performance at the annual international conference of the Hemispheric Institute of Performance and Politics held in Colombia in 2009, where the Dinner Party performance was utilized to help bridge lines of difference across language, ethnicity, and geography. In addition, this Dinner Party performance is an adaptation of *The Long Table*, an experimental public forum that encourages informal conversation on serious subjects created by performance artist Lois Weaver and performed with the queer performance group Split Britches³. With positive qualitative results from an international conference and a nationally recognized queer performance group, I brought in the Dinner Party to have an intimate performance on whiteness and privilege within the classroom space.

The Dinner Party began as a performance to facilitate a student-led dialogue on the forms of advocacy alongside a brief history of feminism. My students were familiar enough with the activity to know that the room needed to be arranged in particular ways and that particular rules applied during the Dinner Party that did not exist outside of its performance. Specifically, the room was arranged with chairs in a circle looking inward at a 6-person table made from desks. Students created 3 "tickets" with responses to the following prompts: (1) write a question about the reading that you know the answer to, (2) write a question about the reading that you do not know the answer to, and (3) write a comment/statement about the reading. These three questions, written on three separate pieces of paper, served as "tickets" to the Dinner Party. Students would participate at least twice within a thirty-minute period, and each time they approached the table they placed their "ticket" in the center of the table in a hat. The collective goal was to keep all six seats filled throughout the performance and to keep the conversation on whiteness and feminism continuing by pulling "tickets" from the hat and dialoguing on the questions or comments. Students could enter the dinner party by tapping participants on the shoulder and taking their place (this could be used strategically to remove outspoken participants), or students could leave the dialogue at any time by getting up and returning to their seats in the outside circle. As students engaged in dialogue, they could draw and write questions on and read from a large sheet of paper placed in front of them (this encouraged quieter students and/or artistic students to have a voice in the conversation).

On the day of my public speaking class' Dinner Party, my heart was racing. My palms were sweaty and stuck together as I folded and unfolded them on my desk. Could my students smell the heat emanating from my armpits like hot breath? Why did this happen so suddenly? We started moving the desks into formation, and my gut immediately wrenched inside as I began to frame Monday's class agenda within the

³ Currently, this performance is still available for booking at <http://splitbritches.wordpress.com/>

context of the death of a mentor—John T. Warren. Should I have cancelled the performance? Was it too soon? As I write this, "I realize that my task is more complicated than I originally thought. How do I look at these bodies in new ways? How do I work to see the mundane in new ways?" (Alexander and Warren 338). As an undergraduate, I felt a connection to *Critical Communication Pedagogy* by Deanna L. Fassett and John T. Warren, and the promise of working with John after finishing my bachelor's and master's degree with Deanna was a goal that got me through the forty-hour shifts while going to school, the debt accrued from student loans, and the myriad of hardships that many first-generation students experience while moving through the higher education system. As a reader, I built a relationship with John through the page, and because of this special connection, I must profess that he is not lost yet. He is still here on the page. Betwixt and between the text, John T. Warren has written *sin vergüenza* (without shame) about whiteness, performance, and privilege by placing his body on the line, and if a reader is willing, then a reader can find my literary mentor's body hidden within his journal articles, his book chapters and his books. Are you willing to "find the ruptures...there in the skip," "in the glitch," and/or "in the gap of the machinery?" (Alexander and Warren, 338). In this autobiographical performance utilizing *nepantla* as a performative writing aesthetic, I invite tension in/between the reader-text-writer relationship to advocate for the inclusion of John T. Warren's works within the classroom.

Our Liminal Method of Touching and Feeling in *Nepantla*

To *touch* this text or any other, the reader, the author, and text must remain in tension and critically analyze the possible dominant power structures involved in the process of co-creating this space together. If "*critical literacy* involves moving beyond the surface of a text—of an image, of a historic tale, of a gesture, of some moment of communication—in order to see what lies beneath it" (Warren and Fassett, *Communication* 195), then as writers and readers, we must engage our bodies with the text. Looking at my computer screen, I am shifting between scholarly articles and journal entries trying to find the right combination of words to clearly present the author-text-reader relationship as my object of study. Gloria Anzaldúa, a queer, Chicana feminist/activist/scholar, writes that "in the past the reader was a minor character in the triangle of author-text-reader. More and more today the reader is becoming as important if not more important than the author. Making meaning is a collaborative affair" (qtd. in Keating, *Anzaldúa* 168). Reading over Deanna L. Fassett and John T. Warren's *Critical Communication Pedagogy*, I write "autoethnography is a reflexive accounting, one that asks us to slow down, to subject our experience to critical examination, to expose life's mundane qualities for how they illustrate our participation in power" (103). But, I need a method that moves beneath current conceptions of autoethnography to *touch* you: the reader.

To *feel* this body, the reader must be open to and actively search for the emotions that framed the work for the writer. In the Dinner Party performance, I asked stu-

dents to read selections from John T. Warren and Deanna L. Fassett on advocacy and whiteness (*Communication* 194-7). Also, I assigned a reading by bell hooks that reviews the history of feminism to present two possible viewpoints for students to engage: "whiteness studies" and "woman-of-color feminisms." It was and still is my greatest hope that "if it is read within the frame of ending oppressive social practices, whiteness studies can serve as an effective way of challenging white power and dominance" (Warren, "Whiteness and Cultural Theory" 187). However, in that moment, I had an emotional decision to make: Do I cancel the performance and leave John Warren and bell hooks out of the classroom space? Or, do I work through the grief, the shock, and the discomfort to include these critical voices? If we are to reclaim this reader-text-writer relationship for each other to resist whiteness or any other oppressive power structure, then we need to talk about our bodies *sin vergüenza* (without shame) to *feel* each other and collectively confront our privileges. It is in this liminal *nepantla* state in/between the reader-text-writer relationship where we can continue to touch and feel those bodies that are no longer around.

This move to autobiographical performance is a purposeful and delicate grappling with a loss that is still too raw for me and may be too raw for you, but it is necessary because I am in *nepantla*. *Nepantla* is a "Náhuatl word meaning 'in-between space'" (Keating, *Anzaldúa* 322), or as Victor Turner describes, a liminal space is "betwixt and between" (qtd. in Fassett and Warren, *Critical* 3). "*Nepantla* represents temporal, spatial, psychic, and/or intellectual point(s) of crisis" (Keating, *Anzaldúa* 322), and "is not inherently a space of power, but rather is *cultivated* as such through spiritual labor undertaken by the borderlands dweller." (emphasis in original, Carrillo Rowe 18). This mediator in/between worlds is called *una nepantlera*, and "nepantleras deal with the collective shadows of their respective groups. They engage in spiritual activism....they serve as agents of awakening, inspire and challenge others to deeper awareness, greater *conocimiento*; they serve as reminders of each other's search for wholeness of being" (Keating, *Anzaldúa* 293). Like my sticky hands folding and unfolding on the desk, my fingers are hesitating on the screen unsure of whether I want to offer *nepantla* as a space in/between for queer of color scholars interested in intersectional analyses because it is not a soothing state. "The *nepantla* [emphasis added] state is inherently in-between, as is coalitional subjectivity, calling us to consider the ways in which we might move through our pain collectively, creatively, and for the purpose of deeply internalizing it so that we might share it, externalize it, and allow the community to carry it together" (Carrillo Rowe 29). *Nepantla* is a space where the appendages of your identity have been hacked from their joints and thrown into the sky. It is an in/between space where your imperative is to put yourself together, even if your ring finger must replace a toe or if you must hold your arm in its socket. In order to cultivate this healing space, we must invest ourselves in the pain, so we, as a community, can carry it together. If I invite you, will you hold your grief in tension with your identity? Will you try to *touch* and *feel* the bodies and emotions behind the text?

A Postscript from the Writer

When I now think of spirit,
I think of the interconnectedness of all life—
a cosmic systems theory.

We act and react,
ail and heal,
begin and end
in tension with all things.

So spirituality,
for me,
is about bringing a sense of
interconnectedness
to the world
around
us

(Warren and Fassett, "Spiritually").

Whether instructing a class, researching as an academic, or experiencing the world as a bisexual male, I rely on John's work and feel a spiritual connection to him through his words. As an instructor, I am emboldened in the classroom by John's work in critical pedagogy (Nainby, Warren, and Bollinger) and critical communication pedagogy (Fassett and Warren, "You Get Pushed Back"; Fassett and Warren, *Critical Communication Pedagogy*; Warren and Fassett, "Spiritually"; Warren and Fassett, *Communication*). As an academic, I am drawn to John's work in whiteness studies (Warren, "Whiteness and Cultural Theory"; Warren, "Absence for Whom?"; Warren, "Doing Whiteness"; Warren, "Bodily"; Warren, "It Really Isn't About You"; Warren and Heuman) and his work with autoethnographic methodology (Berry and Warren; Gust and Warren; Warren). Additionally, as a bisexual male in a same-sex relationship, John's work with bisexuality gives me a language to understand my own liminal positionality within society (Warren and Zoffel). By exploring the reader-text-writer relationship, we can continue to draw knowledge from this connection, and through this interconnectedness, we can share the pain, the loss, and the grief together.

We don't have to remain scattered throughout the heavens floating listlessly alone. We can put ourselves together by sharing our stories through the reader-text-writer relationship. Gloria Anzaldúa writes, "my 'stories' are acts encapsulated in time, 'enacted' every time they are spoken aloud or read silently. I like to think of them as performances and not as inert and 'dead' objects (as the aesthetics of Western culture think of art works)" (89). As a performance, our texts are alive with the presence of bodies, and as such, every time we read silently or aloud, we invoke the vocal chords

of text and re-perform their stories. "The ability of the story (prose and poetry) to transform the storyteller and the listener into something or someone else is shamanistic. The writer, as shape-changer, is a *nabual*, a shaman" (88). There is a livedness and spirituality in *nepantla* that can continue to shape our identities. Can you *touch* or *feel* it? How can we put ourselves back together?

Reader, I have repeated the Dinner Party performance in every course since John's death, and each time I am surprised by how different each performance makes me feel. Sometimes, I am reminded of moments from the classroom that John writes about with such powerful and loving detail: "Thus, I needed to reframe what I thought of as race, shifting to a more performative view of whiteness that acknowledged that the bodies I saw in this classroom that appear white are only manifestations of multiple repetitions of acts-historical acts of mating that, through social norms, generated the bodies I see in front of me" (Warren, "Doing Whiteness" 97). Other times, I find myself wishing that I would have read a particular piece by John before I experienced a Dinner Party performance because he directly addresses everyday performances of whiteness in most (if not all) his work. For instance, when describing a moment of "(un)hinging whiteness" (Carrillo Rowe and Malhotra) with a white female student, John writes "as a system that is beyond her individual control, she is caught up in the machine--she is swept up in the flow. The point is that as part of the machine--she gets benefits. In the end, whiteness is both about her and not about her--it is the both/and that makes this tough" (Warren, "Whiteness and the Dangers" 451). Each time I read a newly discovered or favorite text, I am reminded of the hacking of my limbs and the freewheeling of my heart. The performance is healing because we re-stitched the sinew, the flesh, and the bone to connect to our bodies—our spirits. In other words, "the work of generating a living text, of moving collectively through victimization to power, that occurs within the *nepantla* [emphasis added] state provides a productive vision for what the work of coalitional subjectivity might look like" (Carrillo Rowe 29). Moments of healing are in the classroom alongside whiteness and privilege. What might happen if we acknowledge and open up spaces to dialogue on these issues together within the classroom?

At the Dinner Party performance, students showcased status quo⁴ stories by entrenched privileged positions that some students attempted to resist with the assigned readings. Throughout the Dinner Party, privileged positions held onto myths of "colorblindness is progress," "culture and power are separate," and "we're all making a big deal out of nothing" (Warren and Fassett, *Communication*). However, at the critical moment when I felt I may need to jump in to clarify, an Asian American female student calmly pushed back on a comment about the need for fairness when dealing with white folks: "maybe people have different ideas of what fairness means." Using the readings, students of color felt empowered to push back with their own stories as

⁴ AnaLouise Keating, a Chicana feminist and author of *Transformational Teaching: Transcultural Classroom Dialogues*, defines status quo stories as stories that "reaffirm and in other ways reinforce the existing social system" (23).

evidence. Also, white students used Warren and Fassett in *Communication: A Critical/Cultural Introduction* to describe how the authors made them question their privileges (even as some tried to normalize the experience). Throughout the performance, students held their ground while accepting other voices. Students questioned whether equality is given to white women over women of color; they were curious about why there were so many different feminisms. A particularly memorable moment was when a white female student shared her feelings of empowerment during Hillary Clinton's 2008 presidential election bid but admitted that these readings made her for the first time think about the importance of Clinton's white "race" within that political and personal connection.

Reader, I do not want to offer new techniques or new solutions for the classroom; instead, I want to invite dialogue on the reparative possibilities that open up when performances of reading and writing are taken up as locations for critical consciousness-raising. "Schools and schooling, whether viewed as a right, privilege, or compulsory, are sites for training bodies to behave in socially sanctioned ways" (Cooks and Warren 211), and "thus, in schooling, many mechanisms have been introduced in order to maintain control: school uniforms, bells to signal class time, raising hands to speak, desks in neat and orderly rows, and the like" (Fassett and Warren, "You Get Pushed Back" 23). This work is not meant to be a strong theory that aims to establish broad claims to further school the reader, our students, and our communities; rather, it is a challenge that "hope, often a fracturing, even traumatic thing to experience, is among the energies by which the reparatively positioned reader tries to organize the fragments and part-objects she encounters or creates" (Sedgwick 146). John's work with whiteness as a performance and with its everyday manifestations in the classroom can continue to be *touched* and *felt* by others. His utilization of feminist works and queer theorizations can continue to inspire other marginalized students, teachers, and administrators. No performance is perfect or safe but we knew this *nepantla* state was somewhere in/between.

This is John's challenge to us all:
 to live our lives fully,
 discerningly
 and appreciatively

 by tenaciously
 holding on to the small stuff,

 by seeing those
 details

 as constitutive of what
 matters,

by recognizing that
love is in
the details

(Fassett).



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