

Reflexive Engagement: A White (Queer) Women's Performance of Failures and Alliance Possibilities

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What is my *personal* investment in fostering a bridge between *my* academic work, and
the academic work of *women of color*?

How can I *engage* with the work of women of color, in an ethical way, without
appropriating their work for *my* academic gain?

How can I be *reflexive enough* to embody the words of women of color in the **every-
day**?

As white women, we are invested in reflexive engagement
of both our privilege and also our marginalization.

We ask these questions in order to understand our bodies
as *walking engagements of theory in action*
with motivations for social justice.

These are the opening lines from our performance drawing connections between reflexivity, failures, intersectionality, and alliance possibilities. Queer feminists of color (Anzaldúa; Carrillo Rowe; Collins; Johnson Reagon; Lorde; Lugones; Mohanty; Moraga and Anzaldúa; Moraga;) are invested in intersectional politics and self-reflexivity as a means for effective coalition building. Following their lead, critical intercultural communication scholars challenge us to deconstruct the social forces that continue to disempower marginalized bodies (Calafell and Moreman; Calafell; Nakayama and Halualani; Martin and Nakayama; Alexander; Warren; Cooks; Davis). As critical humanist intercultural scholars we are invested in social justice and believe Performance Studies and Intercultural Communication scholars must continue to build scholarship on reflexivity to develop avenues of alliances. We find queer feminist alliance work needs to be(come) a cornerstone of reflexivity scholarship.

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Performance is the research method we use to articulate reflexivity and its manifestations of coalitional possibilities. Staged performance challenges us to place our bodies vulnerably on display which serves a pedagogical function to both us and our audience. Performance functions pedagogically by exposing contentious issues of lived experiences that tend to escape language alone. As Dwight Conquergood explains, “A performance theory of pedagogy privileges challenge, struggle, innovation, movement, and openness” (“*Storied Worlds*,” 338). Our performance is situated at the crux of performance pedagogy as it asks audience members to self-reflexively examine the ways we are dominant and subordinate, the ways we are oppressed as well as oppressors. 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. Bryant Alexander writes, “The practice of performing culture is an all encompassing aspect of our daily being, inclusive of rituals, customs, policies and procedures, as well as those performances of self related to sex, gender, class and race” (“*Performing Culture*,” 307). Performance serves a pedagogical function, providing performers and audience with a lens for crafting new solutions to the ideological problems of misogyny, sexism, racism, classism, heterosexism, and homophobia. Our performance demonstrates our complicity and resistance to dominant systems of oppression, to (re)imagine new performance possibilities for alliances, by examining reflexivity, failure, and difference.

D. Soyini Madison challenges us to acknowledge how theory informs and is informed by our everyday lived experiences (“*Performing Theory*”). Thus we approach understanding reflexivity through theoretical articulations of identity, as wedged between cultural forces and identities. We view identities as relational and contextually influenced. Identities are not stagnant, but are moving in relation to space, time, history, culture, and politics. Intersectionality exposes our bodies as a multiplex of identities (Crenshaw; Hill Collins; Calafell). Affect theory places these multiplex identities in relation to others, contingent on the context in which the relation is taking place (Manning; Massumi; McIntosh). Scholars face difficulty in representing multiple and intersecting aspects of identities on the page. Our performance responds by modeling a relational understanding of intersecting identities. Performance allows for bodies to critically engage within these intersectional affective dynamics (McIntosh). What is lost here on these pages was captured within our performance. What was captured in the performance will forever remain within that moment, incapable of being re-enacted. Calafell explains that performative writing offers a space to showcase the complexities of intersectional politics and the coalitional possibilities implicit in theories of intersectionality (“*When Will We All Matter*”). Performatively writing our performance is one avenue to interrogate reflexivity further by expanding on the embodied moments and personal reflections of those moments.

We are motivated by the possibilities that performance provides for our bodies as relationally situated. Building on the performance foundations of Conquergood’s “*dialogic performance*” (“*Performing as Moral*”), Kristin Langellier’s “*audience as witness*,” and Madison’s notion of how our bodies meet theory (“*Performing Theo-*

ry”), we conceptualize a framework of performative interaction. Performative interaction challenges performers and audience members to engage *with* voices different from their positionalities in order to foster reflexive engagements. For our performance, performative interaction was the act of reading *with* feminists of color to inform our lives. Performative interaction also asks that we blend moments of our lives with the words of wisdom from queer feminists of color. In doing so, our performance becomes an embodied theoretical dialogue. Performative interaction is “a space of imagination” that holds tightly to reflexive engagement. Our performative project heeds feminist of color’s call for reflexive coalitional politics too few white feminists engage. While much is learned within and through the body in performance, we write our performance on the page to continue the embodied dialogue. This performative essay challenges people to embrace moments of reflexive failures through reflexive engagement to build intersectional relational awareness. Such a shift compels us to move to a relational understanding of differences by recognizing the productive role of reflexive failures.

Reflexive Engagement

We define reflexive engagement as not only the theoretical and methodological articulation of reflexivity, but the embodied process of it. Unfortunately, reflexivity often becomes reduced to methodological practices within and through interpretive and critical research. Scholars articulate reflexivity as a personal and academic process to respond to the crisis of representation within our research of others (Conquergood; Denzin and Lincoln; Goodall; Madison *Critical Ethnography*, “Critical Performance Ethnography”). Reflexivity is the introspective gaze we use to ethically understand the lens in which we are interpreting the world in relation to others. Madison encourages ethnographic and performance scholars to understand reflexivity as not only the “turning back” on our ourselves but also to acknowledge positions of authority and our moral responsibilities relative to representation and interpretation (*Critical Ethnography*). Richard G. Jones, Jr. and Bernadette Calafell coin the term “intersectional reflexivity” which asks scholars to recognize the ways in which they are both privileged and marginalized, powerful and powerless within the academy. We take reflexivity a step further in this work to challenge scholars to embody reflexivity as *engaged* praxis within our *everyday* lives.

We acknowledge reflexivity as a process. We also note that our work here simply scratches the surface of what reflexivity entails. We encourage this work to inspire others to build onto our theoretical articulations of reflexive engagement. With that in mind, we propose that there are three primary attributes to reflexive engagement. Reflexive engagement refers to the embodiment of reflexivity within our everyday acts of being and becoming. It necessitates a constant acknowledgement of our bodies in relation to power and difference. Reflexive embodiment underlines the risks necessitated throughout the process of reflexivity. Within these risks come great rewards of dismantling political forces which continue to separate bodies, opening doors for alli-

ance possibilities. Reflexive engagement challenges us to embody reflexivity not simply as a methodological ethic within interpretive and critical research, but more so, as an overall ethic of everyday being.

Secondly, reflexive engagement is rife with reflexive failures. Too often we miss the promise of alliance possibilities when we reduce reflexivity to methodological processes. Using this reductionist methodology, we represent our moments of relational failures as “research limitations.” Scholars generally must defend these “research limitations” to justify their work. Often times, critical ethnographic research becomes ethically justified by simply acknowledging the limitations of the research due to the positionalities of the researcher. While this reflexive “listing practice” is necessary for ethical cultural research, it generally lends itself to listing the researchers’ identities on the page rather than complexly placing their bodies on the page within and through a reflexive practice.

Reflexive engagement, as an ethics of being, challenge us to move past “limitations,” and towards relations. When practicing reflexivity, especially from a privileged perspective, we experience moments of relational breaks due to unreflexive practices. It is not simply that our understanding of the relationship is skewed due to our positionalities. Rather our positionalities and lived experiences within cultural forces challenge our reflexive engagements with others especially across lines of difference. In the end, relational failures are inevitable. Reflexive engagement asks us to work *with* these failures, reflexively. It is a practice noting the inevitability of failures across politics of difference. Reflexive engagement challenges us to not fixate on the failure but to see these moments of relations as moments of pedagogical manifestations of alliance work.

Finally, reflexive engagement is grounded in a motivation of alliance and coalition building across difference. Critical Cultural Communication scholars are driven by a social justice imperative (Martin and Nakayama; Nakayama and Halualani). We believe social justice begins with the recognition that cultural forces marginalize and privilege bodies within culture. Those invested in social justice work to expose and dismantle these harmful cultural politics. However, much critical work becomes bound within these cultural forces denoting bleak realms of possibilities for social change. Reflexive engagement returns agency to those invested in social justice work through affects of motivations.

The motivation of reflexive engagement is pragmatic in the sense that it sees social change built through alliances. When we build coalitions between people of contested identities, we actively deconstruct normative cultural politics of hierarchy and begin the generative process of rebuilding a more just social order. Carrillo Rowe refers to this type of social justice as “bridge work.” This work requires an active self-reflexive practice that views not only the identity politics present within our research with others but to build relations across these “differences.” Reflexivity plays a crucial role here, particularly in recognitions of overt and subtle privilege. Reflexive engagement asks us to take our reflexivity further through affects of motivations for alliances

to build bridges of relations. The true challenge is not to solely articulate the theoretical makeup of reflexive engagement but to embody this ethic.

We write this piece to an audience of privilege, not exclusively but predominantly, for those that must learn the ethic of reflexivity in the everyday. Reflexive engagement is truly a challenge for those coming from a positionality or multiple positionalities of privilege. Privilege works culturally to mask everyday acts of marginalization erasing awareness of personal privileges, which challenges those who desire to create relationships across difference to do so. What reflexive engagement teaches us is the humbling realities of failure. For us as white (queer) women, embodied reflexivity began with failing to be reflexive, then moved to an acknowledgement of our legitimate failures within our relationships with women of color. In essence, reflexive engagement is inseparable from failure. Understanding how these failures work in a system of power and privilege moved reflexivity from a stagnant methodology to possibilities of reflexive engagement, and ultimately coalitional solidarity. The remainder of this piece is dedicated to explicating our performance of reflexive engagement.

You are now our audience. We begin with our opening questions. Through a cooking metaphor, which plays off female stereotypes while also glorifying femininity, the performance was divided into three “consciousness utensils.” Blending our personal narratives, published texts of women of color, and our bodies’ intentional movements, we craft our performative interaction through the scenes *Utensil of Reflexivity*, *Utensil of Failures*, and *Utensil of Differences*.

Performing Reflexive Engagement

We stand before an audience filled with a few women of color, some queer, some not, a queer man of color, a white queer man, and a few white women (whose sexual orientation we do not know) sprinkled throughout open seats. Some of these bodies we recognize, bringing a sense of security; others are new faces bringing performative tensions. The room, like typical conference rooms, is furnished with generic wall art in gold frames, maroon floral seats placed in rows, and bright blue and maroon colored carpet. Our stage is simple. There is no curtain we can hide behind; no elevated stage to ensure comfortable distances between our bodies and the audience; no eccentric props or costumes to disguise us. Simply put, we stand in front of a group of individuals dressed in black as we might in our everyday lives. A giant blue tarp lines the floor under a plain conference room table. This tarp serves as the only designated “stage” and its edges touch the toes of those sitting in the front row. Our room manifests a closeness unanticipated and perhaps unwanted. On the table sits a giant mixing bowl, cooking utensils, flour and spices, and a book.

We now stand before you. You see us: our white skin, our short hair, our black tops adorned with colorful scarves. We embody white femininity in some ways and in others we mismatch. You read these embodiments, others you question. Our bodies, the audience’s bodies, and your body craft this performative engagement. We perform with trepidation, understanding performance marks and yet masks many of our inter-

secting identities. We fear our intentions will be misread or *never* read. We fear white women will feel attacked, or women of color will feel their voices silenced, or worse, appropriated. Ahmed reminds us that these feelings pulsate through our bodies as living testaments of a broken history between white women and women of color (119). It is a complicated break, but not an irreparable one. We know that this performance marks our bodies as it marks those in the room. Our eyes meet, we take a deep breath and begin a performance that represents reflexive engagement. Together we begin:

“I love performance most when I enter into it,
 when it calls me forward shamelessly,
 across those hard-edged maps into spaces where I must go,
 terrains that are foreign, scary, uninhabitable, but necessary.

[We] must go to them
 to know ourselves more,
 to know you more”
 (Madison *Critical Ethnography* 244).

This performance paints *our* performative interactions with feminists of color.
 By embodying these lessons,
 we expose the:
 The Utensil of *Reflexivity*, The Utensil of *Failures*, and The Utensil of *Differences*”

The Utensil of Reflexivity

The first scene of our performance suggests white women begin by educating *ourselves* of the jilted past between women and actively engage in self-reflexivity. With our motivations grounded in alliance possibilities, we learned quickly these intentions are unattainable until we first understand the broken past our white feminist sisters created and we often unintentionally perpetuate. This scene provided us a means to demonstrate how we came to learn the need for educating ourselves. Using narratives, we discuss the powerful lessons we learned by first failing to understand. These experiences brought us to understand and feel reflexivity. For us, reflexivity was first comprehended through our failing to be reflexive. These mishaps pressed us to go back to the books and learn that reflexivity involves recognizing cultural power of identities, intersectionality, the politics of love, Whiteness, and power present within relationships.

Following our opening questions, we walk to the front of the stage. In unison, we each hold up a wooding spoon and say, "Utensil of Reflexivity." We bow our heads and walk to center stage. In this scene, we use single words as representations of essential theoretical tools that white women must learn in order to grasp the process of reflexivity. As one of us states these words, the other quotes feminists of color that

taught us lessons of these theories. Movements flow from our bodies to visualize these theories embodied as the other speaks. These movements are examples of where the page limits the body.

Scene One: Utensil of Reflexivity

Standing arms length from each other. Dawn Marie looks up into the audience, lifting her hands and pointing towards her chest, she begins,

“With D. Soyini Madison,
 We are *critical* and *self-reflexive*
 of how we think about our positionality
 and the implications of our thoughts and judgments
 (“Staging” 322).”

Holding an invisible hand mirror above her head, Kathryn finishes,

“We don’t stop at our mirror reflections,
 but recognize the resonances that ripple and expand to a thinking about
 thinking
 a meta signification that inherently takes our contemplations and meanings
 further out, beyond our *own* mirrored gaze”(322).

We turn our backs to the audience. Breaking the moment of silence, Kathryn turns and faces the audience. She states, “**Positionality.**”

Facing away from the audience to signal another's voice from her own, Dawn Marie quotes Calafell,

“Sure like many women in the classroom
 white women faced challenges to their authority,
 but their *white* middle-class performances of femininity
 and, in some ways,
 their socially correct beauty made *their* roads a little *less* rocky” (349).

As Dawn Marie speaks, Kathryn runs her hands along the curves of her body; she runs a hand up her right arm, then the left; she faces the audience arms folded, and smiles; acknowledging the normativity with which her white, thin, feminine body can be read.

Silence

We slowly turn our backs from the audience towards each other. Interweaving our hands and crossing our legs, we stand woven together. Our bodies signifying intersections. Together we state, “**Intersectionality.**” Dawn Marie continues to look at Kathryn. They stand woven together as Dawn Marie begins her narrative,

I remember the first time I was challenged to recognize my race as part of my identity. Sitting in your office, I complained of my experiences as a graduate instructor. I cursed the patriarchal nature of the institution and its expectations on my body to conform to the gendered expectations of “female professor.”

You listened intently. You agreed with my pain. Silence filled the space between us as your eyes dropped from mine to your desk. You then reminded me these expectations are not simply because I was a woman, but because I was a white, straight woman. You explained to me that my performance of femininity challenges not only patriarchy but heterosexuality and whiteness as well.

My tongue felt tight in my mouth. Shame washed over me as I realized this was something, by now in my graduate education, I should have recognized myself. Your reminder was more than educational it was life changing. I judged myself in that moment, but judgment did not come from you. I realized that this was something you expected to help me understand.

You reminded me that my experiences cannot only be understood from one positionality but a multiplex of many. I now know as a white straight woman I must force myself to remember the work of intersectionality affects all my identities, not simply my experiences as a White woman.

Our bodies slowly unwind and our backs turn away from the audience.

Dawn Marie turns and states, “**Whiteness.**” Her mouth is open wide with her eyes tightly shut, while her hands tightly press against her ears. With her back facing the audience, Kathryn cites Gloria Anzaldúa (2009),

“Oh, white sister,
 where is your soul,
 your spirit?”

It has run off in shock, susto,

 and you lack shamans and curanderas to call it back...

It is important that white women go out on a limb

 and fight for women-of-color in workplaces, schools, and universities” (154).

In rough motions, Dawn Marie's hands ajar, she slowly uncovers her ears. She cups them as if listening carefully to a whisper within the audience. She reluctantly opens one of her eyes and then the other. Finally, her mouth snaps closed.

We turn towards the audience. Together we state, “**Love.**” We hold one hand out towards the audience, the other beats on our heart. The silence is filled with the sound of hearts beating as we look to different audience members. As we do this, Kathryn begins her narrative.

I write this letter to apologize for the ways I left you to hang, while the white professor harangued you for being too rigidly tied to your understanding of identity politics, saying that your racial body, as a black lesbian woman, blinded you to think of anything other than the materiality of your race.

I did nothing, but agreed in my complicity. Out of love, you forgave me. Out of love, we had dialogue. Out of love, you raised my consciousness, so that I might have a better understanding—something you did not have to do. I now know love is political.

We continue to beat our hands on our chest for a few seconds after her narrative concludes. We then, slowly turn our backs to the audience.

Kathryn turns her back towards Dawn Marie. She states, “**Relationships.**” Kathryn crosses her hands across her chest and begins to slowly fall backwards into Dawn Marie's arms. For a moment, Dawn Marie holds her shoulders and then gently presses her back to her standing position. These brief holds signify the vulnerability necessary for reflexivity and the need to embrace it. This movement repeats itself as Dawn Marie cites bell hooks,

“Until white women can confront their fear and hatred of black women (and vice versa),

until we can acknowledge the negative history
which shapes and informs our contemporary interaction,
there can be no honest,
meaningful dialogue between the two groups” (102).

Silence

We turn and walk towards each other. Kathryn begins,

“We stand in agreement with Moraga,

“...(and) believe that the only reason women of a privileged class
will dare to look at *how* it is that *they* oppress,
is when they've come to know the meaning of their own oppression...

Looking from Kathryn to the audience, Dawn Marie finishes the citation,

“And understand that the oppression of others hurts *them personally*” (49).

This scene brings audiences to join us on our journey of reflexivity embodied. Through a performative moment, we extend the theory of reflexivity into action. More pressing, we capture what it means politically for white women to engage in reflexivity. Listening to feminists of color we connect theoretical notions of positionality, intersectionality, whiteness, love, and relationships to picture reflexivity through embodied movements. Interweaving the words of Madison, Calafell, Anzaldúa, hooks and Moraga with our personal narratives and movements reflects our process of learning reflexivity. Performative interaction allows for us to extend this dialogue to you as well.

The Utensil of Failure

We place our failure scene in the center of our performance with intention. This scene is the heart of our process towards reflexive engagement. Failure manifests where we as white (queer) women meet reflexivity within a process of relation. The Utensil of Failure exposes the realities of failures in relational work. While we acknowledge the jilted past between white women and women of color, we wrestled with the effects of this past in our present everyday relationships. Our struggles denote our failures. Our failures to “see” hurt those that did “see.” In the end, we had to rely on our body to navigate through these difficult relational terrains.

Our need to look to the body, pointed us to an enactment of improvisation to steer through our failures reflexively. Mary Catherine Bateson explains that we should look to our body as a means to work through the constantly unfamiliar realities of our lives. She challenges us to see improvisational moves as not only survival but empowering means of breaking linear ways of knowing. Reflexive improvisation 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. When one is truly invested in a relationship with another, our bodies know when we have failed them. Reflexive improvisation pulls on these embodied knowings to reflexively engage with these relational failures to work through our failures productively. We must lean on improvisation because each relational mishap will always look different, even if it is the same failure of not being self-reflexive. Thus reflexive improvisation points us to the processual nature of reflexivity and the embodied knowings that guild us through them.

Our failure scene is the one we resisted writing and yet knew needed to be. The improvisational nature of working through failures challenges us to never know how this scene will unfold. While failures are necessary for alliance work, we fear them. Improvisational reflexivity is the only way we productively maneuver through our relational failures. Holding hands, we transition. “The Utensil of Failure.” Even as we announce this scene our words shake and our tones drop. We stand behind a table littered with cooking utensils; flour, spices, a mixing bowl, and spoons. Off to the corner sits our “cookbook,” Carrillo Rowe’s *Powerlines* lays in wait. Within the norms

of “appropriate” white femininity, we tie our aprons and lift our heads to begin what may be yet another failure in our desire for reflexive engagement.

Scene Two: The Utensil of Failure

Dawn Marie lifts the “cookbook,” and points her finger towards the flour. She reads the recipe to the audience,

“With Carrillo Rowe,
we believe,
it is the *movement*, in and of itself,
that is a *productive* response to **our** encounters with *‘failure.’*”

If ‘feminist failure’ is a function of the countless betrayals we enact in our efforts to build solidarity among women, ...

...then the move home to investigate the politics of *our* locations
provides a **productive** rejoinder to the conjunction between the two” (53).

Dawn Marie sets the book down and shuffles through the different spices. With strained concentration and shaking hands, Kathryn adds flour to the bowl.

Dawn Marie sprinkles, and then dumps the entire cinnamon spice bottle into the bowl.

Dawn Marie looks to the audience,

“At times we have added too much of our voices to classrooms,
while only *pinches* (adds dash of nutmeg)
of women of color were *allowed* into the mixture.”

With confidence, she swipes her hand into the bowl and licks her finger. In a moment, her face twists from confidence to disgust. Her head hangs.

Selecting another spice, Kathryn lifts it and holds it high overhead.

“We have thought of *our* academic careers
as the **primary** ingredients of *our* lives,”

Her forearm swings across remaining spices, dismissing a few; others crash to the floor.

“We have **not** acknowledged the discrepancies

between women of *color*
and *white* women in the volatile ‘batter.’”

Lifting the sage spice, Dawn Marie opens to smell it. Crinkling her nose, and holding it in the air she looks to Kathryn,

“We have omitted recommendations from women of color
on how to improve the recipe,
thinking that *our way*
was the *most* delicious.”

She sets the sage to the corner of the table; she looks at it and turns her head and eyes away. Kathryn responds,

“Although we have **messed up**
and our imperfections have made the cake fall,”

In a moment of chaotic shuffling, the bowl crashes to the floor. The contents disperse all over our faces and bodies. The flour dust settles on a few audience members sitting in the front row. These people shift uncomfortably, recognizing they are implicated in our cooking failure.

Silence

Dawn Marie and Kathryn run to rescue their mixture. On their knees over the mess of flour, Dawn Marie's head hangs. With her hand on Dawn Marie's back, Kathryn continues,

“...our failures do not mean
we are not trying to improve ourselves as queer feminists,
that we are not willing to do the labor of *re-reading* cookbooks to
educate ourselves
to foster alliances.”

Reaching her hand to Kathryn's face, Dawn Marie gently wipes the flour from her cheek. She reaches for Carrillo-Rowe's book and reads,

“The work, then,
is to move *productively* **through**
the politics of failure
to adopt a posture that *absorbs* failure
into a process of remaking *self, home, and field...*” (53).

Retrieving the disregarding spices, Kathryn places the bowl on the table. Dawn Marie continues,

“...within such a turn
failures arise as *pivotal* moments

signaling the *soft spots* that arise
as we push on the limits of representation” (53).

With flour still lining our faces, we look at the mixing bowl, now empty, and begin to add flour and spices. Kathryn looks into the audience,

“Perhaps the best recipes begin in *chaotic confusion*.
Perhaps the best feminist alliances
begin with failures.”

Looking from Kathryn to the audience, Dawn Marie adds,

“There is no way to build authentic alliances
without *vulnerably embracing*
the moments of **our** reflexive failures.”

Kathryn pours the mixture into a pan while Dawn Marie pulls flowered potholders over her hands. Dawn Marie reaches over and pulls another dish out from the imaginary oven. Her face moves from new reassurance to sadness. Looking down at the pan she states,

“We may burn the edges of our dish,” Dawn Marie and Kathryn wave their hands over the pan, coughing,

“but through the smoke *and* despair
in recognizing and admitting *our* faults,
we see the possibilities of forming alliances.”

Kathryn begins to smile at the burned cooking disaster. She runs her hand down Dawn Marie’s arm and in a voice of encouragement, she looks to her and says,

“The vulnerabilities arising from our failures
have often been the greatest impetuses for
developing our ‘coalitional consciousness’(Keating).

It is **our failures**
that bring us back,
that propel us to keep *learning* and *growing*.”

In response, Dawn Marie finally grins. She nods in agreement and adds,

“Our failure is a form of *reflexive improvisation*
that *can* allow for the opening up of conversations
around racism, sexism, heterosexism, and other ideological systems.”

Together, we walk from behind the table into the audience. Looking into a white woman’s eyes Dawn Marie continues,

“So, let’s begin to embrace the notion of mishaps
Constructively...”

We each walk to another audience member, looking directly into a woman of color’s eyes, Kathryn states,

“*Warmly.*”
Eyes locked on you, we finish,
“*Femininely.*”

The Utensil of Difference

The Utensil of Difference scene builds off a performance workshop we attended in California several years ago. The workshop was sprinkled with a variety of different individuals, all at different places within their academic careers some undergraduate students, some graduate students, some full professors and other job aspiring doctorates. Our educational background is in Critical Cultural Communication, so the lessons of power and difference were familiar to us. The “cross-corporality” of our sexuality, straight and not straight, both white, thin, cisgender women informs the reflexive nature of this performative moment (Moreman and McIntosh 121). As white (queer) women, we are invested in any moment to manifest alliance motivations. Keating argues for “coalitional consciousness raising” that encourages feminists of intersecting positionalities to locate experiences, to examine experiences from multiple oppressions, and most importantly to practice “coalitional risk-taking” (94). Risk-taking is exactly what critical scholars engage with in regards to interrogating identity politics and engaging in reflexive engagement. What follows is a narrative that exposes the risks of resistive failure motivated by alliance desires; the risks of reflexive engagement within an experience of acknowledging relational difference.

As I stood amongst the other participants, the workshop leader began an exercise I had participated in many times. Standing us in a straight line he began to ask us to identify ourselves by stepping forward or backward depending on our particular positionalities. This cultural exploration is supposed to make you feel a bit uncomfortable, especially those that identify within the dominant norms. “Take a step forward if you

are white.” “Take a step backwards if you do not identify as white.” I step forward and watch as others step with me and away from me. This positionality is easy for me to recognize and understand. But as the leader walks us through other positionalities, my hands begin to sweat, wondering, should I step forward here or backwards? “Take a step forward...” “Step backwards if you...” The exercise continues. The room becomes filled with bodies once aligned now broken and standing as individuals along a powerline continuum.

“Take a step backwards if you identify as Gay, Lesbian, Transgender, Questioning, and/or Bisexual.” My eyes look to Kathryn. I know this step for her is always a proud and terrifying one for her to make. There is a pause. Our eyes meet and I feel her anxiety. I begin to bring my foot back towards her and she lifts her head and steps back.

Heaviness in my chest. I am a queer-femme, a queer-feminine expressing person, which often leads to my body being read as a straight, normative body. My bright purple eyeliner has been the focus of much attention this day and I know that without disclosing my identity as a queer-femme, no one will ever know. Sexuality, which is based in behavior, is not as visible as identities such as race and gender (Alcoff), which places it in a liminal space between a blessing and curse. My queer-femme identity is my gender and sexuality, but it is also a commitment to ending violence and trauma to all people; it is a fight for freedom of self-expression and definition; it is based in a politics of liberation and anti-oppression. It doesn't fit easily in my body or the one small step back that my body could take.

Is a politically queer-femme sexual identity enough to claim a GLBTQIQ identity? And if I identify as part of this group, part of the non-normative sexual deviants, then why don't more people step back? More people have to be feeling like sexual deviants at this performance workshop? Yet, if I don't step back then I risk being invisible, and because there are no other out queer women that step back, then I feel it is my duty to authenticate that we are indeed present. I look at Dawn Marie not knowing exactly what to do? I step back. As I do, she steps back with me and grabs my hand. A nod towards support at the least, and even solidarity. I feel her body holding space with mine, and I recognize that it is a joint step backward, not a separated step apart that makes this manageable.

In this moment, we realize why we dislike this exercise. It always sat in a place of tension for us both. Many might challenge us and say this is the pervasiveness of privilege, and seeing privilege so visibly feels uneasy. Having done this exercise several times we have been trained to see privilege and oppression and to process through these emotions extensively. We realized it was not a feeling of discomfort from recognizing our privilege, but the violent ways bodies are torn apart from one another. Anxiety filled our bodies as separation filled the entire room. This moment taught us that identifying difference is crucial but continuing the separation is painful. Cathy Cohen directs us to “recognize the potential for shared resistance” within and through difference (36). Differences must be recognized beyond categorical imperatives and work towards relationships of support; that is where the possibility of solidarity lies.

We took this lesson from our experiences with this exercise into our performance. The Utensil of Difference is not simply about acknowledging power latent within the material realities of our bodies but also movement towards relations within these differences. This movement is crucial for feminist alliances to take place. This is the crucial “step” we must take, once we deeply embody intersectional understandings of ourselves and others through a practice of reflexivity. In this scene, we perform the complexity of relational differences. Blending the words of Mohanty with movements, we rely on our cross-corporal differences and similarities to expose how people must intimately connect in order to understand the role of differences.

Scene 3: The Utensil of Relating Through Difference

We begin this scene standing together with our arms linked. Looking from Kathryn towards the audience, Dawn Marie begins to quote a line from Mohanty's *Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity*:

“In knowing differences and particularities,”

Silence

She begins to pull her arm away from Kathryn as she states, “Take a step if you identify as...”

Silence

Kathryn looks from Dawn Marie to the audience and continues with Mohanty's citation,

“We can better see the connections and commonalities”

Silence

She begins to separate her arm from Dawn Marie's. “Take a step if you identify as...”

Dawn Marie finishes the Mohanty citation,

“...because no border or boundary is ever complete or ridge determining...”
(226)

Stepping away from Kathryn, Dawn Marie continues “Take a step if you identify as...”

Kathryn's arms reached towards Dawn Marie's as she steps away simultaneously.

Together we say, “Take a step if you identify as...”

“Take a step away...”
“Take a step away”
“Take a step.”

Silence

Our bodies stand completely separated at the farthest points of the stage. Our arms begin to tremble from holding them towards each other and finally drop to our legs. The sound of our arms slapping our legs jolts the silence.

Kathryn begins the Mohanty citation again. The repetition signals familiarity and change into the performative air.

“The challenge is to see how differences allow us to explain the connections and border crossing better and more accurately,”

“Take a step *together*...”

Kathryn slowly lifts her leg and steps towards Dawn Marie. Her body heavy with the weight of the painful separation still present. Dawn Marie slowly lifts her head. With a voice of uncertainty she continues the Mohanty citation,

“How specifying difference allows us to theorize universal concerns more fully.”

She lifts her leg with her arms moving it towards Kathryn as her voice begins to grow more confident,

“Take a step together...”

Kathryn smiles and seems to proclaim the final conclusion of the Mohanty citation.

“It is *this* intellectual move
that allows for (our) concerns for women of different communities and identities
to build coalitions and solidarities across borders” (Mohanty 226).

With confidence, she steps towards Dawn Marie reaching her hand out,

“Take a step together...”

Dawn Marie lifts her hand towards Kathryn,

“Take a step together...”

“Take a step together”
“Step together”
“Step together.”

Arms linked again, our bodies signify the security of not only recognizing difference but also the imperative notion of relation that is necessary for us to embrace difference. Relational connection between bodies is imperative to press us beyond the painful breaks of difference and towards alliance constructions. Our arms linked, our chins high, we look towards the audience,

“We must step together.”

We simultaneously step together towards the audience and bow our heads.

Closing Curtain

In true spirit of performance work, we ended our performance by inviting the audience to participate in the performance. This by far was the most terrifying component of our performance. We not only exposed our shortcomings but now we ask others to embrace failures as well. In essence, we requested women of color in the audience, queer people in the audience, and queer feminists of color to accept the failures of white feminists, too. We called forth a challenge to begin alliance workings within that room. And like all performance fears, we did not know what would happen in doing so.

Now we ask you,

To take a step *towards* us,
If you have experienced oppression in your life.

Take a step *towards* us,
If you have experienced privilege in your life.

Take a step *towards* us,
If you desire to recognize failures reflexively.

Take a step *towards* us,
If you desire to build intersectional alliances.

The audience slowly surrounded us.
We held out our shaking hands and gradually a circle forms.

“Let us join together and in doing so,
Commit to fostering feminist alliances.”

I remember when the first audience member stood and walked towards us. A queer feminist of color, a colleague, a friend. She smiled and began her journey to the front of the room. Relief and hope washed over my body as my voice became slightly stronger. As the rest of the audience filtered up, it moved me in powerful ways. I looked to Kathryn and knew she was experiencing the similar sensations — performance exhilaration — and more. We had finally experienced movement beyond our failures and towards alliances. It certainly did not erase the past but it provided purpose to it. We manifested reflexive failures, which moves us towards alliance possibilities.

To do ethical performance work forces scholars to embody the material realities of scholarship. With hopes to unveil new understandings of alliance possibilities, our performance pressed our bodies in vulnerable spaces. We exposed our shortcomings in reflexivity, our alliance failures, and how understanding our differences foster alliance desires. Each scene walks the audience through what we find to be crucial steps for white women to embody reflexivity. The primary purpose of this essay is to outline the practice of reflexivity in our everyday lives. What does it mean to be reflexive? What does the actual process of self-reflexivity look like? How can we be reflexive enough to foster “bridge work” within and through difference? Reflexive engagement underlines the risks necessitated throughout the process of reflexivity; the risky business of deconstructing dominance, centering the disenfranchised voices, and in many ways vulnerably attempting to relinquish our privilege. Within these risks come great rewards of dismantling political forces which continue to separate bodies. Reflexive engagement challenges us to embody reflexivity not simply as a methodological ethic within interpretive and critical research but more so as an overall ethic of everyday being. Reflexive engagement asks us to take our reflexivity further through affects of motivations for alliances to build bridges of relations. What reflexive engagement taught us is the humbling realities of reflexive failures. Understanding how these failures worked reflexively pictures for us the praxis of reflexivity and moved reflexivity from a stagnant methodology practice to possibilities of alliances.

Scene one, *The Utensil of Reflexivity*, demonstrates our lessons in reflexivity by exposing the theoretical complexities necessary for white women to really engage reflexively with ourselves and others. Scene two captures these reflexive lessons by exposing the underpinnings of this alliance process: Failures. We expose our failures to you in order to demonstrate not only an understanding of our shortcomings but also to stress the importance of failures. Failures can be constructive and play an imperative role within relationships. White feminists must recognize that failure is part of the alliance process. We must embrace these moments as dialogic possibilities.

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. At some point, white women will overlook the politics of race and when we do so, we

fail; but to stop there continues the separation. Perfection is not attainable in relationships — failure is expected and should be embraced as part of fostering cross-cultural relations. Reflexive failure is the practice of 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.

Finally, *The Utensil of Difference* scene, demonstrates the importance of recognizing the power relations within difference, but beyond that, to embrace differences relationally. We must not become gridlocked by categorical differences but maintain movement within and through them. Moving beyond categorical differences acknowledges our commitments to one another by recognizing our differences to build alliances. Before white women can come to recognize our failures productively, we must first truly embody reflexivity and understand differences relationally. Our performance exposes these steps towards alliances to make our overall claim that we must embrace failures reflexively to effectively build solidarity with one another towards our collective liberation.

This performance aimed to embrace and forefront the epistemological contributions of women through the metaphor of cooking. While this may seem to build off of stereotypes, and to a degree it did, it was also purposefully suggesting that traditional feminine expressions should be honored. In doing so we also suggest that relating in feminine ways should also be honored. While femininity is no one specific concept, or even set of concepts, we chose to craft the performance around a ritual we both engage in and associate with our feminine expression. While our whiteness may seem to reify the very thing we are working against (a devaluation of women of color), we felt that this performance was our testament to our commitments as white women, and focused more on how, as white women, we are implicated in interlocking systems of oppression. We did not feel that it would work to tokenize women of color by subjecting them to be in our performance, instead through our narratives we brought those from contested identities into the performance. In this way, we demonstrated their impact through our performative interaction without perpetuating the pain we had originally created and wished to disrupt.

Our performance is not without its downfalls. A queer man of color stated he would not have attended knowing two white women were performing this piece, but explained that our performance challenged his preconceptions. He went on to point out that he would like to see sexuality forefronted. We understood the critique, but also suggests that too often, feminine gender identities and movements of intimacy are accepted as friendship rather than as eroticism (Lorde). These are the intersectional complexities that are often masked and misread. However, the point of this critique revealed the difficulties of exposing the intersectional nature of identities. With our narratives specifying racial complexities, the performance does seem to forefront some identities while covering others. This failure to represent intersectionality more

effectively is one we continue to struggle with. We find resolve by acknowledging that movements towards alliances require failures. We must recognize our role within these mishaps and reflexively engage through them.

This critique also reveals the importance of white women embodying intersectional calls of queer feminists of color. By blending our personal experiences, voices of women of color, and placing our white (queer) bodies on the line, we embody reflexive engagement in practice. Performance is an avenue more scholars should adopt to conceptualize the intersectional manifestations of our multiple identities. Performance provides us a means to embody the theoretical complexities of our alliance journey. We move theory into flesh. In doing so, our bodies can vulnerably teach the lessons white women must embrace to foster alliances. Before white women can acknowledge our relational differences we must practice reflexivity. Most importantly, reflexive failure provides a theoretical tool to move white women beyond the constraints of failures and dare ourselves to find the possibilities arising through them.

Now we ask you,

“Take a step *towards* us,
If you have experienced oppression in your life.

Take a step *towards* us,
If you have experienced privilege in your life.

Take a step *towards* us,
If you desire to recognize failures reflexively.

Take a step *towards* us,
If you desire to build intersectional alliances.”

With the audience now surrounding us, we hold out our hands and gradually a circle forms.

“Let us join together,
and in doing so,
commit to fostering alliances.”

With hands held, we look to you.

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