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# Performing Difference: Repetition in Context

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*In this essay, I sketch a performative, constitutive theory of difference that avoids the major trappings of this discussion in current communication scholarship. Building from Gilles Deleuze and Judith Butler, I argue that by focusing on difference in intercultural communication scholarship we can, as a discipline, create more complex understandings of people in cultural contexts. I first examine how difference has been written in communication scholarship. Second, I offer a reading of Deleuze and Butler who, together, provide the grounding for seeing the repetition of difference as political and contingent ontology. I conclude by examining an everyday context, showing how intercultural communication scholarship can benefit from this kind of analysis.*

I began my fascination with difference ironically when I applied for a job that I did not get. Indeed, I was not even interviewed, but the idea of the job held my imagination because of one line in the job ad. The job was for a position in "race and ethnicity" and was the first job I had ever been asked to apply for. So I did. One line in the job ad stated that I would, as the new hire, be able to participate in the formation of a new center on the study of difference, a campus-wide center dedicated to the topic. And I confess: I believed then (and now) that the idea of studying difference is a worthy and potentially rich topic to investigate. I was fascinated largely by the conversations I have had with folks about the topic of difference that was generated after my book on whiteness (Warren, 2003) was released. Some very smart readers whom I trust had asked, "What gets lost in the focus on whiteness—what kinds of critical examinations are lost in the effort to examine the specific site of

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whiteness?" No doubt, my response always was and is, much—much is gained by spending time and effort to really understand social structure, even if one is only examining part of it. Sometimes one can learn about the forest by examining the tree. But in some conversations, careful readers asked why I (and, I assume, others) talk about race (or gender, or class, or sexuality, or . . .) when what really is at stake here is the idea of difference—what makes person A different from person B (and how do such *differences* come to matter so much to us). In other words, as I was told by a scholar I respect greatly, "studying racism is passé." Continuing, s/he claimed that we needed to study difference, escaping the traps of such loaded terms like *racism* as it only politicizes the question and makes it hard to study what is really at stake. Besides my initial concern about the ease at which one might dismiss racism and its effects (and how scary that idea is to me as a critical intercultural scholar), I was also intrigued by what I took as a genuine desire to examine the root of the problem, a radical approach that seeks to not get tangled in the trappings of effects and see the productive mechanism of oppressive relations. The idea is good, even if the end result (to lose the sticky business of difference's products) serves to keep these systems (potentially) in place. I'm not willing to just drop the whole conversation on difference's effect in light of more "radical" approaches to the question. Seems wrong to drop the effects of what happens to "real" bodies in "real" contexts. Seems too easy to sit back in my armchair, stroke my white forehead as I contemplate "more important" issues. I cannot allow myself such privilege; certainly, I already have plenty. Indeed, a major impetus for writing this essay is to speak reflexively about the nature of my own research on difference, much of which falls into the very trappings I seek to disrupt in this essay. This essay is about me as much as it is about anyone; certainly, those works and scholars I build upon in these pages inspire the engagement here.

This essay has been a long time coming—it represents my efforts to find some way of understanding and theorizing difference that keeps two major commitments in tension. First, I desire here to theorize difference, to put forward a way of thinking about difference that might be useful as a way to understand not only the point of departure between people, but also as a way to see and talk about the very nature of subjectivity. To do this, I borrow from Judith Butler (1990a, 1990b, 1993) and Gilles Deleuze (1968/1994), both of who seek to understand subjectivity in complex and constitutive ways. Second, I hope to talk about difference in a way that makes a difference, in a way that acknowledges difference's effect on the lives and bodies of those marked by those differences, differences that matter. As I conclude, I call for more research and analysis of difference as theorized here, arguing that this work is essential for critical intercultural communication.

In the end, my goal in this essay is to begin scoping out a theory of difference that takes into careful account the effects of difference's production. To fulfill this, I turn to everyday moments from my classroom. As a teacher, I face (as so many in intercultural communication do) moments of disruption and dislocation in my own classrooms. These moments are not distinct from my research; indeed, they most often serve as the catalyst for extending and complicating my writing and thinking.

Take for instance a most elementary example of inadvertent racism so commonly used by students in the context of my intercultural communication classrooms: Jenny, in a discussion of whiteness, says, "I have friends of all colors; I don't even see race. I'm color blind." In these small moments, so much is happening. This offer of sameness, this performative of whiteness (Warren, 2003), surely remakes whiteness' dominance; yet, it also is something original, something new. As I move through this analysis, I will return to this simple utterance as a foil, a heuristic that I hope demonstrates the potential of this way of considering difference in production. I will also offer another example at the end of the essay, further demonstrating the potential I see in this way of viewing culture.

## On Difference and the Study of Culture

In her recent book *Difference Matters*, Allen (2004), following in the footsteps of scholars like Lorde (1984) and Johnson (2000) before her, makes an argument for difference based on the claim that "difference signifies how we tend to view identity (ours and others)" (p. 4). Allen then lays out the elements of difference, dedicating an individual chapter to race, gender, sexuality, ability, and age, noting how these elements of difference come to matter in or through our relationships. Each element of difference is richly examined. However, each is discussed independently, divorcing the production of difference from the element of difference focused on in the chapter. For instance, in her chapter on gender difference, she carefully notes how gender matters to us in our communicative lives; yet, she never then connects gender production with the other elements of difference the book offers in complex ways. In the end, the book is like many in communication—difference, as an empty concept signifying aspects of identity, is an umbrella term that "simply" summarizes the various components of our socially meaningful diverse identities without moving that analysis forward.[1] Added to Allen's work is the effort put forth by Cummins (2003) who examines difference and its conflation to deficit, arguing that such conflations work against marginalized groups. He specifically considers bilingual education, arguing that the efforts to end such programs are dramatically reducing the potential of schooling. In his work, like in Allen's (2004), Cummins leaves the notion of *difference* simply as *different* and, as a result, difference as a concept is left rather empty.

Consider another line of research, just as carefully crafted and just as well argued: difference as the key element of cultural debates on identity, a unifying theoretical concept that subsumes all elements within the frame. In Fenstermaker and West's (2002) edited collection *Doing Gender, Doing Difference*, they note that difference is "an ongoing interactional accomplishment" (p. 56). Here, gender, race, and class are examined via ethnomethodology to understand how certain differences are produced. The benefit of this analysis is that the mechanisms of difference are the focal point to the research. While this book is centered in sociology, its logic has far-reaching implications in the study of communication—many scholars in communication studies discuss difference quite distanced from the ways it plays out in our lives,

resulting in a lack of connection between "difference" and the often violent ways that "difference" is enacted. Indeed, the move to difference as a governing topic is a move to de-politicize the debate and, as the logic goes, get on to the fundamental elements of social order, assuming, of course, that such elements are beyond or escape the burden of politics. In education, Boler and Zembylas (2003) also try to take up difference more holistically positioning difference opposite "norms": "we outline a pedagogy of discomfort as an educational approach to understanding the production of norms and differences" (p. 111). In his example, even the notion of difference is set up as an opposition to a vague notion of norms, resulting in a simplified concept of difference that lacks the potential of this theoretical frame.

In both of these traditions, consider what is left undertheorized: in the first, there are limitations in treating difference as a frame for talking about lines of identity that might generate inequity, especially as an empty term that supposedly unites elements of power, but fails to advance any theoretical momentum for understanding power in production. Indeed, to talk about difference within this shallow conceptualization means difference as a concept never gets theorized fully. This is, of course, where the second line of thought or research picks up: here, difference is the major point of theory, trying to explain how we conceptualize and make matter those elements that define us. However, within this tradition, the political and social situatedness of these markers is dramatically undertheorized. Even in a fine book like Fenstermaker and West (2002), the conceptualization of difference still leaves one wanting for how and in what ways these elements affect our lived experiences. In fact, Collins et al. (1995), in a response to Fenstermaker and West's work, claim that by the end of their treatise on difference, "one by one, race, gender, and even class were erased" (p. 491). Communication studies (like sociology and education) has yet to fully develop a theory of difference that meaningfully connects the conceptual with the actual, the theory with the social consequences that result from difference. Perhaps the best example attempting to connect these two is Trinh T. Minh-ha's (1989) playful account of difference where she spins language to look at the very notion of difference. This is not fulfilled in any concrete manner necessarily (nor has it been taken up with any great dedication), but Trinh's work remains one of the only pieces to examine difference conceptually in a way that aims to change the very nature of how we understand sameness and divergence. I believe much more needs to be done; it is crucial especially for those of us in communication studies since we offer key ways of speaking to the issues involved in understanding the nuance of social difference.

## On Difference and Repetition

A colleague recently recommended Gilles Deleuze after reading some of my writing centered on Judith Butler's (1990a, 1993) gender performativity. In my work, I found Butler's notion of repetition useful as a metaphor for thinking about de-essentializing race, resituating race back within the communicative acts that have created it. In other words, race (specifically whiteness) is the product of communication, not the

origin. For me, this was important as so much of the literature framed whiteness as a relatively stable construct, often ignoring the historical context from which one might understand whiteness or race to be generated. For Butler (1990b), gender (and I would argue race) is a product of acts done (and repeated) over time. She argues that identity is a "*stylized repetition of acts*" (p. 270), a generative construct produced through ritualized norms celebrated or demonized in everyday contexts. It is the reward and punishment system of gender that compels one to adhere to the gender system. Indeed, I would extend her work to say that it is the multiple identity markers that we claim (and are claimed for us, with or without our knowledge or consent) that are fashioned in this way—we are products of the repeated messages we have been inundated with over time. How can I even imagine my own desire for gender without the discursive frames that precede my birth? I was a boy long before I had any say. And so, for Butler and I, identity is constituted through the acts that the subject undergoes.

As I read Butler (and indeed, celebrate what her scholarship has done for me), I find her focus is primarily on epistemology—that is, it is about how we come to know our gender (or any other identity marker) that is the aim of much of her work. Most ontological markers (who I am as a raced being) are framed within an epistemological code (how I come to know myself as a raced person).[2] In this way, very little matters about whom I am; what matters is how I come to know who I am and how that knowing is reproduced upon the lives and bodies of others around me. It is a useful redirection in many ways since the essence of who we are has been so condemned in our scholarly culture—ontology has come to mean essentialism and, we might chide, who needs that? After all, any link to ontology and you are "one of those people" who believe in some essential something that resists change and condemns us to reductive politics and bad scholarship. Or so I used to think. Indeed, I was the major proponent of this—I warned those who dare to utter "ontology" of the dangers of holding on to static notions of who we are. Any discussion of identity outside of an epistemological frame would only leave us without the tools to change. For if there is some essential something in me, then how can I imagine a future I can be proud to strive toward. Where is change in a world where things must, by definition, stay the same?

In Deleuze, I have learned that by saying one (epistemology) was good and the other bad (ontology), I was trapped in a binary logic that never allowed me to actually account for who we are—why must ontology (1) be so negative and (2) be so rigid? Part of this might be our discomfort as communication scholars to talk about ontology in a sophisticated manner. Part of this might be that since our scholarship is on communication, we tend to align ourselves with the mechanisms of production since it is in communication that we come to know—epistemology is, in many ways, the natural place for us to lay our energies. But I fear what happens when we sidestep ontology, when we focus too little on what I think is actually an important question for us as communication scholars: who are we? This is significant for we often live our lives with a sense of who we are, even if we tend to only theorize how we know it.

Both are important questions, especially, I think, for intercultural communication scholars who are studying people in their diverse contexts.

What I offer here in terms of Deleuze (1968/1994) are moments—those ideas that help me to understand what difference is, what it means to consider ontology in the face of discussions about difference. To this end, I borrow the concept of animations from Slack's (2003a) excellent volume on Deleuze and Guattari. In this edited collection, Slack notes that the purpose of their collection is to "enliven the work of Deleuze and Guattari by using their vocabulary and concepts to find new and invigorating ways to engage scholarship and life" (Slack, 2003b, p. vii). Indeed, as Grossberg (2003) argues in his introduction to the volume, it might be productive to "open up the necessity for further reflection of the very meaning (and possibilities) of terms (and practices)" generated by such philosophical work (p. 5). I try to embody that ethic here as I draw from Deleuze's (1968/1994) *Difference and Repetition*.

### On Difference's Conflation with Opposition

First, and perhaps most important for my work, is the reminder that in work on culture, identity always receives a better reception than difference. From Deleuze: "It is not difference that presupposes opposition but opposition that presupposes difference, and far from resolving difference by tracing it back to a foundation, opposition betrays and distorts it" (1968/1994, p. 51). In large matter, difference has been conflated to opposition, reduced to a binary that is pitted against something else. In this way, difference is seen as a negative, rather than a positive. Continuing, he notes "difference is the object of affirmation or affirmation itself. In its essence, affirmation is itself difference" (p. 52). My first major discovery, as a thinker about culture, is that difference need not be coded in the negative, as an opposition (i.e., I'm different from you), but could be seen as an affirmation (i.e., I'm unique and so are you). In many ways, this is an elementary idea: difference is the inevitable thread that makes us who we are and that can be a beautiful thing. This is not the same as saying that we are all different and therefore all the same; rather, it is to say that there is variability within presumed categories of people and if we want to understand how power works we need to invest careful attention to particularity and avoid the trappings of binary logics.

In my own work, building a notion of difference as affirming would be important since I've spent much of my efforts seeking out how difference (and the concomitant power imbalance) is bred through minute, everyday performances. In this effort, I've tried to pay careful attention to the workings of identity. In doing this, I've sought to examine that which is shared, but in doing so, I've repeated the errors of thinking about difference as the problem. That is, I only identify those places where difference causes division, re/creating inequities; in doing that, I repeated the logic that difference is only something that hurts or constrains us. Deleuze (1968/1994) reminds us that "all identities are only simulated, produced as an optical 'effect' by the more profound game of difference and repetition" (p. xix). That is, whiteness (as an example) is set up as unified (even if I try to problematize the conflation of those

people within a grouping); this whiteness is necessarily opposed to something else, creating an illusion of identity, simulacra defined. This illusory identity is often posed in this research against the all-encompassing "people of color." While the intentions are sound, the underlying conflation of difference in service of identity is troubling when one examines the assumptions that allow such distinctions to be so easy. In such groupings and the oppositions such groupings signify, I, regardless of how much I code the categories in epistemological language (we learn whiteness, but that whiteness is not natural), reconstitute the stability these categories represent. Part of the problem in my work is the reliance on "identity" as the framing of the question, rather than difference. My avoidance of difference (or, said another way, my overly simplified use of difference) is, in part, due to the negative ways it frames the self—identity certainly earns one more points.

Return for a moment to Jenny and her commonly offered comment "I am color blind." In such moments, we hear the phrase and, upon taking in that speech, move to interpretation. In that act, suggests Deleuze (1968/1994), we simplify that comment and link it to others we have heard in the past. The comment is categorized and linked to others we have heard that are similar. Here, we create a simulation or generalization of that speech, erasing its distinct properties and rendering it one of a kind, often set in contradistinction of something else. Why this translation moment is significant is evident when one seeks to theorize how racist speech works to recenter power and sustain normative relations. That is, if our intercultural work is based on simplified interpretation of speech in an effort to name identities, patterns, and commonalities, we fail to see how in its particularity, the speech may be functioning slightly differently. In my own work in whiteness, it is quite possible that in my attempt to name patterns, the patterns themselves contain nuance that could have had greater ability to disrupt how whiteness works and how privilege gets remade. This point leads to the second element of Deleuze (1968/1994) I wish to offer that can be quite appealing: a reformation of ontology.

### On Repetitions of Difference as Our Essential Nature or Being

For Deleuze (1968/1994), the project of philosophy and the goal of studying difference is to name, to articulate, a "political ontology," a way of seeing who we are as individuals in the world (May, 2005). Deleuze (1968/1994) builds from Nietzsche's notion of the eternal return, claiming that

> [i]n all respects, eternal return is the univocity of being, the effective realization of that univocity. In the eternal return, univocal being is not only thought and even affirmed, but effectively realized. Being is said in a single and same sense, but this sense is that of eternal return as the return or repetition of that which is said. The wheel in the eternal return is at once both a production of repetition on the basis of difference and selection of difference on the basis of repetition. (pp. 41–42)

I find this compelling—a consideration of difference as an ontological state. As I summarize Deleuze, ontology is, essentially, a repetition of difference—that is, ontology is a transformative and fluid state, characterized by repetitive acts that are

always unique, even if they are historically informed repetitions. Being is fluid, adaptive, and always anew; we are always generating anew, never "simply" repeating. This is significant and, forgive the play on words, new for me. As a reader of Butler (1990b), I've used repetition as a guiding frame for understanding identity, remembering her classic "identity is a stylized repetition of acts" (p. 272). But as I read Butler, I rarely am asked to think about repetition as a making of something new; rather, I am (I think) asked to think of it in the frame of redoing, as if one can repeat the act in question.[3] So when I repeat a gendered performance, it reiterates the normative constructions of gender. Thus, the act of repetition always felt very much like the "doing the same again." When I read Deleuze (1968/1994), he reminds me that, indeed, it is always an original act. This is an important point of departure between Deleuze and Butler.

Perhaps an example might help. When I was a kid, my favorite toy was an invisible ink book that, with the aid of your yes-no pen, would make the answers appear when you rubbed the indicated area of the book. Thus, you could play hangman or trivia games; they were great fun for a long car ride to the grandparents. A good game in this book was a look alike game, with a series of drawings that all closely resemble each other. Indeed, only 2 of 9 would "be the same;" the rest would have some subtle differences (perhaps an extra stripe on a shirt or a different lace on a shoe). The point of the game was to determine which images were different and which were the same. Yet, the key here is all the images are different, if seen in a more complex manner— each are different in terms of location, each are a recreation of the theme, even if the differences are beyond what the eye can determine. Returning to my ongoing example of race, one can see the implications with greater consequence. When someone says "I'm color blind," the act, the moment of articulation is not a simple repeating of a common (if well meaning) racist utterance. Rather, it is a complex repetition, a newly voiced saying of it. Not only will the utterance's time be its own, but the intonation will be different, the purpose will be different, as will (potentially) the subject of the utterance. Even if I say the phrase twice: "I'm color blind. I'm color blind," the acts will be their own, even if the subtleties are beyond our perception. What these utterances share is not of the same, but they will share the fact of difference. They will be new sayings, even if they fit within a convention. Butler (1997) reminds us that it is the convention (the citation of familiar tropes) that makes certain speech acts so powerful (i.e., a racist form of speech), but the convention is categorical, not unified. The significance is that we need both to see the saying within the trope of racist speech, but also with critical eyes that allow us to see how it is unique and shifting within (and in the service of sustaining) that trope.

Here, Foucault might serve as a good reminder of how classification and order are established, that is, how convention, itself, is constituted. In *The Order of Things*, Foucault (1970) basically deconstructs the process of classification, the making of similarity and difference, arguing that culture superimposed a vision of order upon the natural world, rendering certain groupings (and grids of seeing) the status of the taken for granted. Thus, Foucault's work in this study was to conduct an archeology of knowing, coming to see how we come to know through our organizational

schemata. Like his study of discipline (1977) or madness (1956), he seeks to uncover the mechanisms of production, to see how such orders have been established and how in the production of these organizational processes, the role of culture has been obscured leaving how we see appearing natural. The import of this work for the present conversation lies in Foucault's reminder that what we take as meaningful categories are often socially created and repeated—the illusion that they are natural or inevitable only work to continue to promote their power. Foucault (1970) is interested in

> a history of resemblance: on what conditions was Classical thought able to reflect relations of similarity or equivalence between things, relations that would provide a foundation and a justification for their words, their classifications, their systems of exchange? What historical *a priori* provided the starting-point from which it was possible to define the great checkerboard of distinct identities established against the confused, undefined, faceless, and, as it were, indifferent background of differences? (p. xxiv)

Foucault goes on to note that what is a history of madness could be a history of order in another culture or point of view. Here, we come to see even the seeking of identity—the seeking of that which subjects share—is built on faulty ground, problematic (in as much as they are created and then obscured) foundations. Thus, even repetition (as a repeating) cannot be the same, as the markers we seek to look at are themselves obscuring other possible patterns, many of which may suggest quite a bit of divergence. This supports the notion that when an act is done (some iteration spoken, some bodily movement made, etc.), it is always an original act—its originality is only being obscured by the lenses of our perception, a falsehood imposed on us by our cultural past, imbued with the ideology any culture will inevitably produce.

  Returning to this notion of a political ontology, an ontology of difference, we can see direct links to the study of social classification. The idea of being (ontology) as always constituted anew, always a repetition of differences, is key for the study of, to name but one site of difference enacted, racism. In my work on whiteness (i.e., Warren, 2003), I struggled to articulate whiteness' production because it appeared to me that these repeated acts should provide some space for catching whiteness. That is, one studies something in order to understand it; within critical theory, the goal is usually to change that something that causes us distress. But in my own writing, I note that whiteness slips, obscures itself even when we try with all our might to grab it. Like Johnson's (2003) notion that blackness is slippery, I too have tried to describe this notion in whiteness, that elusive something-nothing that works its magic even as it evaporates. With Deleuze, this is a characteristic much easier to name: whiteness, as ontology (which is the only frame to understand how whiteness can be slippery since epistemology can only account for how we know—knowing *what* is the question that leads us back to being: isn't the *what* an ontological question?), is a repetition of difference. That is, race or whiteness (and thus racism and white supremacy) is always an act of creativity, an act anew—its or our ontological status is always in the productive process of renewal and change, thus these systems are harder to change or

account for fully given that they are (ontologically) new, shifting to accommodate any process for change. Certainly, they occur within common tropes, as Butler (1997) reminds us, citing convention, even if they are original. In a sense this is the root of Butler's notion of a failed copy, the notion that within gender, one is always failing to reproduce the idealized image we share of gender. All our performances of gender, for Butler, are failed copies, drag performances where we attempt to emulate the ideal. These failures are inevitable; they are, as Deleuze (1968/1994) would remind us, the definition of repetition, always different by nature. The implications for the study of racism (and I would propose sexism, classism, ableism, and heterosexism) are great—first, we can see the ontological nature of difference as repetition; second, we can account for the difficulty of naming and securing the phenomenon itself.

## On Difference as Ephemeral

This leads to my last major contribution from Deleuze: The reason that one cannot simply repeat any act is because of the ephemeral nature of repetition.

> The rule of discontinuity or instantaneity in repetition tells us that one instance does not appear unless the other has disappeared—hence the status of matter as *mens momentanea*. However, given that repetition disappears even as it occurs, how can we say "the second," "the third," and "it is the same"? It has no in-itself. (1968/1994, p. 70)

Thus, for Deleuze, a repetition is an act that disappears as soon as it occurs, an act that once it is, it is no more. This is significant because all we are left with is the memory, the image in our mind—an image that is at once put into a kind of simplified reproductive machine and consolidated in our minds with those previous acts that we consider similar. In the moment of, for instance, hearing "I'm color blind" we lose the specifics in that flash, in that instant, and are left with only that which we can perceive. We link that utterance to what utterances appear similar, making the moment just another of a kind and thus perceive it as a repeated saying. We are, in a sense, left with only a simulation of the moment. Deleuze is very good about describing this and it is worth a lengthy quote:

> The past is then no longer the immediate past of retention but the reflexive past of representation, of reflected and reproduced particularity. Correlatively, the future also ceases to be the immediate future of anticipation in order to become the reflexive future of prediction, the reflected generality of the understanding (the understanding weights the expectation in the imagination in proportion to the number of distinct similar cases observed and recalled). In other words, the active syntheses of memory and understanding are superimposed upon and supported by the passive synthesis of the imagination. (p. 71)

At once, the act or observation is done, it is condensed into memory and begins to change and adapt into what our mind can grasp. We perceive it in conjunction with other like acts or observations. In this moment, we engage in interpretation, changing the thing different into an imagined representation of the act or observation—in effect, making it appear the "same." In other words, our past is always simulacra,

always a reflexive construction of the past. The everyday data we might identify from daily observations or enactments are superficially imposed on our imaginations, becoming only echoes of what really was.

How important is this for the study of racism? How much would this advance my argument about how racism persists, especially given that what I mark and detail in my ethnographic work is only the simulation of racism, never careful enough to get to the thing itself (a series of reportings of failed copies, always allusions of what was—note, this is, I think, more significant than the simplistic notion that we are subjective viewers of culture)? This is important because it frames the analysis and demands greater specificity of how I/we study the various environments we might find ourselves in, indeed, a different way of seeing and talking about what we are seeing. When faced with the repetition of "I am color blind," we might be able to move away from the relatively simple pattern (this is an erasure of power, an erasure of the historicity of race) and see instead the complexity (this is a new, momentary iteration of racist discourse that is doing something unique in this time and place). I feel this move to particularity will advance the level of our analysis and dramatically increase our ability to be agents of interruption, critique, and change.

These three elements drawn from Deleuze are important to me as a researcher of race and culture. These lessons are important to me as someone who is frustrated with how we, as a discipline, talk about difference. It is important since we have such an undertheorized conception of difference and identity, often relying on elementary definitions of these important terms (I say this, noting that I have done much of this in my own work). In the next section, I try to bridge these ideas with a more coherent way of studying difference writ large, offering a specific context to ground the ideas.

## On Difference Enacted: An Example in a Different Context

To reinforce my argument here, I offer another example that I hope demonstrates the potential of this way of viewing culture. Here, I offer the following event from my own classroom, followed by an investigation of how an analysis such as I offer above might help intercultural scholars understand what happens when a difference is named in a community. This relatively "simple" example, I hope, provides some important ways of understanding how Deleuze and Butler can be useful analytical tools in understanding repetition in context.

I teach a large introduction to communication theory course at my current university, often having upwards of 80 students at a time. In these contexts, I struggle with bringing my passion for theory to them in meaningful ways. My teaching, often so much more effective in smaller contexts, seeks translation, bringing the ideas and concepts in the book to life in their own experiences. A ritual in this classroom, like so many large lecture classes, is the passing of an attendance sheet for students to sign: On the left side of the page, I have their names typed; on the right side, I have spaces for them to sign. This ritual is important in part because it represents my belief that in order to be a member of a classroom community, one has to be present; it is also important because students want credit for being in class, preserving their allotted

absence days for important life circumstances. It was early in the semester and I was doing a brief lecture on hooks' (1992) notion of theory as a libratory practice, asking students to see the power and potential of theory, and my attendance sheet comes back to me after class with "FAG" written next to a student's name. A concerned student (who was not the named student) brings me the sheet, her own pen marks deeply scratched on top of the still clear text. The writing is clearly not the student's own, his presumed identity (rightly or wrongly) called out in this class (my class) ritual. In this moment, I am faced with a series of emotions. As someone who identifies as bi, the naming does not escape me completely, even if this moment is not about me. I also do not know who either authors are; I am not sure who the named student is, not to mention who it was that did the naming. I know that this needs to be addressed, but how to do so without this address serving as another violent naming is not at all clear. I need to acknowledge this public breach (as it was seen by the students during the attendance sheet's passing)—this naming is both anonymous and public. It is, to say the least, a moment where I am faced with attending to difference as it makes itself present in my classroom. And I want to do the naming, and the student who was named, justice.

In order to examine this moment from a Deleuzian point of view, we must understand the written utterance within an ontological frame, understanding this moment within a framework of difference. Consider these three points of investigation that bring to the surface some of the potential of considering difference in this moment: first, we can see the citation (based in a careful reading of both Butler and Deleuze), as a repetition of a name that instantiates a difference between the named student and the student who does the naming. Here, name-calling works to propose, publicly, some sort of difference, simultaneously reconstituting heterosexual privilege at the same time. Its power to do all of this relies, as Butler (1997) makes clear, on convention by allowing the historicity of the word to function as a form of force—its punch, in other words, is a product of its past usage. Yet, what sustains this utterance's power is not that it is the same as its past usage, but in its originality. It is because this new citation of hate speech (if I can use this characterization) occurs anew; its usage in this time, in this place, in this way, to this person, within this form, is an original saying. In this way, its infliction of violence, evidenced by the disruption it caused not only to me but also to the class itself, is fresh; we are, as Butler (1997) reminds us, knocked out of context when hit with such a name. Its ability to have the power to hurt is based in the word's historicity, its hurt is a product of its original use.

Second, consider how the utterance quickly becomes one of a pattern—indeed, when I first saw the word sketched across my attendance sheet, I immediately saw the word within a frame of those other times I encountered that word in the past. That is, I remembered walking down the hall in junior high school and hearing other boys say that to me; I remembered friends telling me heartbreaking stories of their bodies being named (often with more physical violence accompanying the naming); I remembered all those hearings from the past (all those times that constitute its historicity, its power). In the moment of locating this utterance within that frame—in my own perception of this event—I turn this original utterance into one of the same.

In my mind, the event becomes a kind of simulacra—a simulation of the real that glosses over any differences that might make this moment different, that might shed light on how this event provides unique opportunities to understand how power is coming to be *in this particular time, in this particular context* (Baudrillard, 1994; Deleuze, 1968/1994). Within this frame, I can begin to understand in more concrete ways the process of erasure that happens in everyday life where difference is simplified to similarity, where complexity and differentiation is categorized and synthesized in my own imagination.

Third, I can also understand the process of identification at play in this experience—that is, the desire to see this as (1) a product of identity politics and the process of reproducing hetero/sexism (which it surely does); and (2) the only process of differentiation that I am, in the cultural context of my classroom, drawn to, thus recreating difference (and the calling out of difference) as a negative thing to see (and do). Taking each separately, the marking of this injurious speech, as Butler (1997) might rightly call it, does reiterate and remake hetero/sexism and the result of it, within this critical framing, remakes sexuality a difference that matters and enacts violence upon the receiver(s). That production of difference carries with it exclusion, insult, and a historicity that marks the receiver (and the other students and myself as teacher) bodily: With the citation of hate speech, as a disciplinary mechanism, "it is always the body that is at issue" (Foucault, 1977, p. 25). In this way, it is important to note how difference, through the use of this naming mechanism, is negative in as much as it enacts a kind of violence in the writing of it on the attendance sheet. However, the fact that this is the only time in the classroom that differentiation comes to my mind, the only time such processes arise to the center of my attention, is significant. What other mechanisms of difference were (or have been) cited in this classroom context? For instance, the attendance sheet itself is a specific calling out of difference—its central purpose is, of course, to mark difference (i.e., literally, who is there and who is not). In some ways, this is a very useful marker as it grants credit for one's presence in the class itself. One can also consider the various acts that teachers and students normally do in this kind of context: students' raised hands, a teacher calling on students, dialoguing (in this instance) about hooks' view of theory—a content differentiation, the marking of time from "free time" to "class time," the change of PowerPoint slides, and the like. In these moments, violence is not necessarily at play; in fact, often such markers of difference are affirming, building community, granting credit for good work, generating discussion and learning, and celebrating the unique, shared classroom time together. Even if these moments feel "like last semester," the teacher knows, bodily, that these moments are fresh, are new, as each semester brings new students, new experiences, and new ways of seeing to the classroom. Difference, in this way, is not about violence, it is about understanding the very nature of being in the classroom—it is the ontological state of the classroom, of the teacher, the students. It is a vision for understanding the very nature of subjectivity within this classroom space.

As a frame for understanding this "event" (Stewart, 1995), a theory of difference changes how we understand "what happens" within intercultural settings. What I

hope this example shows is that while it is productive to understanding how difference, as enacted via hate speech as noted above, *can* yield oppressive conditions, it is not productive to only understand difference within this frame. Indeed, because a repetition of difference as a political ontology offers a complex way of understanding culture, the implications for critical intercultural communication studies are great. In the concluding section of this essay, I offer what I think of as the payoff of this way of considering culture, especially as it relates not only to the study of intercultural communication but also as a way of understanding the material effects of difference's production (that is, how difference comes to matter in the lives and bodies of those named violently within unequal power relations).

## On Repetitions of Difference

Returning for a moment to why I got invested in difference, I have been asked in recent months to talk more about whiteness. In doing that, I have tried to make connections beyond the locale of whiteness itself. I do this not because I think my work in whiteness research has failed to generate a heuristic way of seeing whiteness in production, but because I think the implications of the work are (potentially) beyond the study of whiteness, indeed beyond the study of racism. I think some of my work (and so many others in intercultural communication) could offer a way of seeing the reiteration (and effect) of power (in various manifestations) itself, a look at the reconstitution of a system of power (always shifting and always changing) and how that system perpetuates itself. That is, the machine of whiteness (those connections produced through time) is part of a larger system that produces inequality. When I say, "I'm color blind," I'm not only recreating racism and whiteness anew, I'm also reproducing the larger system of inequality. One enactment of difference (constructed in our minds as opposition, but not naturally so) reproduces all systems of difference. This is key in the national debate on power, especially for those so willing to endorse progressive politics in race, but condemn marriage equality—the reiteration of hetero/sexism is not just inconsistent; it is generative of power across all elements of difference. This is to say, if we shift our thinking to examine difference (not only the nature of it as ontology, but as a mechanism of power), we can foster a productive theory of power that reads difference across contexts and situates specific enactments (i.e., racism, sexism, etc.) within the general domain of power, understanding how and why our theories have yet to capture or speak back effectively to its production. This is important because this theory is (1) inherently communicative, and (2) situated within the lives of the people we study, not to mention the lives we each live. A hopeful and complex theory of difference in context might be able to do the work of social action in ways not yet imagined.

The major problem with current discussions of difference in communication is that we do not have the same sophistication in talking about difference conceptually as we do talking about aspects of culture (race, gender, sexuality, etc.). When talking conceptually about difference, we often either conflate all differences as the same of a

kind or we tend to build on the notion of differences, separating out the sites of difference actualized (race, gender, etc.). Both ignore difference as a concept, both erase the heuristic nature of how power is produced in social interaction. That is, if we consider difference as proposed by Deleuze (1968/1994), we can see a more complicated way of seeing how power is at play. First, arbitrary separations of racism, sexism, heterosexism, and so forth only work to erase the points of difference that exist within the groups themselves. Indeed, given that each act is new, the reduction leaves the very concepts (race, gender, etc.) distant from each other, erasing the potential of seeing them in concert (Allen, 2004; Johnson, 2000). That is, without a careful analysis of how difference is generated and how it sustains itself across various enactments of power, we only talk around the issue. This is also true for those who wish to avoid the trappings of race and gender (and class, sexuality, etc.) and discuss difference itself. Often, such conversations fail to account for the phenomena in complex enough ways (Fenstermaker & West, 2002). Fenstermaker and West's book does attempt to draw the conclusion that difference is a social accomplishment (and they do provide some tempting examples), but ultimately draw a less-convincing case for difference outside of the markers of difference. Indeed, in their efforts to locate the patterns of difference in production, they conflate each act as one of the same, one act within the pattern of acts. In this moment, the divisions they might seek to frustrate (i.e., class and gender and race) are reconsolidated even as difference, as Deleuze (1968/1994) might say, is effectively reduced to its simplest similarities.

What I propose is needed in communication studies research, specifically the research in the site of culture, identity, and difference, is a more careful and nuanced point of analysis. That is, we need to change the way we talk about difference. One way to do so is the Deleuzian approach I offer here. We can respecify how, in communicative interaction, difference is produced and conceptualized. By embracing difference and understanding the repetition of difference as the ontological status of humanity, we might be able to refigure what we mean when we discuss who we are and how we understand our relationships with each other. In May's (2005) excellent summary of Deleuze and his impact on Western thought, he notes the following about Deleuze's project:

> [L]anguage overspills itself, always doing more than it can say. And we have begun to think of this world as well, moving beyond the dogmatic image of thought we have inherited toward a new, more agile, thought that palpates what it cannot conceive and gestures at what it cannot grasp. (pp. 114–115)

What Deleuze brings (and what I'm attracted to and, perhaps, not yet able to say with eloquence) is the hope embedded in reconceiving of who we are to such a degree that in order to live as he would have us live, we would be able to make connections in much more productive and hopeful ways. What that looks like is, as of yet, perhaps unthinkable, beyond the edge of our current thinking. It is what Britzman (1995) might describe beyond the limits of thinkability, the place where our imagination is constrained by our current mode of thinking. Indeed, Deleuze does not prescribe a way to live, but makes it clear that we might do it in more hopeful ways.

Where can communication studies fulfill this mission? I propose two points of entry for us. First, I think that pushing Deleuze into intercultural communication is key. I don't recommend just offering his work to communication scholars which has been done on a small scale already;[4] rather, I recommend adapting his work toward a more communication-centered focus (this has been done well in a number of works, including race theory by Nakayama & Krizek, 1995). I think Deleuze's writing can be advanced if we more fully account for the centrality of communication in theorizing about difference.[5] The work of citationality (as described in my classroom example above) could greatly advance his claims about difference, showing *how* difference is constituted within cultural scenes. I suspect much can be gained by writing communication into his work in ways that have not yet been fully explored.

Second, I propose a more complicated discussion of identity. That is, in much of intercultural communication, identity becomes the key word that we use to describe our (or others') self and is taken as if we know what we mean when we say it. Like difference, identity can be further pushed, further complicated. For instance, looking back at my own work, I still find myself taking much for granted when I talk about identity (Warren, 2003). We, as a discipline, would benefit from continuing our discussions of what we mean when we say "identity." For me, I've recently become interested in Ricoeur's (1992) notion of the self and I end here on his discussion of these pressing issues:

> "Who am I, so inconstant, that *notwithstanding* you count on me?" The gap between the question which engulfs the narrative imagination and the answer of the subject who has been made responsible by the expectation of the other becomes the secret break at the very heart of commitment. This secret break is what makes the modesty of self-constancy differ from the Stoic pride of rigid self-consistency. (p. 168)

Ricoeur (1992) locates his theory of the self within communication, within a communicative context with others (in a sense, an intercultural interaction). Thus, identity is constituted through the expectations of the self in relation to some other(s). Ricoeur finds the seeming paradox that the self is "so inconstant, that *notwithstanding* you count on me"—that the self is both obligated to hold up expectations by some other, even while we celebrate the fact that we are always changing—refreshing and points to the tensive location of the self in culture. Here, we can see some of the key principles of Deleuze brought to the site of the speaking subject. That is, what Deleuze does for discourse and the repetition of difference, Ricoeur makes possible for understanding the very constitution of the self. We might find some important links here with communication, as it is in the interaction with others that the self is produced (Butler relocated in spaces with others, reinforcing the ways our social identities are always subject to evaluation and recognition).

I end by noting that I think critical intercultural communication has the ability and context to raise the stakes for communication generally. Surely intercultural scholars, who incorporate a more critically informed and social justice orientation to their work, can affect how we understand communication as the major force in constructing self, other, and the very blueprints of our understandings. My major

push here is that without a critical intercultural perspective *for the field*, we will continue to repeat the problems of a discipline that is often perfectly comfortable in theorizing communication and communicators in apolitical terms. We hold the power to change the conversation across the board. I hope we do.

## Notes

[1]   I want to pause here in order to clarify my analytic point of critique: I am concerned not with the quality of work done under the rubric of intercultural communication, but rather with how "difference" as a conceptual frame has been used. Allen's (2004) book is thoughtful, reflective, and analytic—it is a rich and powerful text considering race, gender, and the like as it plays out through our daily lives. My concern with her book is not the quality of her analysis, but rather how difference as a concept is theorized. The work of intercultural scholars like Allen has been (and continues to be) important, uncovering how power underlies a variety of social inequities (see, for instance, some of Allen's other impressive works: Allen, 1995, 2007). Within intercultural communication, there is a long tradition of important critical scholarship examining power, much of which helps me in identifying my question(s) concerning difference generally (see these important essays, only a recent selection of some of the powerful work done in the service of researching how difference has come to matter in our lives—race studies: Fuoss, 1999; Watts & Orbe, 2002; feminism: Blair, Brown, & Baxter, 1994; Johnson & Bhatt, 2003; queer theory/studies: Corey, 1996; Gingrich-Philbrook, 1998; class-based analyses: Fiske, 1991; Nainby & Pea, 2003; and countless others). My concern for this paper lies in our conceptualization of the term *difference* and how it is used in our scholarship.

[2]   Certainly, Butler does talk about ontology, but the general frame of her work centers around coming to know, repetition as a form of learning that constitutes the self. Ontology is featured early in her work on gender performativity, where she notes: "More appropriate, I suggest, would be a vocabulary that resists the substance metaphysics of subject-verb formations and relies instead on an ontology of present participles. The 'I' that is its body, of necessity, a mode of embodying, and the 'what' that it embodies is possibilities" (Butler, 1990b, p. 272). Here, the being of ontology shifts to becoming—this, as I will show, is very similar to Deleuze. However, the bulk of her work is about how one learns or comes to know the process of becoming. Thus, the language of ontology in Butler's work is largely within epistemological terms.

[3]   Borrowing from Turner (1974), Butler (1990b) argues, "social action requires a performance which is *repeated*" (p. 277). This section of her essay specifically discusses her conception of repetition, noting that enactments are never "original" or about "individual choice" (p. 277). However, what is important here is the tendency to see performativity as both varied acts that are also repeated or repeatable. What I find so informative here is the notion that while these acts sediment into cultural norms, what gets lost in Butler is the influence of how the variation matters—that is, it is in the variation within performativity (the uniqueness of each performance), that our phenemonena (i.e., sex, gender, race, etc. . . .) changes. This can be seen, to name but one way, in her focus on performativity to the exclusion of performance, resulting in a focus on pattern over particularity. Butler discussed patterns and specific acts in part when she talks about performances as "failed copies," noting that it is through such failings that we have the potential to change (1990a). The focus for Butler is how such failings provide the potential for subversion, noting that the failings also generate the very ground for normative persistence. However, the focus on normativity here is not as nuanced as it is for Deleuze who adds much more complexity and energy on this point.

[4]     Surely, researchers in communication studies have made use of Deleuze's work. Though much of the work has focused on Deleuze and Guattari's *Thousand Plateaus*, not much has centered on Deleuze's work alone. For examples of Deleuze and Guattari's work, consider Coonfield (2006) who uses *Thousand Plateaus* to examine action star Jackie Chan "in order to sketch the affective/perceptual/kinetic terrain of the machinic" (p. 285). Also, Slack's (2003a) edited book *Animations (of Deleuze and Guattari)* was inspired by a reading group of the Deleuze and Guattari classic. Most scholarship on Deleuze himself is by cultural studies scholars: see, for instance, Ford's (2005) study of Deleuze and detectives; Wark's (2001) analysis of cultural studies as a parallel of Deleuzian philosophy; and Thoburn's (2007) thinking about hegemony that incorporates Deleuzian concepts of the subject. Each of these works can introduce Deleuze to communication audiences. While these are significant pieces, the influence of Deleuze in (critical) intercultural communication has not generated much impact on our thinking.

[5]     A good example of this kind of effort might well be seen in Wise's (2003) essay on home where he incorporates Deleuze and Guattari's nomad figure to examine the production of culture and identity. Such work extends and complicates not only Deleuze and Guattari's constitutive theories of identity but also our very notions of communication.

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