



Some Strange Magic: The Disruption of the Whiteness of Castle Play through Improvisation

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Abstract

This conceptual framework investigates the symbol of the castle in the American imagination as one site of memory that contributes to white supremacy through childhood play. The authors conceive of long-form improvisation in relation to childhood play to imagine new pedagogical installments that might teach children to resist the hegemonic symbol of the castle.

Keywords: *whiteness, pedagogy, improvisation, pretend play, castles, early childhood*

Consider the Castle

This conceptual essay aims to theorize the relationship between castles as sign or text with whiteness. Further, it offers a conceptual approach to a radical form of improvisational, anti-racist critical whiteness pedagogy for children, youth, and adults. We admit that this essay, as a framework, is speculative in design. Still, our theorizing of both the castle as a sign and text and improvisational pedagogy is currently being developed through empirical studies cued by our discussion here.

We begin this theoretical discussion where we first began our conversation about castles, whiteness, and anti-racist pedagogy—on a cold evening in the Fall of 2015 at a small meeting of white critical whiteness scholars.

The goal of this meeting was to share our current research projects, and ask and give feedback and suggestions from the group. Around a dining room table, Erin shared her dissertation research to the collective. Sam listened to Erin talk about her dissertation research—this was the first time we met. Erin had designed a critical ethnography to examine the ways in which her children learned to be white (see Miller, 2015). Although the connections between whiteness and castles were not explicit, Erin felt that castles and castle narratives were having something to do with her young children's construction of whiteness. Among other data, Erin shared what her daughter Olivia—she was six at the time—had said during her one of her play episodes with a toy castle:

Olivia (6 years old): (singing as she sets sail from the castle) I'm going to ride my horse to Africa, because there is land. I'm going to go, go, go across the ocean. I'm going to go, go across the ocean.

Olivia's play haunted Erin. How had Erin's daughter come to imagine that she lived inside a castle? What led Olivia to believe that Africa was a distant place, far away from that castle? What provoked her to ride her horse to Africa?

In another data set, Erin shared photographs of pictures on the walls of her children's doctor's office. Each poster contained the image of a European castle. Flags flew from the parapets, the stone structure sat atop rolling hills, and the bricks were painted white. Previously, Erin wouldn't have noticed the seemingly benign artwork on the wall at her doctor's office. Now she was studying whiteness and she was curious. How was her daughter's emerging, white American identity being confounded by connections to Western Europe? Indeed, her daughter's childhood was adorned with images of English castles. These symbols could be found in television shows and movies. Castles provided settings in picture books, backdrops at doctors' offices, and seemed to be a major source of inspiration for much child's play.

Like any scholar with an interest in critical literacy, Erin became skeptical of the castle as a text or a symbol. How did the castle intersect with the ways that her daughter was becoming white?

Erin's questions resonated with Sam's desire to better understand how white people are made white in America (see Tanner, 2016; 2017). He could not stop thinking about the castle as a text or sign, laden with meaning. He also began to worry about the relationship between castles and whiteness.

Sam was in the children's section at his local library a month later. His two white toddlers were playing. Sam noticed something for the first time. A large toy castle sat in the middle of the room. Countless children—most of whom were white—were eagerly playing with the castle. Action figures of kings, queens, princes, and princesses littered the space. Sam's oldest boy made the king stand on top of a parapet.

Sam's children were watching the popular television show *Daniel Tiger* a few weeks later. An episode about castles began. Sam watched with fascination as the episode taught children how to play with castles. The characters in the episode took on roles typically associated with monarchies of Western Europe. At the end, the episode explicitly taught children how to build sand castles. Sam would have thought nothing of this episode prior to talking with Erin. Now, he began to wonder. Was this play really benign? What did it mean that his white children were being taught to play with castles?

We began to talk more explicitly about our concern that castle play was actually contributing to the ways that our children were learning to become white. Historically, castles (and later forts) had been integral to the project of colonization, and its subsequent oppression of people of color. What were castles now? We began to tell each other stories. We were surprised to discover that each of us had, as children, been compelled to play with castles. The symbol of the castle had meant something in our childhoods.

But what?

We use vignettes below to share our memories with our reader, the same way we shared them with each other, prior to proceeding.

Playing with Castles (Sam)

I remember my father sitting next to me in the sweltering attic of our three-story house in Highland Park, an affluent, white neighborhood in St. Paul. We were playing Super Mario Brothers together. I was the first player, and Dad was the second. Dad bought a Nintendo after he finalized

his divorce with my alcoholic mother. I was excited about the new toy, and we took turns guiding Mario and Luigi through the early stages of the game. We were trying to rescue a captured princess. Each of these stages ended with a brick, European castle. Though I was only seven, I was the first to make it to the final level in the first world, stage 1-4 for those familiar with the game. I was so proud as Dad watched me guide Mario into Bowser's imposing, stone castle. Inside, Mario jumped over pits of lava and evaded fireballs. I squealed with delight after I figured out how to evade Bowser and enter the room where the princess was being held. Dad laughed with me when a small toadstool informed us that our princess was in another castle.

Playing with Castles (Erin)

I remember my mother sitting next to me at the water's edge on a South Carolina beach. She showed me how to make a drip sand castle. It was one of my earliest memories of my mother so I must have been very young, perhaps three or four. The water's edge was where the sand was perfect for making drip sand castles—not too dry but not underwater. The sand was exposed but still wet from the final wash of the tide. Our legs were outstretched and between us, she scooped up small fistfuls of dark gray, very fine sand and let it drip slowly between her fingers. The droplets piled on top of each other and, in our imaginations, created parapets and towers that we topped with more sand droplets to create elaborate spires. There was something peculiar about the drip castles we made: while the sand was fluid as it fell from our fingers, when it landed on the mound that was, for us, the castle, it froze as if it was stopped in time.

Remembering the Castles of Our Childhood

The memories we include to begin this essay have striking differences. Sam was playing with castles in video games, enacting a “new literacy” (Gee, 2003, p. 13), while Erin was playing with castles on the beach with natural materials. Erin was outside with her mother in South Carolina and Sam was inside of his house with his father in Minnesota. Erin and her mother were building castles; Sam and his father were invading them. Sam fixated on penetrating virtual castles in *Super Mario Brothers*—structures that might hold a captured princess. He remembers feeling proud as his father watched him invade the castle. Erin, fascinated by the structural design of her sand castles, imagined parapets and towers as her mother helped her to replicate a structure common in childhood.

Inside and outside. Creating and invading. Girl and boy. Mother and father. These dichotomies of our memories cannot be avoided nor can we ignore the gendered play of our stories, yet we choose to focus here on what was common in our remembering. We were both *white children playing with castles*. Yes, we were separated by time, space, and gender. We would not meet until many years later. Still, we were both learning to play with castles with our white parents. Perhaps, we were creating (and participating in) a particular kind of community of practice (Wenger, 1999) within the cultural world of white supremacy. The fantasy world of the castle in our respective imaginations, perhaps, bonded us to a cultural memory of white supremacy—handed down through the legacy of European colonization—as we played our parts as white children playing with castles.

The sandcastle play and castles of gaming in our own childhood memories are only two of the myriad places castles emerge in the imaginative world of children. We encourage our readers to create a mental list of the childhood literary texts where castles can be found—from young adult

fiction such as Harry Potter to the fairy tales commonly associated with very young childhood. One would likely find, as we did, that the castle is so prominent in the US literary imagination that listing texts which are about castles or which have castles in them is difficult because they are incalculable. They abound outside of the literary imagination as well. Castle images are on pictures in waiting rooms at the pediatric offices and on posters in schools designed to inspire and motivate children. They are packaged and sold as toy structures. They are final destinations in board games such as Candyland©. They are integral in Legos© sets. They are inspiration for the architecture of playhouses, play-tents, and playsets commonly seen across suburban America, the same suburban America described by Ta-Nehisi Coates (2015) as disconnected homes built on the human bones of indigenous peoples eradicated by the greed of whiteness. They are popular as coloring books, on worksheet games, and images on puzzles. They are themed backgrounds for birthday party essentials. They are on collectable cards, intended to be traded and possessed. They are images on bedding, clothing, and diapers. The symbol of the castle, then, is an artifact routinely encouraged to be taken up in the childhood imaginary. In fact, it seems impossible to avoid indirect reference to the castle as artifact both in the lives of children and in the lives of people.

Castles as Racial Signs

Castles have been studied for their insights to military prowess (i.e., arrow-slits and crenellations), compared to churches as a symbol of stature, and explored for their significance as art history. Still, some scholars (i.e., Wheatley, 2001) believe that castles have not been critically examined as their own unique interdisciplinary phenomena and are understudied for their strong linkage between physical structure and symbolic motif: “From a wider cultural perspective, a paper castle table decoration and a lord’s defended residence have something in common. They are both identified as castles as to express some shared medieval idea of ‘castle-ness’” (Wheatley, 2001, p. 1). Wheatly’s notion of the castle in play lends an easy hand to the consideration of the innumerable manifestations of castle imagery across American childhoods, imagery that gives fodder to much castle play.

Our own conceptualization of the castle as a racial symbol in the imagination developed as we considered recent work in literacy education that is informed by sociocultural theory. Lewis, Psycher, & Stutleberg (2014) wrote that pedagogy in literacy should “include the analysis, interpretation, critique, and production of signs from literary and nonfiction texts to films, advertisements, and propaganda in print and digital formats” (p. 23). Certainly, the castle is a prevalent sign in a variety of texts across genres designed for children in America and, subsequently, informs childhood play. In fact, Lewis et al. (2014) argued, “signs are not comprised only of the mediating texts,” but also “include the constructs—such as race and gender—that mediate life” (p. 23). The European castle and successor structures such as the American fort, then, can be read as signs that are embedded with racial meaning, especially because of their political and historical symbolism of control in the subjugation of non-white peoples. Certainly, castles (and later forts) and those who lived in them were used as the epicenter to enforce a white supremacist agenda, one in which slaves and indigenous people were exploited to serve global European interests and expansion. It is reasonable to wonder how the castle might continue to exist as a symbol in the American imagination. Lewis et al. (2014) warned that signs are “socially, culturally, and ideologically motivated” and meaning is carried through signs by way of “interactional dynamics and textual practices” (p. 23). In other words, children continue to absorb the meanings imbued in signs through interacting uncritically with texts, and—in our experience—the castle dominates the Western imagination.

Practices of critical literacy inform how we conceptualize the castle and design the improvisational, anti-racist pedagogy described in this essay (and currently in development through empirical studies). We mean to trouble the castle as a sign, and then consider ways to expose and disrupt our students' tacit engagement with that text. Lewis (2017), in using critical literacy, was interested in "(1) how signs position readers/viewers, (2) how readers/viewers position signs, and (3) how signs and readers/viewers are positioned within social, political, cultural, and spatial contexts" (Lewis, 2017). These three principals, rooted in the assumption that the castle is a sign imbued with racial meaning, inform the way we imagine improvisational pedagogy that might disrupt the ongoing production of white supremacy.

We approach the sign of the castle as an example of what womanist scholar Emily Townes (2006) calls sites of memory—one of many relics that facilitates the production of privilege in the American imagination. In contrast to real and living memory, Townes (2006) writes that sites of memory are "artificial and deliberately fabricated" objects meant to stop time, fixed ways of moving us *away* from truth since they are only "the histories of dominant cultures and societies" and "have run roughshod over competing ideologies that do not carry commensurate abilities to exert coercion and/or force" (p. 15). We approach the castles as a sign to wonder how whiteness is cemented through childhood play, and then, more importantly, offer a deconstruction tool, an anti-racist pedagogy for educators by way of improvisation.

This essay continues, then, from a somewhat surprising assumption. We contend that whiteness is produced (and reproduced) in the castle site, a common location of imaginary play in childhood. Furthermore, we believe whiteness is solidified as children play with castles (toy and imaginary). In playing with castles, children construct (and thus desire to exist within) a world of princes, princesses, queens, kings, royal courts, imperialist adventures, and other manifestations of Western European dominance and wealth. In their imaginations of these histories, children learn to fix themselves as the beneficiaries of the social power of these worlds—a power that is rooted in historical white supremacy, and which insidiously lends the construction of racial identities. In other words, we believe when children begin the imaginary process of becoming people who can and do "run roughshod" over people without the same "commensurate abilities" (p. 15) at the castle site, they are learning white supremacy in ways that are usually unrecognized because of the perceived cultural banality and sheer dominance of castles in American childhood.

While the symbol of the castle, in our view, stabilizes and protects *many* social hierarchies (ethnic, gendered, religious, economic, etc.), our specific focus in this manuscript is how the castle, as a site of memory, lends itself to a deeper analysis of the formation of white supremacy in the childhood imaginary. Our goal of writing is to build a theoretical argument of the castle as one site of racialized memory in the childhood imaginary as well as describe ways that improvisation pedagogy, a contrasting fluid anti-racist pedagogical tool, can be used with a variety of populations to destabilize the formation (and affirmation) of whiteness.

Improvisation and the Pretend Play of Early Childhood

Our description of improvisation shares much in common with characteristics of pretend play in childhood. Pretend play, interchanged frequently in the literature with the term fantasy play (McDevitt and Ormrod, 2007; Paley, 2004) is described as, "an active transformation of the here and now that involves a living agent who is aware that he or she is pretending, a reality that is pretended about, and a mental representation that is projected onto reality" (Smith and Lillard, 2012, p. 525). In pretend play, roles often shift and tools are improvised to take on new meanings.

Children can merge worlds, enter and exit frames as they will (i.e., Braidotti's (2013) notion of "virtual suicide" (p. 135) in improvisation), break societal rules, become different things or people and perform novel scripts. In fact, pretend play is unique in that it is *not* rule-driven or planned out or owned by a particular set of players. In pretend play, children spontaneously test out concepts through interpersonal interactions and relationships. Over time, pretend play is replaced by play that involves games with explicit rules and where entry into fantasy worlds is built on determined scripts and defined roles. To our mind, it is in the phase after pretend play where we find the castle narrative locked in the American collective memory. That is, we believe this is the developmental age where stories of fortifying, invading, dominating, defending, destructing, in general pretending to "run roughshod" (Townes, 2006, p. 15) over nonwhite people are cemented through operative discourses. These discourses are evoked knowingly or unknowingly by castle imagery, castle play and/or castle talk (i.e., reflect on Sam's learning to invade the castle for the prize of a princess).

By contrast, we also believe improvisation as pedagogy can help us work with young children who are moving out of pretend play into a stage of childhood and later adulthood where white supremacy becomes fixed. While anti-racist improvisational pedagogy offers promise when working with any age level, we share the concern that if we do *not* entertain these interventionist pedagogies in childhood, children will take up castles as sites of memory and rehearse, over and over, a script of dominance where the rules position white people within an unexamined ethos of authority over people of color.

The Formation of Whiteness in the Castle Site

We recognize our take on whiteness via the symbol of castles is unusual—and that, perhaps, it disturbs the very sediment of many of our readers' own childhood memories—but, and because we anchor our work in new materialism and post-humanism, we are committed to Braidotti's (2011) call for "a prophetic or visionary dimension...necessary in order to secure an affirmative hold over the present as the launching pad for sustainable becoming or qualitative transformations" (p. 237). Certainly, teaching and research is in need of pathways to secure affirmative holds over the production of white supremacy. In this way, we might begin to imagine sustainable, transformative ways of becoming for our students (and ourselves).

We continue by providing a disclaimer: while we unpack a little castle-history to provide some context for our essay we do not think of castles as literal, historical structures for our purposes here. Yes, we recognize that castles are indeed real structures—with devastating, interesting, and fantastic social histories—yet, we are primarily concerned with how castles are symbolically used in childhood to stabilize white supremacy. Ultimately, we believe castles are transformed in childhood play from actual structures that tell the histories of particular peoples into imaginative sites where creative positioning of the self in relation to the castle constructs racial identifications.

The Castle in the Racial Imaginary

The castle is most commonly known as a defensive structure prevalent across medieval Western Europe that has infiltrated modern day American childhood culture with its prevalence in movies, amusement parks, books, and theatrics. While medieval castles were historically built with military functions in mind, castles symbolically carried a deeper meaning of social control: they were cultural signifiers of power and administrative rheostat. They were fortified residences to ruling elite, the home base of imperialist projects that were orchestrated by those who resided

within. Originally beginning as rudimentary defensive walls, they evolved over time to the “perfected castles” (Wheatly, 2001 p. 9) of Europe, France, Spain, etc. during the era of 1250 and 1350 with flanking towers, gatehouses, concentric defenses, and machicolations, embellished in the American imagination with the instrumental help of Walt Disney. We acknowledge that castles originally served as a physical and symbolic hierarchy of social inequality with respect to wealth and power. In our present analysis, we are concerned with the ways castles have been appropriated into the American imaginary by and for children within a more distinct racial framework. That is, in the American race project, those who hold power (and exist within the castle) are historically white and those who are excluded from holding power are non-white.¹ Certainly, we hope to avoid totalizing those categories, but we want to acknowledge the historical traditions that inform how we imagine ourselves in the present.

In the racial imaginary, whiteness is formed and shaped by a relationship to what two prominent scholars of color who write about whiteness—Toni Morrison and The Reverend Thandeka—described as nonwhiteness. The boundaries between the two are important in understanding the castle as a fixed symbol of white supremacy. Before directly implicating the castle, it is important to identify what Thandeka (1999) described as the “internal reference for the nonwhite zone in Euro-American life” that lives in the “self’s own proscribed feelings” (p. 18). Thandeka’s provocative theorization of whiteness helps to explain this fixed dispositional way of being that is policed by racial mythology and served by the imaginary symbol of the castle. Erin’s daughter Olivia’s play, mentioned at the beginning of this essay, should not be surprising given Thandeka’s claim. Olivia imagined herself inside of the castle, and Africa across the ocean, outside of the castle. Perhaps, Olivia was simply establishing her internal referent for white and nonwhite zones. What surprised us, however, was that she was using the castle as an imaginary text to establish (and maintain) these disparate spaces.

Interested in how Euro-American children are socialized in the white community’s ideals, Thandeka (1999) examined how differences from the white ideal are held in contempt or denied by white caregivers. Her investigation led her to claim that learning to be white creates “an injury to one’s core sense of self” (p. 17). This injury stems from an “attack against the child by members of its own white community because the child is not yet white” (p. 18) and serves to create what Thandeka described as “an induction process into whiteness” that is formed by a system built on “lockstep discipline” (p. 84).

Fixed boundaries fortify and uphold this racial mythology. According to Thandeka (1999), “the nonwhite zone must be vigilantly patrolled, then, for along its border lies the terrain of race-mixing” (p. 26). For Thandeka, this fortification is both internal as well as external. Referring to the “nonwhite ghetto in an American city, town, or suburb,” Thandeka contended that the “rage lodged in the Euro-American’s internal nonwhite zone” contributed to the creation of external concrete ghettos that become an “objective symbol for both the Euro-American’s racial fears and her or his lost desires for a community that does not judge but embraces difference as good” (p. 26). Thandeka suggested that the nonwhite zones in American cities become appealing to white people because they have “repressed desires looking for a way to escape their white confines” (p. 26). Certainly, Thandeka’s theorization of whiteness in relationship to Erin’s daughter’s play helps to understand the function of the castle in the white imaginary. The castle as sign or text helps to

1. This brief description of American racism does not account for those people who came to be known as white but who did not hold power (i.e., poor white people). Adopting ideas from Du Bois (1935/2013), even though not all white people were land-owning elite, in the American race project, poor white people experience whiteness as a psychological manifestation of social superiority.

fortify and fix the superiority of the white ideal, while simultaneously forcing white people to repress difference from that ideal and causing them to deny desire to subvert being fixed or frozen in such a limited way.

Thandeka's theorization of whiteness in relation to nonwhiteness shares much in common with Toni Morrison's (1992) thinking in *Playing in the Dark*. In that work, Morrison named imaginary nonwhiteness as "Africanism" and described it as a "disabling virus" in the imagination that becomes a way of "talking about and policing" everything from class, sex, repression, power, and ethics (p. 7). For Morrison, nonwhiteness provides a way for white people to contemplate "chaos and civilization, desire and fear, and a mechanism for testing the problems and blessings of freedom" (p. 7). If such a potent fear and desire for nonwhiteness accompanies induction into whiteness by white people, it seems logical that castles come to stand in as essential affirmations of the ongoing creation of whiteness. Just as "Africa" is distant for Erin's white daughter, Africanism is kept at bay for white people so that whiteness can be made and maintained. Again, in the case of Erin's daughter, the castle as a text policed these spaces.

Perhaps castles, to a degree, exist to fix reality in particular ways. They keep chaos at bay, protect inhabitants from difference, and project power. Drawing on Coates' (2015) more recent analogy that whiteness can only exist in the presence of nonwhiteness because "a mountain is not a mountain if there is nothing below" (p. 105), we consider the social construction of castles as white supremacist cultural artifacts that necessarily depend upon nonwhiteness to exist. These structures represent wealth *because of* resources stolen; they represent power because they are an ominous presence to terrorize those upon whom power was denied. They represent invasion because of the subjugated. The nonwhiteness that exists on the periphery of castles grounds and stabilizes the whiteness within.

Thus, when white children imagine and play with castles, perhaps, they (knowingly or not) begin to imagine a worldview that stratifies people hierarchically which evolved in America into whiteness and nonwhiteness. This invisible narrative of castle play might be as important in the construction of white supremacy as the visible, tangible one because the castle serves to lock in the narratives of white supremacy as the dominant narrative of oppression. In this way, castles might stifle growth, limit progress, and suffocate transformative possibility.

If we accept this conceptualization of the castle, then we may have discovered a tangible point of entry for anti-racist educators. The symbol of the castle becomes an access point to children's racial imaginations in the US. How can we work with those imaginations in ways that do not serve to fix, affirm, or reproduce the castle as a site of memory that feeds into white supremacist histories and ways of being? Our answer to that question is somewhat surprising.

At the castle's most opposite, we enter the world of improvisation.

Unfixing Whiteness Through Improvisation

In what follows, we rely on a practitioner's understanding of long-form, theatrical improvisation (Sam has been an improver for nearly fifteen years) in relationship with theories of the posthuman to broadly conceive of improvisation. Improvisation theater (or "improv") is an art form in which performers co-create a spontaneous, theatrical performance. In improv, actors work in groups to create unscripted and unrehearsed scenes. Improvisation is about creating a kind of play that allows participants to exist in social worlds that are not fixed. Artifacts, discourses, and texts such as the castle become fluid; the participants in improvisation enter a space where re-negotiation (i.e. taking up different identities, allowing unexpected content to emerge, and

remaking reality) is facilitated. Categories are broken down, reality is in flux, and protections or privileges granted from participation in hegemonic ideals are suspended. An unfixed disposition—a way of being or identity that can resist normalized hegemony (such as the castle as a fixture of the white imagination or subsequent participation in white supremacy)—can be gleaned from unpacking practices of long-form, theatrical improvisation. This art form is routinely associated with comedy. While improv certainly *can be* comedic (and has relied on that genre to be serviceable as a form of mainstream, contemporary entertainment), it has much to illustrate in terms of providing people tools that sustain emergent ways of being, transformative practices, and collaborative dispositions.

What follows will paint improvisation as a sort of ideal. The authors acknowledge that this is problematic because—of course—improvisation as an art form is taken up and made serviceable in countless uncritical ways that serve to reaffirm existing power structures. Still, thinking about the practice of improv as a sort of conceptual ideal serves as a useful counter to the fixed and oppressive site of the castle and, hopefully, will inspire other thinkers and practitioners to take up explorations of improvisation in response to how we conceptualize it as mature play below.

Improvisation and Posthumanism

There are many intersections between the conceptual design of long-form improvisation and Rosi Braidotti and Karen Barad's conceptualization of the posthuman. Working through these connections illustrates much about the function of the castle in the white imaginary and potential ways to unfix the castle as a pervasive site of memory through improvisational process. Much of Karen Barad's scholarship adheres to diffractive ways of knowing. Barad (2007) described this methodology as follows: "We do not uncover preexisting facts about independently existing things as they exist frozen in time like little statues positioned in the world. Rather, we learn about phenomena—about specific material configurations of the world's becoming" (p. 91).

The castle is anything but diffractive. It serves to solidify landscapes, fix power structures, and limit what Barad wrote of as "the world's becoming." In comparison, long-form improv is, at its core, about unfixing the world's becoming. There is no predetermined outcome for the content or form of a scene, performance, or rehearsal. Rather, performers accept whatever is uttered in the moment—be it a line of dialogue, a physical action, a sound effect, a noise from the audience—and accept it as a new truth that will contribute to whatever the scene or performance eventually becomes. *Good* improvisers share a process of mature play that makes and remakes reality whenever it is carried out, be it in a rehearsal or performance. In comparison with what we think of as *bad* improvisation (i.e. improvisation with overly determined, often comedic, outcomes, troupes that do not honor embodied and authentic collaborative process, and participants who use improvisation as a vehicle to impose their will), *good* improvisers learn to work diffractively. This is to say that they adhere to affirmative participation, carry themselves with unfixed dispositions, and facilitate the continual emergence of new ideas, content, or meanings—or, to borrow from Barad's words, they allow moments to "become." Of course, this is in stark contrast to the castle, which serves to stifle change, difference, or deviation.

Braidotti's (2005) posthuman thinking about nomadic theory also shares a relationship with improvisation. Braidotti (2005) defined this concept by writing: "Nomadic affectivity is outward-bound and based on complex relations with a multiplicity of others, including non-human others" (para. 1). Braidotti argued that late capitalism relies on nomadism to enforce its hegemonic project. Still, she pointed out that nomadic affectivity relies on a complex relationship with human

and non-human others. Long-form improvisation actually teaches performers to be explicitly aware of these relationships, rather than just responding passively to cues dictated by hegemonic power, fixed discourses, or even the market.

Good Improvisation

Good improvisation is not cued by anything except iterative exploration of the group's imagination. This is to say that a performance or scene often begins with a suggestion from an audience that performers begin to explore by riffing together through monologues, scene work, characters, or any other number of introductory practices. This is a process that, by its nature, is about unfixing reality. For example, if the suggestion for the improvisation is *castle*, a performer might begin to describe the rough, stone surface of a castle wall. This might move into a scene about cementing bricks together, which might turn into a relationship between two performers who, instead of taking up their identities in *real life*, have the ability to take on different genders, races, sexes, class relationships, family relationships, etc. Done correctly, the improvisers will "yes, and" the notion of a castle in a way that explicitly explores and transforms its complex relationship with reality because it allows the topic to, using Barad's words once more, "become." Performers and discourses become inherently nomadic or unfixing in the time and space of long-form improvisation. Rather than being cued by hegemonic pressures, *good* performers adhere to rules that require them to continually name and rename the complex relationships being articulated, exchanged, and remade in the shared imagination of the improvisational act. Bringing this back to castles, if the suggestion of castle is taken by the group of performers, there is potential to unfix this site of memory that we have traced in the white imaginary. Performers can take up any of the seemingly infinite, complex human and nonhuman characters, settings, relationships, histories, and artifacts that produced and are reproduced by affirmations of the castle in the contemporary, white imagination.

Improvisation is, of course, a creative act. Creativity requires the freedom to destroy or deconstruct. For Braidotti, thinking about human identity and participation in discourse, this is a sort of virtual suicide. Indeed, Braidotti (2013) wrote that,

Life as virtual suicide is life as constant creation. Life lives so as to break the cycles of inert repetitions that usher in banality. Lest we delude ourselves with narcissistic pretenses, we need to cultivate endurance, immortality within time, that is to say death in life (p. 135).

If the castle is a cycle of inert repetition that ushers in white supremacy, long-form improvisation is an art form with the potential to break that cycle by creating new repetitions to complicate white supremacy through mature play. Indeed, its rules teach performers to 1) cultivate endurance because the imaginary of the group is sustained beyond the will of the individual, 2) achieve immortality by participating in unbound, collective re-workings of the imagination, and 3) put an end to scenes, characters, and content each time a performer stops a scene (often with a clap), allowing space for new explorations to continue the affirmative practice of saying yes to the content that has been established, and building off that content to create new meanings through performance.

Improvisation as a Conceptual Tool

Improvisation—as a conceptual tool that facilitates radical collaborative identity—resists what Braidotti (2005) described as “unitary identity,” which, for her, contributes to “liberal tradition of individualism” (p. x) or the isolating, and unitary power of the castle, and subsequently, white supremacy. Good improvisation requires participants to learn how to productively negotiate “the pluralistic multiplication of options” that Braidotti argued was desirable in her nomadic vision (para. 36). Indeed, improvisation is a group process that teaches participants to embrace ongoing practices of de-territorialization, re-territorialization, that refuse fixed hegemony. This fluidity occurs because improve transposes “the subject out of identity politics into a non-unitary or nomadic vision of selves as inter-relational forces” and, according to Braidotti, this way of being “is a more useful approach” (para. 36) to facilitate the world’s becoming rather than the traditions of individualism that we contend are part of the castle’s ongoing existence in the white psyche.

If an improvisational troupe is successful in resisting unitary identities, negotiating a multiplication of options, and embracing an ongoing reorganization of reality, it can serve as a practical tool to achieve what Braidotti (2005) argued nomadic theory is for: “Consciousness” that is “re-defined accordingly not as the core of the humanistic subject, but at best as a way of synchronizing the multiple differences within each and everyone, which constitute the ethical core of nomadic subjects” (para. 36).

Improv as Pedagogy

Scholars such as Boldt, Lewis, and Leander (2015) and Leander and Boldt (2013) have started to pay attention to improvisation in relation to pedagogy. Relying on Deleuze and Guattari (1987), Leander and Boldt (2013) examined what happens when students improvisationally encounter texts. They considered a particular student who was historically resistant to traditional literacy in schools, and the ways he enthusiastically encountered Japanese comic books and graphic novels known as manga. Their analysis of this student’s encounter led them to consider how learners become engaged when they participate in an improvisational sort of play with what Leander and Boldt called “major resources” or “the familiar, the known, the expected, and dependable” (p. 43). They went on to argue that explorations of major resources allow “in minor ways—unexpected, emergent, combinations” that can “take flight in to something new” (p. 43). Leander and Boldt were quick to clarify that their observations did “not constitute a pedagogy,” but they did pose their contention about improvisation as “an opening” (p. 43). This led them to the following questions: “Can the teacher make space for fluidity and indeterminacy as the nature of things? Can he or she recognize difference, surprise, and unfolding that follow along paths that are not rational or linear or obviously critical or political?” (p. 43). Our response to these questions is rooted in Sam’s practitioner’s history with long-form improvisation. Over time, he borrowed from his interactions with professional improvisational theatre communities such as Brave New Workshop and Huge Theatre in Minneapolis and created a pedagogical structure or code to guide improvisers in his troupes. A list of five rules informed his improvisational pedagogy: 1) Participants always say “yes, and”; 2) Improvisation is not a performance vehicle for personality; 3) Improvisational troupes are not fixed groups; 4) Participants cannot negate other performers choices; and, 5) The collective is more important than the individual. This fluid set of assumptions worked as agreements (that the director had to adhere to as well), rather than rules, and facilitated the development of a collaborative disposition in participants. This disposition often created communities

of affirmative practice. Ultimately, these agreements resulted in generative and emergent thinking in improvisational rehearsals and performances. Participants in his improvisational troupes were able to “play with” the major resources of discourse, artifacts, and symbols without being policed. In their work, they were quick to redistribute power dynamics in terms of gender, race, class, or social structure by taking on characters, creating scenes, or building stories.

Before moving forward to a direct consideration of improvisation and anti-racist pedagogy as a logical response to the problematic of the castle in early childhood, we acknowledge that many of our readers may not be familiar with long-form improvisation. Below, we describe long-form improvisation as Sam directed it in detail. We ask the reader to keep in mind our conversation about castles, white supremacy, and anti-racist pedagogy as they work through the explanation below in order to extend this description as a potential illustration of a radical way to approach teaching and learning, especially in terms of social justice, anti-racist pedagogies.

A Picture of Long-Form Improvisation

A group of performers take a suggestion from an audience. They use one of a handful of warm-up activities that allow them to riff on the suggestion (rants are individual monologues that performers use to explore the suggestion, string of pearls is an exercise where performers add one line to a story about the object, and keep delivering that line until the energy of their performance or embodiment of the story has reached a crescendo, there are many other ways to do this), and eventually begin a theatrical scene inspired by their riff. Scenes or moments continue until somebody claps and begins a new scene (which should be inspired by the previously created content). This process continues, and an improvisational play is created. Sam’s troupes have created shows or performances that were a series of disconnected scenes and games, but the sort of improv we are considering here is more closely connected to performances his troupes gave that involved performers taking a single suggestion, and creating a full-length play, (the longest improvised play Sam’s performers sustained was over two hours long), in which stories, characters, and themes begin to emerge without any predetermined outcomes.

Rehearsals for these shows were less about planning; rather, they were about teaching participants to embody a dispositional way of being that relied on all of the concepts discussed above, in order to establish a collaborative that facilitated sustainable and shared improvisation. This affirmative disposition proved extremely hard to facilitate pedagogically. Saying “yes, and” is incredibly hard for people. In our experience, people seem to negate each other almost by virtue of our nature. Therefore, Sam’s rehearsals were often about teaching participants how to listen deeply to each other, build off of what other participants created, and be willing to “unfix” themselves by giving up their predetermined understandings of themselves, others, and content. Warm-up exercises in Sam’s rehearsals included meditative breathing meant to blank the participant’s mind, and collaborative games intended to de-mechanize the body. The games and activities used in rehearsals were many—we invite the reader to seek out the infinite ways that improvisational troupes rehearse. Sam’s practices, like many directors and teachers of long-form improvisation, were about making performers comfortable with giving up their predetermined conceptions of reality, give over to the group mind, and confidently add and create content without fear of external, internal, or group policing mechanisms. Ultimately, rehearsals and performances required participants to learn and inhabit a dispositional way of being that relied on 1) a willingness to give over to the group mind; 2) an affirmative stance that does not negate content that has already been established (which is not the same as not disagreeing, it just means that what has already been created is a

truth, and that truth can be acted on in infinite ways); and, 3) an openness that has no predetermined outcome for the work or activity of the group mind.

Improv as Anti-Racist Pedagogy to Unfix the Castle

Now that we have explained long-form improvisation more thoroughly, we move to a direct consideration of anti-racist pedagogy. To our mind, ineffective social justice pedagogy aims to erase or silence histories and discourses of oppression. This is true in anti-racist pedagogy. Simplistic white privilege pedagogy requires white people to admit that they privilege, feel bad about that privilege, and do not actually do anything to understand or resist the complexities of white supremacy, and the subsequent ways that their own whiteness is made, remade, and activated (see Lensmire et al. [2013] for compelling examples of this). Worse, overly simple privilege pedagogy actually polices white students language and behaviors in ways that do not allow them to “play” with the major resources of whiteness, for our discussion here, the castle. This is problematic because, as Leonardo (2005) teaches us, “critical work on race does not only study its real manifestations and deem everything else ghosts of the real; it must critically understand...how people imagine race in their daily lives” (p. 404). This is even more problematic because whiteness, by virtue of Thandeka’s (1999) theorization presented above, relies on internal policing mechanisms within the imaginary to remain disguised.

White supremacy is often not disturbed because overly predetermined sorts of pedagogy, in fact, serve to assist whiteness in remaining under theorized. Yes, creating improvisational pedagogies to unearth the major resources of whiteness has the potential to reaffirm white supremacy. Still, if it is racist for white people to say anything about whiteness, the interior world of whiteness remains disguised and misunderstood. The castle continues to exist as an untroubled major resource, an internal reality of whiteness, and an insidious and pervasive artifact of childhood play.

With that in mind, we contend that anti-racist pedagogy may become more effective if it were to rely on improvisation. Content cannot be erased. Once something is established as truth, it cannot be negated. However, participants in an improvisational rehearsal or performance are required to say “yes, and,” to content as it is created. Subsequently, white supremacy is real (and cannot be erased), but the “and” becomes extremely important. How can we build off the truth of white supremacy while still being committed to exposing the structural evils of the mythology of race that continues to serve the colonial project? Recall our reference to Braidotti (2011) earlier. Braidotti called for a visionary dimension to take affirmative hold of the presence. Perhaps improvisation provides a practice to take affirmative hold of white supremacy. Silencing artifacts, symbols, or expressions of the pervasive discourse of white supremacy, which is how many social justice pedagogies function, serves to impede transformation at individual and collective levels. Improvisational, anti-racist pedagogy might create *new play* that troubles and complicates preexisting sites of memory for participants. It should have faith that, if a generative, affirmative, and collaborative process has been established, participants’ explorations of understood histories and imaginations will result in their realizations that reconfiguring power for the sustainability of society is necessary.

Therefore, when an improv troupe or a group of children or adults enter a pedagogical space where whiteness is a major resource or the content material (these spaces might include the imaginary worlds of young children as they engage in free play, performances, playgrounds, workshop sessions, classes, art exhibitions), the policing functions of the imaginary—for example the tacit existence of the castle within sites of memory—work to push the collective away from

redistributing power or dynamics of whiteness. Whiteness is truly insidious in this way. Therefore, it fixes social reality in profound ways that work to counter democracy, social justice, or the evaluation (and subsequent dismantling) of what Townes (2009) described as the production of cultural evil that stems from a hegemonic collection of particularly frozen sites of memory.

Playing Differently

We do not believe that the castle is an explicit, literal affirmation of white supremacy. We do, however, worry about the castle as a sign that dominates the imaginary landscape of childhood in the United States and, perhaps, adulthood too. The history of castles, forts, and even walls is martial, and has aided the cause of colonization and, in turn, white supremacy. The castle as a sign, perhaps, is produced and reproduced through text (books, movies, video games, etc.), and continues to create meaning as a site of memory. If we take logics of critical literacy seriously, and we do, we must begin to wonder *how* the castle continues to mean. How does it position readers? How is it positioned by readers? What is the social, political, and ideological context of the castle? What is the implicit, racial meaning of the castle as a sign, as text?

We believe the assertions we have offered above extend to monolithic mythologies of race, to hegemonic and oppressive discourse, and to the way that we approach our classrooms and our children. Our belief is that if we *do not* engage children in collaborative, productive, creative, and agentive pedagogy, they will accept the imposed, fixed realities reaffirmed by the castle as sign. Improv provides a different way to play, a way that respects the organic creativity inside of humans and, further, teaches us how to play productively with each other. We propose that those of us working with young children might benefit from teaching processes and procedures of improv to facilitate the sort of play that holds the most openings for anti-racism.

If we do not create new ways to approach their play with castles, we worry children in America will continue to affirm white supremacy through their play. The castle is a world that must be claimed and possessed, and the people in the way shall be run roughshod over in the process. When rehearsed over and over, these rules of the game will become fixed and it will be too hard to conceive of another way to play, another way to be, in the world. Failure to achieve this way of being is dangerous. Indeed, we are serious about Richard Wright's (1945/1998) caution at the end of his memoir *Black Boy* that unless we can find a more human path *away* from racism in the U.S., all of us—black and white—will inevitably be consumed by it.

Lest we give into this grave prophesizing, we must state that theorizing the way young children might resist racism evokes another author—Hermann Melville (1853)—who reminded us that even in “the heart of the eternal pyramids, it seemed, wherein, by some strange magic, through the clefts, grass-seed, dropped by birds, had sprung” (p. 45). Despite all of our work—the work of hegemony upholds white supremacy, and fuels oppression—something else is possible. There is some strange magic buried beneath all of our structures—our castles—that attempt to fix the world. Perhaps improvisational pedagogy can access this magic, facilitate it, and we can learn to inspire *new things to grow*.

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