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## Engaging the Verbs of Social Justice as We Trace Our Legacies and Our Relevance 2017 National Communication Association Annual Convention Opening Session

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## Engaging the Verbs of Social Justice as We Trace Our Legacies and Our Relevance

*2017 National Communication Association Annual Convention Opening Session*

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**ABSTRACT** This essay introduces the collected performances and responses presented during the Opening Session of the 2017 National Communication Association annual convention held in Dallas, TX. **KEYWORDS** National Communication Association; Social justice; Academia; Legacy; Relevance

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This project came about thanks to the imaginative efforts of the National Communication Association (NCA) President, Ronald L. Jackson II. At the beginning of 2017, then President-Elect, Ron reached out to us in hopes that we would plan and produce a performance Opening Session for the 103rd annual convention that would make for a critically, creatively, and conceptually different disciplinary conference. Before we began planning, we wanted to examine our own histories with performance as a site of intellectual pleasure and possibility.

Interestingly enough, we met one another thirteen years ago while participating on a performance panel called “Spoken Word Performance: Shifting from Third Space to Center Stage,” held at the 2005 Western States Communication Association annual convention in San Francisco, CA. The panel brought together people from multiple stages in their careers to perform and respond to poetry as a site of world/word-making. Not only did that panel serve as a formative moment in our still-young academic careers, it also marked our radical legacy, however short, and provided the impulse that sparked our relevance then—thanks to the tutelage of folks like Marc D. Rich, Bryant Keith Alexander, Brenda J. Allen, and Ronald L. Jackson II, who have always sought creative ways to communicate and study communication differently—and our relevance now, over a decade later, as the crafters of a special performance and Opening Session at our discipline’s national annual convention.

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This history illuminates the obvious choice as we started planning. Given our aesthetic and academic interests, as well as the conference's theme of "Our Legacy, Our Relevance," we decided we wanted to feature poetry, speed painting, and music, not merely as objects of study or things to be unpacked, critiqued, and broken open in service of "real" intellectual pursuits, but as critical practices that challenged form, convention, and the theme itself. True to performance studies, we wanted to ensure that the art was object, theory, and method in ways that refused to concede to myopic understandings of creative efforts.

We organized the performance first by reaching out to critically acclaimed spoken word artists. Once we solidified participation, we began crafting the Opening Session, which was meant to serve as a teaser to the special performance later in the week as well as challenge NCA convention goers to think critically about whose legacies we protect and how we can remain relevant. We wanted to highlight that relevance is earned by uplifting the voices and bodies of the marginalized in a world constantly trying to quiet their voices and bodies. Three of the participating poets each performed a piece, performance scholars responded poetically to the pieces, and Jeffrey Q. McCune Jr. offered a concluding response. What transpired in the Opening Session was a beautifully moving display of radical inclusion, possibility, love, and fierce dedication to collaborative and transformative dialogue.

When we crafted the original panel, "Engaging the Verbs of Social Justice as We Trace Our Legacies and Our Relevance," we were thinking specifically about what it means to become (verb) the *OUR* in "Our Legacy, Our Relevance." One of the verbs we enacted was opening the doors. Opening the doors to our discipline in ways that push for radical inclusion or bring our whole selves into spaces far beyond our research, our degrees, and our accomplishments. Instead of waiting for someone to choose to include *OUR* bodies, we chose to enact agency, become the verbs of social justice, and create an Opening Session that speaks to what our bodies do in public and private spaces, as signs of complicity and protest, as just heroes and villains, for our actions are never without consequence, nor are they without contestation.

But what, even, is "our?" Our, from the Latin *nos*, meaning *we*. We, which is indeed the nominative plural of I, is used to denote (an)other. Which begs the question, who are the others in our legacy and our relevance? Who gets to answer that question? And, equally important, who gets to ask it? But rather than working to save the others, a binary empowered–disempowered move that is not so different from the colonial project of exploitation and domination, the

artists, scholars, and scholar–artists in the panel and this special section demand that we think about and encounter one (an)other in a kind of Levinasian responsibility that recognizes I owe more to the other than to myself.

When the editor of *Departures in Critical Qualitative Research* reached out to us about publishing the content of the Opening Session, we began collecting the poetry and the poetic responses, and asked that each contributor also find the space to share their thoughts on the process and how we can continue this work moving forward. What follows in this special section are ten powerful performances and responses that capture the depth, breadth, and exigency of this political climate. Imani Cezanne, Benny LeMaster, Rachel N. Hastings, Dana L. Cloud, Patricia A. Suchy, Ed Mabrey, Julie-Ann Scott, Miranda Dottie Olzman, Jeffrey Q. McCune Jr. and Ronald L. Jackson II—all are remarkable people who blur the lines between activism, scholarship, performance, artistry, and humanity.

In her poem “#flyingwhileblack,” Imani Cezanne reminds us yet again that the personal is political as she illustrates how the Transportation Security Administration (TSA)—an institution that is connected to other institutions that both make up and represent *the* institution—wants to check, comb through, tame, perm, and relax her Black girl hair, or what she calls “a well-trimmed riot.” Riffing on Cezanne’s #flyingwhileblack, Benny LeMaster’s painfully beautiful response makes two things incredibly clear. First, the TSA (and the larger network of institutions) are indeed everywhere—prodding, poking, questioning, checking for “normality,” and framing the subjugated as a threat we must guard against in violent ways. In this way, LeMaster echoes Cezanne’s poetic claim that we should consider “the irony of terrorizers accusing the terrorized of terrorism.” Second, LeMaster reminds us that the politics of passing is incredibly dangerous.

Rachel N. Hastings traverses across time and space to politically proclaim a Blackness that precedes the transatlantic slave trade, what Dana L. Cloud calls “the Black cultural memory of a time before.” Hastings evidences Michelle M. Wright’s claim that Blackness is not so much a “what” but instead it “operates as [a] construct and as phenomenological” and is best understood when we focus on “when and where it is being imagined, defined, and performed.”<sup>11</sup> Through query, Cloud builds on Hastings’s “Moor/more” wordplay to ask how pre-modernity might be strategically useful, and how using the complex Moor might provide more opportunities for freedom. Patricia A. Suchy makes use of performative writing in her response to Hastings. In a critical moment when protesters resist historical statues and their legacies, and in a manner that is best

described as a dance, Suchy brilliantly weaves through Hastings's work and her own body politics, to challenge and push over/back/against the theme of the conference. In this way, Suchy takes her cue from Ezra Pound, Damion Searls, Hastings, and the other panelists to suggest that our legacy and our relevance is to "Make this house sound—of sound—and new and tight."

In "The Libretto of the Opera," Ed Mabrey accomplishes what so many performance scholars work toward; by merging opera convention with state-sanctioned murder for slam poetry, he blends high and low art and pulls back the curtain to make abundantly clear what Dwight Conquergood called "lethal theatre," or those "executions [that] are awesome rituals of human sacrifice through which the state dramatizes its absolute power and monopoly on violence," as well as the connections between performance and the quotidian.<sup>2</sup> Julie-Ann Scott, following in Mabrey's wake (intentional use of that term), reflects on what it means to teach her white son about racism in a predominantly white town where, like the opera, she didn't see it growing up, but knew it existed. Her response to Mabrey's poem is a powerful point to the importance of incorporating social justice into childcare, not as a sympathetic move, but as one of intentionally active compassion and empathy. Miranda Dottie Olzman joins Scott and Mabrey to critically and creatively expose how whiteness acts as a chorus, a white company of voices singing #AllLivesMatter in an attempt to drown out the Black solo by pretending they are only making enlightened commentary that adds upon the action.

Closing out the collection, Jeffrey Q. McCune Jr.'s use of "convocation" provides us a wonderful lens to see how the Opening Session was less a panel of, with, and about performance, and more a call for NCA convention attendees to use the session as "pivot points, jump offs, clarifications, and gestures toward something beyond what we have been given as hermeneutic choices." McCune's call is not a trite call to come together for unity's sake; rather, his convocation is one that is grounded in José Esteban Muñoz's "disidentification"<sup>3</sup> to ask, "What does a monstrous legacy look like, where we remove citizen-human-subject imperatives and opt for non-citizen-thug-monster-object imperatives?" Anchoring this special section is a masterfully crafted response from Ronald L. Jackson II questioning "Is This What Revolution Looks Like?."

It is our hope that this special section inspires more relevance within and beyond our discipline by further contextualizing the coming together and ripping apart of Opening Session politics, the conventions of personhood, and the critical weight that is "Our Legacy, Our Relevance." We ask you to enter at the

learning edge, where discomfort sparks change, where respect is complex, and where honesty can be deemed a radical act of resistance.

Footage of the 2017 National Communication Association Opening Session is available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dKw8sy1HI7U&feature=youtu.be>. ■

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#### NOTES

1. Michelle M. Wright, *Physics of Blackness: Beyond the Middle Passage Epistemology* (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2015), 3.
2. Dwight Conquergood, "Lethal Theatre: Performance, Punishment, and the Death Penalty," *Theatre Journal* 54, no. 3 (2002): 342.
3. José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).