

“A Good Story”: On Black Abjection in Improv Comedy

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Abstract: This article discusses Black absence in Improv comedy as a symptom of a racial exclusion inherent in Humanism. Relating Improv’s liberatory and democratic ideals to the epistemological paradigm of modernity, I engage in deconstructive play with the literary doppelgänger motif as a Romanticist reaction to Enlightenment’s ratio-centric ideals. The argument considers the cultural phenomenon of Improv to be a particular manifestation of White aesthetic, cultural, and political hegemony in popular culture, not despite but because of its rhetorics of freedom.

Keywords: Blackness; Critical Whiteness Studies; Improvisation; Humanism; Enlightenment; Theater; Doppelgänger; Performance;

I think that satiric improvisational theater is definitely a cosmopolitan phenomenon and the people who do it and its audience are cosmopolitan people who are sufficiently liberated from their ethnic backgrounds to identify with whatever is going on throughout the world. [...] But I don’t think most black people are cosmopolitan. I think they’re more ethnic in their orientation, so when they’re black actors, they want to do black theater. [...] The ethnic experience is very enjoyable, but it excludes the outer world. It’s always “Us against them.”

Roger Bowen (qtd. in Sweet 40-41)¹

Improv and Diversity

In a recent article for the *Chicago Tribune*, Meredith Rodriguez engages with “the lack of diversity” on NBC’s comedy show *Saturday Night Live* and traces the absence of black cast members back to the racial dynamics of the major breeding ground for future comedians: Chicago’s Improv scene. Rodriguez writes: “those leading Chicago’s improv and comedy scene say that although women and minorities have been breaking down barriers in the last several years, finding enough minorities for [Chicago’s Improv] main stages remains a challenge.” She is seconded by Andrew Alexander, the CEO of the scene’s founding institution and largest player, Second City, who agrees that “[w]e always have to do more,” adding that “[t]he bench is fairly thin” and that “[i]t’s not like we have a lot to draw on.” It seems like Alexander does the best he can, investing “millions of dollars in Second City’s diversity program” over the last two decades, financing “workshops at inner-city schools, casts that feature minority talent and scholarships at the Second City training center.”

¹ Bowen has long worked as an actor and writer for the Improv company Second City as well as its predecessor The Committee (Sweet 25).

According to the article, Second City's Outreach and Diversity coordinator Dionna Griffin-Irons has an annual budget of \$200,000 at her disposal. Charna Halpern, the head of iO, another Chicago Improv² company, faces similar problems. Despite affirmations of advocating a race-neutral perspective,³ she also comments: "I have some coming up for further auditions. [...] They just need to get wet behind the ears." Yet, how does one conceptualize this kind of liberal neutrality that, so far, has always remained one of potential without ever being realized? How is it possible to even speak of diversity within a context of proclaimed neutrality?

The debates surrounding the absence of what is termed 'minorities' here can be summarized by a simple question, which I shall articulate for purely heuristic reasons within the axiomatic and deictic⁴ context always already⁵ set: "Why won't the diverse want to play with us even if we pay them to do so?" It is difficult to ascertain what is more troubling: the answer to this question or the question itself. Arguing within this logic means beating one's head against the same epistemological wall Amy E. Seham runs into: The well-meaning Improv community points its misguided finger at those absent from its own homogenous, hegemonic group.⁶ White logic masks the fact that both the position from which the pointing takes place as well as the performative gesture of the pointing itself promise to be the most yielding starting points of investigation. Yet, while an auto-critical analysis would be

² Unlike common practice, I capitalize 'Improv' so as to mark the nominative quality of the term. I understand Improv here as a strategic position from which aesthetic, cultural, and institutional power is exerted, rather than aesthetic principles of either theater or improvisation.

³ "Halpern does not keep quotas or look specifically for minority actors, she said, saying she simply looks for the 'best players'" (Rodriguez).

⁴ Bal defines deictic words as "words that only have meaning in the context in which they are uttered, such as 'I' and 'you,' 'yesterday,' 'here' and 'there.'" She argues with Benveniste that "the 'essence' of language lies in deixis, not reference, because what matters in language is not the world 'about' which subjects communicate, but the constitution of the subjectivity required to communicate in the first place" (30). While I do not turn to linguistic issues directly, this model is highly relevant with regard to the issues at hand. In my dissertation project, I apply Bal's narratological toolkit to approach issues of perspective in the autosemiotic Improv discourse.

⁵ Wilderson applies the deconstructionist phrase 'always already' in his claim that one can only understand the Black as "a subject who is always already positioned as a Slave" (7). I choose to use this phrase to strongly mark the epistemological pessimism on which this argument is based.

⁶ Up until now, Seham's monograph *Whose Improv Is It Anyway?* (2001) has been the only publication that confronts the Improv community with its exclusionary dynamics and the fact that "Second City had long reflected Chicago's history as a racially divided city" (188). However, her investigation tends to focus more on gender than on race issues. Whenever the latter are concerned, her argument largely remains within the multicultural/identity-based paradigm, which forecloses a more thorough investigation of the ways in which Improv has been constructed as a White space.

appropriate, the absent are being blamed for their absence. I argue that the crux of the matter can be found in the ideological and linguistic system of thought that enables a dominant discourse in which deictic terms and even simple determiners, relying by definition on relationality and perspective, are fully understood without any contextualization. Who is the implied reader that understands what is being referred to by “some” without any difficulty? Of course, this question is rhetorical and there is an obvious conventional agreement as to who and what is referred to with terms like ‘us,’ ‘them,’ ‘diversity.’ To get to the bones of this issue, we need to destabilize this agreement. Thus, a more productive approach to this complex of issues must involve questions of positionality and perspective like: How can people be diverse? Who or what do they divert from?

In the course of this article, I demonstrate how the “lack of diversity” (Rodriguez) serves as a terminological veil to describe the absence of Blackness, which, in turn, implies the brutal ubiquity of Whiteness. I argue that those millions of dollars spent to diversify Improv are well-invested if the goal is to maintain White hegemony regardless of whether those described as diverse actually partake in Improv or not. The concept of diversity, despite continual claims to the contrary, guarantees that the ‘diverse,’ read ‘Blacks,’ remain what they are: the Other of an unmarked Whiteness.⁷ I will show how, when this Other is being talked about in terms of diversity within the Improv community, the discussion is really about Whiteness itself. As long as the issue of diversity is exclusively articulated from a White position, any utterance has the performative effect of re-asserting this position as one of hegemonic normalcy and authority. United States entertainment culture, with its specifications in Improv comedy, is only one of the spaces where White hegemony manifests itself in the guise of an unmarked Whiteness. Given that Improv’s ideological ground is most explicitly provided by the Humanist system of thought generated in the Enlightenment

⁷ Only a day after the publication of the article mentioned above, the *New York Times* featured an article titled “‘S.N.L.’ to Add Black Female Performer” (Carter). The article reiterates the allegedly race-neutral ‘quality argument’ by stating that executive producer Lorne Michaels was “purely driven by talent considerations.” This alleged colorblindness is undermined by Michaels himself, who states that it was “100 percent good for the show to have an African-American woman.” Carter points to Michaels’s claim that this “is not merely because the show could use a woman capable of playing the first lady, Michelle Obama, in sketches,” yet reminding the reader that this “was important enough a consideration that all the candidates will be asked to try an impression of her Monday night.” This goes to underscore the point made above: Even (or especially) the incorporation of what is termed ‘diverse’ serves to re-enforce the discourse maintaining the concept of ‘diversity,’ defending the locus proper of White normalcy, which is the only position from which Blackness appears diverse.

period, that is, by White knowing and knowledge, the discourse on diversity in Improv seems particularly apt for analysis.

At this point, it is important to note that I use the terms 'Black' and 'Blackness' as structural positions. In my usage, they denote no homogenous group identities but the concepts of 'social death' and 'absolute abjection.' Following Sabine Broeck's understanding of abjection, I emphasize its predicative sense, regarding it as a result of reiterative action ever since the dawn of modernity (153). Accordingly, 'White' and 'Whiteness' denote a position of normalized, invisible, and hegemonial authority, functioning as the active abjector of the Black. Yet, this does not mean that these terms are purely heuristic: their primary quality as constructs does not diminish their power to structure the world in racist terms on an arbitrary somatotopical basis.

To begin with, I will provide further information on Improv and a brief introduction to the ideology at its base, which I relate to some aspects of modern, enlightened thought. In order to demonstrate the arbitrariness and perspectivism of the aesthetic and political principles ruling Improv—and by extension essential parts of U.S. entertainment culture—I consider one of modernity's central literary figures, the *doppelgänger*, as a productively deconstructable metaphor, then leading up to an attempt to make the concepts 'White' and 'Black' productive as perspectives and rhetorical strategies of making and unmaking the world. The article thus contributes to the larger project of analyzing how the semantics of modern thought have been White from their inception.

The Fundamentals of Improv and (Its) Doppelgänger

Improv is an improvisation-based, usually comedic, theatrical form of live entertainment. It is often said to have originated in the theater games by the pedagogue Viola Spolin, whose son Paul Sills, working with the exercises she developed, became the first director of what was to become Improv's central institution, the above-mentioned Second City. According to its website, Second City, founded in 1959, has developed into the "largest training center for improvisation and acting in the country with 13,000 students a year," a breeding ground for "the premiere comic talent in the industry." Connecting a schooling system with the entertainment industry, Improv—and, in metonymical relation, Second City—channels

actors, comedians, scriptwriters, etc. onto live stages and into film and television. This gate-keeping function makes the fact that Improv is an almost exclusively White phenomenon a political issue.

Paul Sill's comments in an interview with Jeffrey Sweet are exemplary of Improv's normative aesthetics, expressing its relationship with certain democratic, spiritual, and liberatory ideals.⁸ This excerpt reveals the fundamental axioms and rhetoric that have been driving and structuring Improv ever since:

- SILLS: Most [traditional, commercial] theater is slave-market bullshit. [...]
- SWEET: In that kind of theater the actors are trying to become marketable commodities. But improvisational theater is particularly free. Whereas in the traditional theater you might be a square peg trying out for an octagonal slot, in improvisational theater you create your own square slot.
- SILLS: Yes, so improvisational theater can use anyone where he is. [...]
- SWEET: So this all has to do with what you were saying before about people discovering themselves through improvisation, becoming self-confident.
- SILLS: It's not so much the confidence in the self, it's more the awareness that there is such a thing as the self. That the self exists. [...] The authentication of the spirit—which has something to do with the Church—is vital to the theater and is something that the theater can and must do. Improvisational theater is the closest thing you'll find to democracy in theater. It opens up the possibility of play between people in the group, and play is an expression of our equality. (19-20)

Such politico-spiritual ideals become, of course, very hollow, when only applied to and by an all-White Improv community. Improv's quite homogenous demographics do surprise, both in view of Chicago's significant Black population and the fact that other improvisation-related art forms are heavily marked as Black, most prominently jazz, which was at a highpoint when Second City was founded: Miles Davis's *Birth of the Cool* was released in 1957. Indeed,

⁸ Amy Seham observes that, "powerful contradictions were built into the very foundations of first-wave improv through the often conflicting goals and methods of their creators. [...] Spolin was devoted to improvisation's spiritual and psychological release of human potential. Shepherd wanted a political community theatre that would fight class oppression [...]. Sills was interested in both the spiritual and the political, as long as improv also produced 'authentic' art. Each artist subscribed to the notion that improvisation (and by extension improv-comedy), when properly practiced, could allow participants to bypass limiting and disciplinary structures—whether internal or external—and to have the freedom to express a greater truth" (7).

readers on African American aesthetics in one way or another always feature “the principle of *improvisation within traditional forms*” (Caponi 11, emphasis in original), and Robert G. O’Meally, introducing “The Vernacular Tradition” in the *Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, regards improvisation as “a highly prized aspect of vernacular performance” (6).⁹ Improv’s pretentious claims for universalist liberal and democratic ideals as well as its ‘recipes’ for retrieving allegedly authentic truths from a putatively authentic self make Black absence from Improv particularly problematic. Speaking politically with Paul Sills, Improv was devised as an alternative to the “slave-market bullshit”¹⁰ of scripted theater, as a democratic “expression of our equality.” In Charna Halpern’s aptly titled *Truth in Comedy* one learns that “anyone can improvise” (9), Improv being “a completely emancipating experience” (21). On a more spiritual level, a presumed direct access to organic wholeness and authentic truths is celebrated in Improv, which can even give “meaning to life in a deeper, spiritual sense,” as Seham quotes the improviser Frances Callier (xviii). Improv’s discourse is continually invigorated by such religio-humanist ideals and their artistic mirage of authenticity or, as Paul Sills has it, “the awareness that there is such a thing as the self.”¹¹

The fundamentality of these ideals to Improv’s self-conception makes the absence of ‘voices from the margins’—to stay within (White) Improv’s frame of reference—a logical as well as

⁹ The scope of this article does not allow me to delve into the complications of the discourse on Black aesthetics and performance. Suffice it here to say that I do not intend to essentialize African Americans as improvisers but point out that improvisation is heavily marked as a Black performance mode, mainly through the discourses on jazz and rap (cf. Moten).

¹⁰ The unwarranted use of the slave metaphor is a whole discussion of its own, which I cannot provide here. It will, however, feature prominently in my dissertation, of which this article is only a sketch.

¹¹ Chris Johnston’s publication *The Improvisation Game* (2009) is a case in point regarding Improv’s ideology. He writes that the “medium of improvisation, properly handled, has the capacity to show us to ourselves. It can reveal the shadows, surprising us horribly. While travelling to a familiar place, it can trip us up and demonstrate we’re not who we thought we were. [...] There is another self to be seen, and improvisation is conjuring up the experience” (6). Further, “[i]n the West particularly, many feel drawn to it, because they yearn for opportunities to evade the social conventions that separate and contain. [...] There’s something else required, a kind of alchemical mixture, a fusion of hearts and minds that is always beyond legislation or good deeds. It’s the admixture of something spiritual, a social, impulsive, voluntarist flexing of social muscles by people who are acting [...] to realise a marriage between personal self-expression and the desire to meld into and advance the interests of the group” (197-98). This passage is exemplary for contemporary writing on improvisation in its integration of the individual and the social, progressivism and folklorism, the political, the emotional, and the magical/spiritual. The universalist and vivid terminology is also remarkable: Whose “social muscles” are being flexed and to what end? Johnston’s reply would certainly involve an empowerment of those who feel “ill at ease with society” (197).

ethical problem for the community. Making matters worse, those margins, where the sought-after voices allegedly articulate themselves, are drawn precisely over the color line. This is not a personal observation on my part, but discursive knowledge within the Improv sphere, the closed universe of its autosemiosis, as well as public knowledge as expressed in the above-quoted article. Indeed, it is an obvious case that Improv is overtly troubled by the seemingly inexplicable line of defense surrounding whatever it perceives itself to be, while allegedly dealing with the unwanted child of Black absence—mainly in the opaque terms of diversity politics.¹²

Besides its aesthetic, ideological, and institutional dimensions, Improv can be conceptualized as a sphere of knowledge and shared interests. Seeing that this Improv knowledge circulates primarily online (websites, forums, and podcasts) and emphasizing the translocality of the Improv community, I will now direct the attention from Second City (Chicago) to the Upright Citizens Brigade Theatre (New York City). In a 2010 UCB podcast, John Frusciante and Will Hines, both improvisers and instructors, interview the all-Black and all-female Improv trio Doppelganger. These quotations are only three particularly telling ones from a podcast marked by the awkwardness and discomfort generated by Black absence and White ubiquity in Improv:

- HINES: It makes Doppelganger—in addition I mean, the primary thing is that Doppelganger does great shows—but it also is fun, when Doppelganger as a team is a good story. [...] It's encouraging. [...] When I see Doppelganger on stage, I'm like "Oh, maybe we're not a bunch of assholes. Maybe, like, my community, that I'm invested in, and that I love so much, is not a bunch of dicks. (35:38)
- FRUSC.: The perception is [...]: 'This is a white college-dude art form.' But the fact that you three ladies are so great and so hilarious and have kicked ass for the past two months, is, you know, an argument against that. (36:00)
- FRUSC.: [The UCB diversity program] is definitely working, I think. I think we've seen a lot of—I think we're starting to see more diversity on the stage, more consistent diversity in the classes and also more, you know, funny people who are diverse. (51:32)

¹² One example of the ways in which Black absence is articulated in Improv is the episode "Black Guy auditions" in the UCB online series *Inside the Master Class* (Besser 2012). I leave it up to the reader to assess whether this ironical take on the question of diversity succeeds in challenging the multicultural paradigm.

As soon as a group like Doppelganger enters the communal picture, they are warmly welcomed, as their presence brings along the comforting reassurance that “[we’re] not a bunch of dicks.” This only goes to show how the fact is veiled that the fundamental problem does not lie in the absence of “voices from the margins” but in the marginality of the margins, in the diverseness of diversity.¹³ Seeing “diversity on the stage” implies the absurd notion of diversity as an objectifiable, observable quality. This does in no way do justice to Improv’s egalitarian claims, as it presupposes differentiation and judgment of humans on a somatotopical basis—despite the perfidious semantics of ‘being diverse’ as something positive. Synchronically speaking, if some-thing ‘is diverse’ there must be a stable referent which that some-thing diverts from. Here, that stable referent is the White speaking-position that goes unmarked, unquestioned, (always) invisible. As long as the argument stays within these inherently racist semantics, the smug inclusion of marginalized voices only solidifies the latter’s peripheral position and prevents the spotlight from turning onto the auto-centralizing agent of the marginalization. I suggest that the discomfort among the White Improv community might thus not only be based on irritation by Black absence itself but by the psychological double bind this absence is a symptom of, a traditionally Humanist contradiction constituted by the conflicting forces of wanting to be a) truly egalitarian and inclusive, and b) to keep being the one who does the including.

If the story of Doppelganger is, as Will Hines assures, “a good story,” a success narrative, the success surely lies mainly with Improv as an economic sector rather than with the members of the group. The “good story” of Doppelganger framed as Black exceptionalism provides White relief in the tense race question on the one hand and the exception to petrify the rules on the other. The money spent on scholarships and diversity programs pays off: the number of Black Improv artists rises and there is “more diversity on the stage, more consistent diversity in the classes.” Whether this observation of Frusciante’s is true or not, any talk of a statistical increase of African American members is strikingly racist in itself. Applauding this ‘increase’ is nothing but an affirmative celebration of generous, White action. Having no direct economic profitability, the value of such diversity programs lies in obscuring potential points of accusation as well as covering up the problematics of concepts like authenticity and freedom, which are central to Improv’s normative aesthetics. With the

¹³ The same stands for the term ‘minority’ used in the newspaper article quoted above.

members' somatotypes functioning as the central element of the Doppelgänger narrative, the agents of such a "good story" are easily replaced. Such fungibility, to use Saidiya Hartman's term (7), re-stages the Black as the Slave to the White Master who remains in powerful control of the cultural, institutional, and financial resources. Any story, positive or negative, involving the diversity concept, strengthens the White position. And yet, the Improv community finds it difficult to understand why one would actively and consciously stay absent from these power structures which re-enact epistemologies of enslavement.

Just like the presence of the Doppelgänger trio in Improv instigates reactions that re-enforce Improv's self-affirming, liberatory, and multicultural claims (in the same vein as those articulated in the face of Black absence, for which the introductory quotation by Bowen serves as an example), the figure of the doppelgänger can be read as a literary, Romanticist strategy to conceptualize (and position) the abject within and against the ratio-centric system of thought that was Enlightenment. I suggest that the doppelgänger motif can be conceptualized as a genuine threat to the epistemology of Enlightenment with the potential to lay bare the latter's historical, cultural, and racial underpinnings. By foregrounding the dynamics of abjection (i.e. those dynamics which bring it about in the first place), the doppelgänger provides a productive metaphor to effectively disturb the very system of thought that had created it.

The Shadow of Enlightenment

Although the motif has been discussed extensively in Freudian terms—one subject, two sides, one shown, one hidden—it provides a productive model for a critique of Enlightenment thought, which was a precondition for Freudian analysis in that it constructed the notion of subjective, Human individuality in the first place. Drawing on literature and criticism by Morrison (1987), Young (1990), Blackburn (1997), and others, Broeck understands the subject of modernity primarily as a subject whose possession of freedom is its distinctive (self-empowering, auto-instituting) characteristic (155). I read this freedom with Gary Peters to be a freedom for a "master who would rather enslave you than go unrecognized as a nobody" (23). The terms 'master' and 'enslave' are to be taken quite literally, given the intricate relationship of Enlightenment thought with the epistemological

and cultural practice of African enslavement. Only those with the capacity to own a slave could be truly free.

Not only has this “vexed genealogy of freedom” (Hartman 115) foreclosed the Black from the realm of humanity until today, it also lays bare the epistemological brutality present in making use of the Black as the referential background of the semiotic chaos against which White Europeans could cut out their own image of civilized subjectivity.¹⁴ Wynter explains how the rational subject of Enlightenment, which she terms Man1, replaced what had previously been the prerogative of Christianity, providing a signifier for what it means to be Human. Both concepts, the religious Christian and the rational Man1, are based on a hierarchical duality, between flesh and spirit in Christianity, between irrational and rational in modernity. While I emphasize the role of so-called rational thought in the making of the Black Abject, it is important to note with Wynter that this duality was already prefigured in the biblical co-classification of Blacks with apes or the usage of the color black as a signifier for sin, e.g. in the portrayal of demons (302).

Thus today’s on-going re-enactments of Black enslavement into the matrix slot of the abject are not unfortunate by-products but emphatic discursive and epistemologically necessary reifications of modernity’s paradigm of reason. If today one speaks of a free subject acting authentically, like in Improv, the statement is charged with the continual epistemological and historical momentum of Black dehumanization. The Black cannot act authentically, i.e. in congruence with itself, because there is no such thing as a Black human self. It is thus not paradoxical to claim universal freedom for an art form as White as Improv. Indeed, it is perfectly reasonable within the axiomatic logic of a traditional White epistemological perspective, including the irrationality ascribed to the Black abject—evil, enslaved, ethnic, or whatever other terms may be available.

Doppelgänger Deconstruction

Returning to my somewhat precarious analogy, I read the doppelgänger motif as an enlightened literary re-articulation of the theological concepts of good and evil, following

¹⁴ Toni Morrison makes a similar point when she writes that, “[it] was this Africanism, deployed as rawness and savagery, that provided the staging ground and arena for the elaboration of the quintessential American identity” (*Playing* 44).

the same logic of transumption Wynter points at. The notion of the doppelgänger as a representation of the repressed part of the split subject, Christian or enlightened, was in large part prefigured in the concept of sinful and irrational Black flesh. It seems only logical that in portrayals of literary doppelgängers the images are remarkably close to semantics frequently ascribed to the Black abject: not only is the traditional double presented as shadowy, dark, and ape-like, but it also acts according to ‘natural instincts’ (rather than ‘rational thought’), such as lust and violence.¹⁵

However, in a doppelgänger situation it is, logically speaking, perspective not ontology that defines who gets to be the original host. Søren Landkildehus explains that “there may be no criterion to distinguish an ontological priority between someone and his so-called double.” He further argues that “in non-hierarchical language use both instantiations are each other’s double” (67). Other than merely regarding the doppelgänger as a literary trope to destabilize notions of a coherent self, he considers the double a “benign but dramatic feature of [...] a ‘fundamental’ transformation in one’s belief system” (65). Going beyond the narrative plane, to which Landkildehus still adheres, I radicalize this argument, suggesting that the doppelgänger has the potential to rupture the general epistemological matrix from which such a self could emerge. Following the logic of analogy that I pursued in this article, I suggest that abject perspectives are crucial for a critical re-consideration and re-working of White hegemonial knowledges—aesthetic, social, political, cultural. Such heterogeneous positionalities are necessary to understand the perspectivism involved in what is perceived (and disseminated) as normal. If one aims at the deconstruction of continual White selfing processes of which Improv and, by extension, United States popular entertainment culture are symptomatic manifestations, one will thus not be able to get far without Black perspectives.

I claim that improvisational aesthetics could be helped by more doppelgängering or Blackening. By that I mean the deconstruction of persistent ways of knowing, producing and

¹⁵ Despite du Bois’s influential concept of a double consciousness (and other theorists in his vein), the doppelgänger metaphor has, to my knowledge, not yet been made productive in the kind of epistemological critique pursued in this article. As a literary figure, however, the doppelgänger does feature in African American literary texts and analyses thereof, as Smith (1996) and Shockley (2006) illustrate. Smith’s intertextual reading of Charles R. Johnson’s *Middle Passage* and John A. Williams’s *Captain Blackman* involves some of the heuristic dualisms of the doppelgänger concept which are utilized in this article too.

perceiving theatrical improvisatory performance. Using the epistemologically deconstructive potential of the Black perspective, I believe it is possible and worthwhile to revisit improvisational aesthetics, developing a focus on the actual potential of the theatrical situation. In disrupting White linguistic, cultural, and political hegemony as well as the conservative prerogative of the ‘funny’ and recognizing the aesthetic value of productive encounters between various stocks (or baggages) of knowledge, this might be possible. As a first step, however, it is important for the Improv community to acknowledge that race-neutral and apolitical Improv, in form or content, does not exist. If this can be achieved, it might be possible for improvisational theater to provide a substantial alternative to the “slave-market bullshit” in which it is trading and treading at this point, without resorting to the narration of further racist “good stories.”

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