

# Critical questions: The impact and import of the contradictions and epistemic denials in the field of intercultural communication research, theorizing, teaching, and practice

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## Abstract

Present contradictions in the intercultural communication field – the pre-eminence of western communication models and the minimization and denial of particular international and racial cultural voices – delimit the possibilities for nuanced theory building, scholarship, and teaching that may address the greatest challenge facing the world community – fostering understanding and advancing peace and security. This article introduces the notion of *avant-garde epistemic confluence* as one possibility for engendering greater levels of inclusion of marginalized and silenced voices at the epistemic core of the field to effectively address the evolving intergroup, multi-ethnic, and inter-religious conflicts on the world's stage. Mobilizing principles grounded in mindfulness and intercultural alliance building at the individual and disciplinary levels via research, theorizing, and teaching is a driving force. Advancing a pragmatic vision of the intercultural communication field in this twenty-first-century moment with the potential to address complex cross-cultural and intergroup social and political tensions is the central mission.

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My voice is the voice of many waters  
 I do not attempt to speak for all  
 Yet my voice is  
 All  
 That was  
 All  
 That is  
 All  
 That will ever be  
 My voice a reflection  
 Architect of past, present, future  
 It is  
 Me  
 It is  
 You  
 It is  
 Us  
 Everyday extraordinary  
 Hidden, forgotten, ignored  
 Droplet in an ocean  
 The heart of every matter that ever did matter  
 My voice is the voice of many waters  
 I cannot speak for all  
 Yet my voice is  
 All

(Hannah Oliha, 2012)

Indeed, in our view, it is the norm for the discipline of communication to follow the power and to fashion its theories and standards for effectiveness based upon those who are successful in controlling and manipulating others. In this sense, rather than constructed abstractly or based upon a priori conceptions of communication effectiveness, the theories of communication effectiveness recognized and published in the discipline of communication are derivative and they follow the flow and path of power. (Chesebro et al., 2007: 5)

As an emerging intercultural communication scholar, I have thought often of Lorde's (1984: 112) words, 'the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house'. Following that thought, I have often asked myself (and colleagues who will listen), how we, as intercultural scholars can continue to advance epistemic commitments that silence and fail to recognize other lenses. It is a thought that has plagued me long before this moment and no doubt will continue to do so in many moments to come. While completing my doctoral studies, I noticed quickly that certain types of knowledge are green-lighted;

students, teachers, practitioners, and scholars are encouraged to engage these perspectives to their heart's content – and others are amber-lighted – through unmistakable omissions and desertions, individuals are unobtrusively told to proceed with caution when engaging these perspectives.

Certainly there are political consequences to red-lighting – discouraging individuals from exploring divergent and unfamiliar perspectives – in this historical moment in academia. Such action is tantamount to dispensing a charge of 'guilty' in a court of law without sufficient evidence, yet through silence or limited exposure, we amber-light certain types of knowledge in intercultural communication scholarship, teaching, and practice, limiting the engagement of historically underrepresented perspectives in theorizing and knowledge generation. As scholars continue to grapple with the challenges of fostering healthy intercultural communities through the field of intercultural communication, I believe there is an urgency like never before to expand the epistemic foundations of the field – especially in this historical moment as different social groups and identities struggle to assert local and contextualized agendas, in globalized and volatile social spaces (see Holladay and Smith, 2009; Oliha, 2011; Oliha and Collier, 2010).

Graduating from the Department of Communication at the University of New Mexico, which is arguably one of the top intercultural communication programs in the US, I was intrigued by the narrative of the evolution of the field and the discipline of communication mobilized in 'seminal' papers designated as 'required' reading during my graduate education. Now as a professor with an intellectual and personal commitment to the field of intercultural communication, I am increasingly troubled by the moments when I have to remind my students that there are gaps even in the readings I am assigning as there are voices yet to be included and sociocultural perspectives yet to be engaged. The scholarly contributions I interrogate in this article are an amalgamation of: (1) seminal works I was exposed to in core classes as a doctorate student being groomed to contribute to teaching and scholarship in the field; and (2) contributions by scholars I was exposed to in elective courses or in independent research pursuits as I have been engaged in this ongoing journey to find my place in the communication discipline and specifically in the intercultural communication field. Some of these works engender a dominant narrative privileging western ideological and paradigmatic leanings. Others are interruptions generating co- and/or counter-narratives. All of these scholarly contributions are attempts to name and establish the boundaries of a field emerging from the larger umbrella that is the communication studies discipline.

## **Emergence of the intercultural communication field: Dominant, counter and co-narratives**

Indeed a cursory review of scholarship exploring the roots of the field and its emergence reveal the tenor of the historical and contemporary trajectory of the field. Arguably a seminal paper used to educate new and emerging scholars regarding the historical foundation of the field of intercultural communication is Leeds-Hurwitz's (1990) 'Notes in the history of intercultural communication: The Foreign Service Institute and the mandate for intercultural training'. In the opening paragraph of this paper Leeds-Hurwitz argues that:

Many articles discussing some aspect of intercultural communication begin with a paragraph in which the author reviews the history of the field and the major publications. Typically, Edward Hall's book, *The Silent Language*, published in 1959 is listed as the first work in the field, and often specifically mentioned as the crucial starting point. (Leeds-Hurwitz, 1990: 262)

Leeds-Hurwitz (1990) further argues that Hall's contributions to the field, and indeed the field itself, emerged through the specific needs of the Foreign Service Institute (FSI) of the US Department of State (DOS) 'between 1946 and 1956' (Leeds-Hurwitz, 1990: 262). Growing out of the need to apply 'abstract anthropological concepts to the practical world of foreign service diplomats, this early focus on training American diplomats led . . . to the standard use of intercultural communication training' (Leeds-Hurwitz, 1990: 262). These claims are supported by the four key arguments Leeds-Hurwitz makes in her paper: (1) Hall's work is important to the development of the field; (2) the evolution of Hall's work was shaped by the needs of FSI; (3) these two contextual nuggets shaped crucial ideas regarding the nature and purpose of intercultural communication – notions advanced by future scholars; and (4) these ideas are implicated in and 'illuminate some features of the contemporary literature' (Leeds-Hurwitz, 1990: 262). The overarching rationale for Leeds-Hurwitz's contribution to general dialogue regarding the emergence of the field of intercultural communication is the assumption that readers will be 'most familiar with the contemporary literature' offering a compelling reason to illumine 'the historical context which set the stage for the current practices in the field' (Leeds-Hurwitz, 1990: 262).

Another publication by Martin and Nakayama (2003) addressing the emergence and development of the field claims that the:

Current study of intercultural communication is influenced in part by how it developed in the United States and in part by the worldviews, or research philosophies, of the scholars who pursue it. The roots of the study of intercultural communication can be traced to the post-World War II era, when the United States increasingly came to dominate the world stage. However, government and business personnel working overseas often found that they were ill equipped to work among people from different cultures. The language training they received, for example, did little to prepare them for the complex challenge of working abroad. (Martin and Nakayama, 2003: 42)

Born from the exigency to equip and educate scholars in the 'new' and growing field that is intercultural communication, both papers make claims that appear to be the dominant understanding of the roots of the field. Indeed Leeds-Hurwitz adds a rhetorical amen to her major claims even in the final line of her opening paragraph through the assertion that 'if we are to understand why we include some topics as *appropriate* and *do not consider* other types of work, we must understand the exigencies that generated the first study of intercultural communication' (Leeds-Hurwitz, 1990: 262; emphasis added). An insightful and striking claim, yet note the implications of said statement. The roots of the field began with a pragmatic goal to help American diplomats and business persons fulfill the goals of communicating effectively in foreign contexts for the purpose of protecting the

interests of the United States. Secondary to the primary US foreign business and diplomacy objectives are the interests of the other parties involved. Inadvertently Leeds-Hurwitz's (1990) claims about the roots of the field and the import of understanding these roots rhetorically silence non-western ways of knowing and being by centering the exigency of the western subject getting what s(he) wants by communicating effectively with other parties involved in cross-cultural interactions. Indeed the framing does not support the idea of *exchange* (a multidirectional flow) but rather a unidirectional flow showing how the western, notably US subject, should *act upon* other subjects for the fulfillment of a given goal. A compelling and problematic notion to advance in a conflict-torn age when the greatest need is to uncover and pursue opportunities to build bridges upon which diverse groups occupying shared social spaces may traverse on the journey toward understanding and co-creating methods of working and living together.

Arguably rumblings of the birthing of the field began long before 1946 despite the aforementioned problematic framing of the development of the field. Even in the early part of the twentieth century, scholars like WEB DuBois made the critical claim that:

The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color-line – the relation of the darker to the lighter races of men in Asia and Africa, in America and the islands of the sea. It was a phase of this problem that caused the Civil War. (DuBois, 1903)

I contend that this major claim has impacted research and theory building in the area of critical intercultural communication research. Consider Jackson et al.'s (2000: 82) mobilization of the ethos of Dubois' statement in the claim that the ' "problem" of the 21st century will be the politics of identity'.

Perhaps rumblings of the beginnings of the field were felt even long before this moment as Geronimo, a famous Native American chief in the 1800s, spoke of the oneness of humanity even as his people struggled to negotiate peace treaties and advocate for equity during the critical years of nation building and expansion in North America:

I cannot think that we are useless or God would not have created us. There is one God looking down on us all. We are all the children of one God. The sun, the darkness, the winds are all listening to what we have to say. ([www.indians.org/welker/geronimo.htm](http://www.indians.org/welker/geronimo.htm))

Capturing notions surrounding the domestic struggle to negotiate the social, historical, economic, and cultural differences implicated in interactions between subjects embodying different sociocultural identities in the United States, these theoretically loaded perspectives have and are impacting the work of scholars in the field, yet narratives of the emergence of the field fail to acknowledge their impact and import in contemporary teaching, scholarship and practice in the critical project to cultivate understanding, dialogue and social change regarding the operation of privilege, power and identity in increasingly globalized contexts that are conflict torn. Merely two nationally contextualized examples (invariably there are others crossing national and historical boundaries), the silence surrounding even these contributions to the field in narratives about the historical *emergence* and *development* of the field of intercultural communication supports

the notion that *what* we know in the field and *can* know are constrained by the ongoing minimization, denial, and exclusion of the epistemological, meta-theoretical, and theoretical contributions of scholars and intellectuals with non-western ideological, epistemological, and axiological worldviews.

The biggest challenge that twenty-first-century intercultural communication scholars will have to grapple with in the near future are questions that remain unanswered and whose answers will continue to be contested terrain. Among these are questions surrounding: (1) sources of knowledge (where does our knowledge of the field come from?); (2) methods used in knowledge acquisition and dissemination (how is this knowledge gathered and shared?); and (3) accountability (how do we ensure that the field embodies the principles of intercultural communication competence and sensitivity that its scholars attempt to research and teach?). The unique agenda of the field of intercultural communication creates an urgency to resolve present contradictions if the field is to effectively address the evolving cross-cultural, intergroup, multi-ethnic, and inter-religious conflicts on the world's stage through theorizing, research, and teaching.

The crucial question in this historical moment is whether we, as intercultural communication teachers and scholars, grounded in the agenda to engender community through our work, are modeling intercultural communication competence and whether we are creating space for intercultural alliance building (Collier, 2002) through our embodiment of the principle of mindfulness (Langer, 1989) at our epistemic core. Indeed, does that core include non-traditional and historically underrepresented perspectives (including but not limited to international and minority racial group identities)? If not, is there space to expand this epistemic core such that voices that hitherto have been muted and ignored might contribute perspectives that will enable the field to respond comprehensively to contemporary conflicts at the theoretical and practical level, in order to advance creative and sustainable endings to twenty-first-century cross-cultural conflicts? Indeed, if the field will contribute the nuanced theorizing that emerging intergroup conflicts require, how can the field do so through the denial of non-mainstream perspectives – which, incidentally, are non-mainstream simply because they are muted and ignored – thereby creating contradictions and gaps in teaching, scholarship, and practice (see Asante, 2006; Chesebro et al., 2007; hooks, 2003; Miller, 2005; Tuhiwai Smith, 1999)?

In subsequent sections I address the denials and gaps in the field and the implications therein for nuanced theory building, scholarship, and teaching that may address the greatest challenge facing the world community – fostering understanding and advancing peace and security. *Avant-garde epistemic confluence* is introduced as one possibility for engendering greater levels of inclusion of marginalized and silenced voices at the epistemic core of the field in the crucial project to address the evolving intergroup, multi-ethnic, and inter-religious conflicts on the world's stage. Finally, I offer an example of this epistemological proposition at work. This article seeks to advance a pragmatic vision of the intercultural communication field in this twenty-first-century moment with the potential to address complex cross-cultural and intergroup, social and political tensions through the inclusion of the voice of co-cultural scholars whose epistemic, meta-theoretical, and theoretical worldviews have been influenced by intellectual and social spaces beyond dominant westernized paradigms.

## Denials and gaps

We live in the post-9-11 era of clashing identities. Tightly knit communications technologies and transportation systems continue to bring together differing languages, religions, cultures, races, and nationalities closer than ever before in a web of interdependence, conflict, and a common fate. Paradoxically, the very forces that diminish physical, social, and cultural boundaries exacerbate group rivalries, rendering a deeply fractious and unsettling landscape of today's world. (Kim, 2007: 249–250)

Scholars such as Asante (2006), Chesebro et al. (2007), and Kim (2007) suggest that the field of intercultural communication privileges western ways of knowing and being; Under the assertion that Korean, Japanese, Chinese, and other Asian scholars can contribute significantly to shifting the fields of interpersonal and intercultural communication from 'mechanistic and message-centered models and methods to more dynamic and humane person-centered models and methods', Gordon (2006: 17) offers an interpretation of key factors influencing the epistemology and ontology of western and western-influenced scholars.

The western worldview is fixated with ' "sources" and messages, and "channels" and "receivers" and "message fidelity" and "feedback" and "noise," ' all underlying fundamental components of communication processes and practices (Gordon, 2006: 17). By centering the 'message' as a major source of inquiry, the western paradigm inadvertently engenders a static understanding of communication (Gordon, 2006: 17), rather than engaging the dynamic flow and exchange involved. Importantly, the western approach has historically privileged the 'descriptive and statistically based knowledge of communication and culture' favored by the positivistic paradigm (Lee et al., 1995: 263). With an emphasis on controlling and predicting 'communication behavior', the western approach favors the 'urge to exercise our force in the world, striving to make our impact, trying to dominate our subject matter, exercising our "yang" capacities, and seeing our subject matter itself, "communication", in its most ' "agentic" aspects' (Gordon, 2006: 18). Left undone and unattended to is the urge for 'communion' (Gordon, 2006: 18), the very undertone spurring and ordering communication processes and practices. The human subject need not communicate with other human subjects except for the purpose of *sharing* space and time *in community*. Indeed intercultural communication has such implications for increasing levels of communication competence in a conflict-torn world simply because it advocates the importance of acknowledging and understanding self *in relation* to the other in complex and dynamic social and cultural contexts.

It is of crucial importance then that our thinking and doing in the field of intercultural communication engage us in the crucial activities of ' "co-mingling" our meanings and experiences with others, co-creating something "in common", coming out of separateness into "community", "communing" with the one another, coming into "unity", reaching "union", reaching "oneness" ' (Gordon, 2006: 18–19). These ideas are not the utopic musings of scholars lost in the ivory tower of unrealistic impossibilities, but 'the etymological roots of our central disciplinary term "communication" ' (Gordon, 2006: 18). Therefore, how can the field advance comprehensive understandings of intercultural

communication competence, peace, and security without the input of historically marginalized perspectives?

Again Lorde's (1984) words echo in my mind. In order to make visible the workings of marginalization in academia and in research processes, scholars such as Patricia Hill Collins (2003), for example, have advanced a deeper understanding of the factors that locate historically marginalized perspectives in the corpus of academic scholarship. Collins (2003) advances a black feminist positionality and the intersectionality of race, class, and gender as nested systems of oppression. In 'Toward a new vision: Race, class, and gender as categories of analysis and connection', she argues that there are 'few pure victims or oppressors, and that each one of us derives varying amounts of penalty and privilege from the multiple systems of oppression that frame our lives' (2003: 591). In it she calls for a richer conceptualization of identity and positionality that resists the flattening of difference and the Olympics of ranking oppressions to determine the biggest victim. Her work stands as an epistemic challenge to historic efforts to flatten difference and conceptualize them solely on nationalistic or binary categories of black/white and male/female. In her work is the call to advance practices that account for the complexities of our identities as scholars, teachers, and subjects.

Such scholarship is in line with others that consider the hegemonic workings of academic institutions that have ignored non-western identities historically, including, but not limited to those emerging from African, indigenous, and Latin and Native American communities, while also marginalizing alternate forms of knowledge generation. One such project is that of Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999), who challenges the veracity of western research in exploring the life of indigenous people. She argues for a transformative research methodology that is sensitive to indigenous ways of knowing and being and that reclaims these critical dimensions through the research process.

Of note in the field of intercultural communication scholarship is the work of scholars like Molefi Asante (2006) who advances the notion of Afrocentricity. Through it, he speaks of unhinging the generalization of the particular into the absolute, thereby delimiting the full expression of other forms of knowledge and ways of being. According to Asante, the quintessential example of this move is the mobilization of western thought as the absolute foundation of knowledge, when it is, in fact, particular. The strategic deployment of western thought as absolute in US institutions of education erases the knowledge of African, Eastern, and Native American communities for example. Asante (2006: 146) contends that 'openness to human agency' is the 'operative principle' of Afrocentricity. In the article 'Afrocentricity and the Eurocentric hegemony of knowledge', he argues that a fixation with color is not the problem with issues of race and diversity, but rather the 'strange belief on the part of Whites that they are superior to Africans, [and] that they have a right to establish and maintain hierarchy' (Asante, 2006: 152).

As to the claim that race consciousness contradicts the goals of community and delimits the possibilities for transcending the material conditions that racial hierarchies produce, Asante (2006) argues for disavowing *racism* rather than *race consciousness* (Asante, 2006; see Oliha, 2011). He argues that silencing race consciousness is an erasure of African American positionality and agency. Such insight raises awareness about the potential contributions that knowledge emerging from historically marginalized and muted spaces might add to the field of intercultural communication.



Scholars such as Chesebro et al. (2007: 7) also suggest that ‘the last 2,500 year history of communication theory has been extremely selective. It has focused solely on developments within Western nations.’ Arguing for the greater inclusion of Asian communication models, they suggest that presently, and erroneously, ‘Western cultures are presumed to be the only sources of models and standards of communication standards, practices, and achievements’ (Chesebro et al., 2007: 6). Speaking of these same western communication models that were introduced to him as a student, Gordon (2006: 18) suggests that the communication discipline has been dominated by ‘“agentic” forces’ for the last half-century. Gordon (2006: 18) claims that these forces have emphasized:

‘Tough’ over ‘tender,’ ‘numbers’ over ‘words,’ ‘power’ over ‘love,’ ‘control’ over ‘surrender,’ [and] ‘strategies’ over ‘persons . . .’ As a consequence, our theorizing about humans communicating has been biased and limiting. Boundaries and blinders have hampered our professional seeing and knowing. (Gordon, 2006: 18)

Asante (2006), Chesebro et al. (2007), and Gordon (2006) offer compelling evidence regarding the gaps and possibilities in the communication discipline in general and in the field of intercultural communication in particular.

The work emerging from these scholars suggests that historically marginalized and non-traditional voices are gaining entrance into the research process in intercultural communication and in academia as a whole. Yet the question remains of how much the epistemic tensions and calls to action impact theorizing and scholarship outside of the social justice agendas of racial minority and international scholars who choose to prominently feature these perspectives in their research and practice. Reflective of Chesebro et al.’s (2007: 6) claim that ‘cross-cultural and international communication theory has implicitly presumed that the United States and Western cultural systems are an appropriate foundation for defining what are appropriate and successful communication processes and outcomes’, these voices are sometimes amber-lighted and/or minimized in general academic circles. Certainly there are spaces in academia where these voices play a major role, yet I argue that their overwhelming reduction to moments of ‘critical’ reflection minimizes their possibilities. Until there is a greater openness in the field to the voice of co-cultural scholars whose epistemic, meta-theoretical, and theoretical worldviews have been influenced by places and spaces outside the dominant westernized flow, there is still work to be done to model in our teaching and practice, the principles of intercultural sensitivity and mindfulness we research and teach. Further if the field is to contribute theoretically and pragmatically to addressing the social concerns of this conflict-ridden epoch, the boundaries of the field must be expanded beyond the narratives, and hence perspectives, that hitherto have controlled the borders of the field.

In the upcoming section I address the importance of voice and the import and impact of the potential contributions of historically underrepresented voices in the field of intercultural communication. Further, I introduce the notion of *avant-garde epistemic confluence* as a possible interruption of the present denials and gaps in the field, while offering one example of this propositional claim at work through one historically marginalized sociocultural perspective in the field of intercultural communication.

## Voice: Does mine count?

Some of the most passionate domestic and international conflicts headlining the daily media involve differing cultural identities. From long-festered prejudices, discriminations, and hatreds to the more recent acts of violent rage and terror, we are seeing in all corners of the world so many angry words, hurt, and destruction. (Kim, 2007: 250)

When I speak of ‘voice’, I’m not speaking merely of the subjective sense making of phenomena, but I am speaking of the historical, social, political, geographical, and cultural layers of knowledge that comprise voice and what those layers represent. Further, I am referencing the possibilities that – different types of – voice, the amalgamation of these layers, might offer the field of intercultural communication.

One of my frustrations as a Nigerian American intercultural communication scholar is the dearth of scholarship exploring African communities and perspectives in the field. How can the field of intercultural communication respond to the conflicts taking place on the African continent, for example, if we don’t expand the sites of our scholarship and more specifically, the epistemic core of our scholarship? For example, research suggests that African, indigenous, Latino/a, and Native American voices and perspectives are historically underrepresented in intercultural communication scholarship (Miller, 2005; Tuhiwai Smith, 1999). Munshi and McKie (2001) establish the premise for the forthcoming claim:

Maps, drawn up during European colonialism, create a warped geopolitical image of the world that positions the West in an artificially superior position. These colonial maps manipulate the shapes and sizes of continents and nations and distort the reality of their relative physical size so that North America looks larger than Africa and Scandinavia bigger than India. (Munshi and McKie, 2001: 10)

While this article does not seek to detail specific examples of the underrepresentation of different sociocultural perspectives, Munshi and McKie (2001) fill a gap in the interpretive lens necessary for understanding this complex phenomenon through their assertion that ‘the cartography of intercultural communication [similarly] projects . . . systematic distortions by wiping nations that are of marginal business interest to the West-dominated global market off the subject map’ of intercultural communication curricula (Munshi and McKie, 2001: 10). Seeking to create an intercultural course able to meet the needs of students embodying and espousing different identities, Munshi and McKie (2001: 12) found that most of the business and management texts ‘looked at culture and communication through a restricted western lens’. Importantly they illuminate how textbooks in the field tend to follow ‘the geographical contours of the rich trading patterns of Euro-American commerce’ concentrating on ‘the cultural norms of people from countries with which the West is doing, or has the potential to do business’ (Munshi and McKie, 2001: 10). Referencing how these texts center the cultural interactions between western nations and peoples (primarily the US and Europeans) and countries such as China and Japan. Fewer references are made about countries such as Thailand for example, and none about populous nations such as Brazil and India. Finally they assert that countries in Africa ‘are rarely referenced in the intercultural communication sphere of influence’ (Munshi and McKie, 2001: 10).

If woven more widely into the discipline, these voices and perspectives could offer: (1) alternate possibilities to the field as it relates to strategies for building intercultural communities; and (2) possibilities for expanding ideas about data collection and indeed what qualifies as data in intercultural communication research. Crucially, these new possibilities may extend areas of the field to more adequately address the complexities of the tensions and conflicts plaguing cross-cultural, multi-ethnic, and multi-religious populations on the world's stage.

Scholars such as Kim (2007: 249) argue that 'there is clearly a need for intercultural communication researchers to acquire deeper knowledge of differing philosophical-methodological systems. It is through expanded methodological literacy that divergent perspectives may be better understood and even appreciated.' Indeed, the growing and increasingly complex international conflicts in the human community suggest that the field of intercultural communication cannot remain within the borders of standardization and conventionality (see Asante, 2006; Chesebro et al., 2007; Gordon, 2006; Kim, 2007), but must engage the idea of *avant-garde epistemic confluence*. An *avant-garde epistemic confluence* exists when we allow knowledge and standards of knowledge acquisition to flow together, come together and join together across cultures. It is a meeting of ideas that opens up new possibilities for theory building in particular and the research process in general (Gordon, 2006; Miller, 2005). It is a synergistic mating that transcends the prison of convention to foster connections between the historically underrepresented and the standardized, and the marginalized and uncritically centered. It is a process wherein, politically, socially, and culturally separated rivers (ideas, perspectives, subjectivities, voices) flow together and converge in the service of creativity and community. If the field of intercultural communication is to effectively negotiate the issues of peace, security, and community building on the world's stage, it must first start in our knowledge generation processes – through our ways of knowing and through our theory building.

### *Avant-garde epistemic confluence in practice*

One strategy to engage the idea of *avant-garde epistemic confluence* is the pursuit of collaborations with scholars (academic and community based) from various backgrounds. This can materialize as openness to allowing one's ideas to meld with those of a colleague whose voice captures a social, cultural, political, and historical amalgamation different from one's own. Another avenue is through openness to alternative understandings of the taken-for-granted of the field. Specifically, understandings of culture and communication diverge from one cultural site to the next. Baraldi (2006: 67) asserts that intercultural scholars must acknowledge 'the existence in communication of incommensurate cultural forms' meaning that 'some relevant cultural values expressed in communication [cannot be] . . . exported to differently structured societies'. While there may be common themes in our understandings of culture and communication, there are certainly nuances that speak of local meanings of phenomena; yet, though local and contextualized, these nuances could shed light on understandings of these concepts at the macro level.

Given these considerations, this twenty-first-century moment calls for nuanced understandings of communication competence and even intercultural communication

competence flowing out of different cultural spaces (Miller, 2005). The possibilities are limitless if we allow these perspectives and voices to flow into our epistemic waters. Going back to the notion of the denials and gaps concerning African contexts, for example, Miller (2005) confirms that presently:

Africa is apparently so far from the center of intercultural communication literature as to be beyond the margins. The currents of research occasionally stray briefly near the continent's northern and southern edges, but the remainder of that vast and richly cultured people remains virtually un contemplated. That this indicates undervaluing of African people and cultures is perhaps obvious. That it represents a weakness in the understanding of communication across the globe is less obvious but equally true. It is time for the field of intercultural communication to emulate the example of cartography and discard its distorted representations of the planet. (Miller, 2005: 224)

Miller (2005: 220) further claims that all too frequently, African cultures are 'omitted from discussion' in intercultural communication research. The dominant discussions in the field center on western and eastern contexts respectively (Miller, 2005). Importantly, Miller's examination of journals committed to the exploration of intercultural communication revealed that the majority of articles offered over a 10-year period focused on North American and Asian cultures. The journals included: *Journal of Intercultural Communication Research*, *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, *International and Intercultural Communication Annual*, and *Howard Journal of Communication*. Miller's study is an important justification for greater levels of reflexivity at two levels: (1) the individual and (2) disciplinary.

Present scholarship (Asante, 2006; Baldesty, 2003; Baraldi, 2006; Chesebro et al., 2007; Gordon, 2006; Kim, 2007; Miller, 2005; Oliha, 2010; Torres, 2006) suggests that there are grave repercussions for the continued denial, omission, and minimization of cultural perspectives and voices in this historical moment. Gordon (2006) argues that the privileged space given the western worldview has created biases in and limited theorizing about communication processes and consequently the potential impact of the field in contemporary conflicts. Importantly, we (intercultural communication scholars and practitioners), who are to challenge the exclusion of different voices and perspectives while helping communities negotiate the negative consequences therein, place our 'students at a disadvantage' because of the resulting distortions in teaching intercultural communication (Munshi and McKie, 2001: 9).

Miller (2005) affirms how such actions jeopardize:

... research and theory across the entire field in several ways. First, the failure to include African [indigenous, Latin American and Southeast Asian] cultures in cross-cultural communication studies leads to untested generalizations of statements regarding cross-cultural validity of U.S. originated theory. (Miller, 2005: 221)

Revising the question posed at the beginning of this section, I conclude this article by asking one question that creates space for engaging the imminent possibilities of avant-garde epistemic confluence: What would happen if we allowed African voices

to flow into the epistemic waters of the field of intercultural communication? How might these voices impact knowledge generation in the field and extend present understandings of communication, communication competence, and intercultural communication competence? How might these voices impact theory building and practice in the field? In the following section I offer one perspective, one voice, if you will, illuminating a non-traditional cultural understanding of communication competence.

### *Proverbial ideas and possibilities*

In order to model the ideas I pose in this article, I offer one voice and its pathway into communication competence in interpersonal interactions. Given the dearth of scholarship engaging African voices (Miller, 2005), I explore that cultural site as an interrogative lens. The following questions guide my closing thoughts in this section: What do the Yoruba, a West African tribe of Nigeria, say about communication competence? How can this influence intercultural communication and the project to advance international understanding, peace, and security?

Yoruba proverb: Omi leyon. [People are water].

Widely used in conversation among Yorubas, this proverb is a reminder to do good to all we meet; to treat them kindly, to show them respect – for we never know when we will run into them again, like water flowing into unexpected rivers and streams. As water flows wherever it pleases, uncontrollable and unencumbered, filling crevices, and manifesting as if out of nowhere, human beings flow in and out of each other's lives. We 'run into' each other, 'cross paths', and experience 'chance' meetings. This proverb illuminates an idea held by Yorubas that we may run into old friends, acquaintances, and neighbors again at unexpected and unanticipated times and places, and in those chance, unexpected meetings, we may find ourselves – or someone dear to us – in need of their goodness, kindness, and respect.

One of the reasons we study intercultural communication and advance intercultural communication theory is to promote intergroup understanding and intercultural communication competence. We emphasize the importance of history, context, and knowledge of the other. This proverb advances the idea that engaging in this type of scholarship is not merely a good idea but an organizing imperative.

For Yorubas, this proverb is a way of seeing and living that nurtures the inherent intersections of our lived experiences, the opportunities that exist – present and future – for our paths to cross and for our meeting to be guided by a behavioral/moral code. This proverb captures an idea held by Yorubas that whether locally or globally, whether it is us or somebody connected to us, our paths will cross again in the future. Importantly, how we communicate and/or miscommunicate with each other in the present will have significance in some near or far off future that we cannot even anticipate.

The certainty is that there exists a future moment when our paths will cross again. The possibilities and boundaries of our interaction and our affective, cognitive, and relational approach to that moment will be determined by the way we did and/or didn't effectively handle past interactions.

This proverb offers some interesting insight into negotiating interpersonal interactions. It is similar to the golden rule, but also far different. It does not merely say, 'treat others like you would like to be treated', it says instead, 'treat them as you would like your interactions with them to proceed in the future'. Generally speaking, it is about how you want to be treated, but specifically, it is about how you desire potential future interactions and dealings with this individual to unfold. This proverb suggests that the relational and interactional possibilities of tomorrow are grounded in the communication practices of today. As we think about conflicts arising from cross-cultural differences and cross-border political goals and tensions arising from multi-ethnic, multi-racial, and multi-religious populations, this proverb raises questions and possibilities about how those conflicts might be resolved from a community-centered, collaborative, relational, and future orientation.

As twenty-first-century interculturalists, the crucial question we must ask ourselves, as we think about the potential of intercultural communication for fostering peace, understanding, and effective conflict resolution practices, is how well we model principles surrounding mindfulness, intercultural alliance building, and avant-garde epistemic confluence in our researching, teaching, and general practice. Additionally, we must honestly ask ourselves and the field as a whole: What dominant ways of knowing and being inform these important activities at present and what opportunities and challenges exist therein? What particular steps can we take to become more inclusive of historically under-represented voices at the epistemic level? Crucially, how are we creating space, through our researching, teaching and general practice, for individuals and groups to flow together, come together, and join together across cultures? It is our answers to these questions that will map out and establish the future of the field of intercultural communication.

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