Red-Nosed Fantasies Of The Future:

A Framework for Social Justice-Informed Performance Creation in the Mump and

Smoot Lineage of the Pochinko Tradition of Clowning

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"We cannot have a meaningful revolution without humor. Every time we see the left or any group trying to move forward politically in a radical way, when they're humorless, they fail. Humor is essential to the integrative balance that we need to deal with diversity and difference and the building of community"

-bell hooks (Yancy and hooks 2015)

When I tell my social justice colleagues that I am a clown, they are often skeptical of how that practice could possibly support liberatory goals. When I tell my clowning colleagues of my commitment to social justice they often nod politely but do not see it as directly related to our mutual passion for clown. I am certainly not the first to attempt to bring clowning and social justice work into dialogue. The work of L. M. Bogad (2010; 2020) bringing clown principals to work in social justice campaigns, for example, inspires me. My focus here, however, is not on clowning's application in social justice contexts such as protests, but rather on the potential of theatrical clowning to support social justice aims within more traditional theatre spaces such as festivals and cabarets in which more narrative dramaturgies are employed.

In this paper I offer a brief contextualization of a specific lineage of the Pochinko clown tradition–which I refer to as the Mump and Smoot Lineage–before offering an analysis of Judith Butler's argument for the necessity of fantasy for social change. Putting these two analyses into dialogue, I offer some provocations and theories as to how clowning might provide a fruitful avenue for social justice-motivated Butlerian fantasy. In so doing, I hope to offer inspiration for further research into clowning and its intersections with social justice practices. My focus, however, is on the making and performing of clown in a theatre context. The central questions that guide my work herein are twofold. First, how might understanding clowning's relationship to social

justice pursuits be of use to those *creating* clown performances? And second, how can the practice and craft of the Mump and Smoot lineage of the Pochinko tradition of clowning work in service of social justice aims? I make no claims that my exploration will be exhaustive, nor that all clowns must work in this way, nor still that clowning is somehow the best way to pursue social justice. Instead, I offer clowning as one of many useful tools which can be directed toward the pursuit of social justice. Clowning is a tool that, in the case of the lineage I examine herein, does not need great alterations to work in meaningful service of social justice aims. Thus, I offer social justice as a meaningful avenue for clown exploration which practitioners might more overtly and frequently explore.

The Mump and Smoot Lineage of the Pochinko Tradition of Clowning

> "According to all of my teachers, Pochinko was constantly experimenting with his approach to clown training – it was very much a living methodology"
>
> -Julia Lane (2016, 11)

The lineage on which I draw most extensively exists within the broader Pochinko tradition of clowning developed by Richard Pochinko in the 1970s in various parts of the nation-state of Canada. The lineage with which I am concerned emerged following Pochinko's death in 1989, led mostly by Pochinko's students John Turner and Michael Kennard. The pair formed the clown duo Mump and Smoot and created many widely successful shows which have toured across North America and internationally. The pair have also taught clown around the world, and especially in Canada, notably at The S.P.A.C.E, the Manitoulin Conservatory for Creation and Performance, Laurentian

University, and the University of Alberta. I will hereafter refer to this as the Mump and Smoot Lineage of the Pochinko Tradition of Clowning (MSLPTC). I refer to it in this way for several reasons. First, centering the names of Turner and Kennard's clowns and attributing scholarly reverence to a pair of so-called "clowns of horror" (Hines, Kennard, and Turner 2020, 44) delights me as a scholar and a clown. Second, I wish to legitimately differentiate this lineage from other clowning pedagogies and methodologies as well as other applications of Pochinko's ideas, particularly those in the volume *Clown Through Mask: The Pioneering Work of Richard Pochinko as Practiced by Sue Morrison* (2013) which has lead to "divisions in the clowning community as to the accuracy of some of [authors] Coburn and Morrison's depictions and interpretations" (Lane 2016, 11). As interpreters and teachers of–and innovators upon–Pochinko's ideas, Turner and Kennard have brought many of their own insights and creation practices into dialogue with their teacher's work. Third and finally, the contributions of Turner and Kennard's director Karen Hines and long-time movement coach Fiona Griffiths, for example, must also be understood as constituting a significant contribution to this particular lineage. Pochinko himself drew on–or perhaps appropriated–traditions as diverse as Lacoq's pedagogies and the worldviews of Indigenous nations,[1] and thus to see the Pochinko Tradition as dogmatic rather than a series of innovations is to largely misunderstand its history. Pochniko himself encouraged innovation rather than dogma (Hines, Kennard, and Turner 49; Lane 13).

My focus here is not so much on pedagogy or performer training but rather MSLPTC as a performance creation methodology and dramaturgical practice. Julia

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[1] For a more detailed exploration of Pochinko's connections and disconnections from Indigenous culture and performance traditions see Norris et al. 2020.

Lane (2016), referencing the teachings of John Turner and Ian C. Wallace, highlights

the following as key tenets of the Pochinko tradition generally:

> a focus on the uniqueness of the individual (which includes an emphasis on each participant finding their own access to clowning that does not remain dependent on or subservient to the workshop instructor); an emphasis on the suspension of judgment, particularly on the part of the instructor, allowing participants to make their own assessments of "success" or "failure" (or better yet, to try to suspend judgments of success and failure altogether); the development of a "non-technique technique" (a phrase which comes from Mike Kennard), meaning that the structure of the workshop is intended to allow for freedom, rather than suggesting strict adherence to a set "technique"; and a prioritization on the sourcing of creativity within ourselves, which Pochinko also described as "facing (or seeing) all directions of ourselves," a process which is embodied through the specific mask making methodology [used to develop students' personal clowns]. (13)

Thus, the Pochinko tradition generally focuses on the uniqueness of the individual

student/clown as opposed to an outside aesthetic.

The MSLPTC further adds to this base in several key ways. For example, there

are over thirty clown rules–which Pochinko called "things to remember" and the

MSLPTC has transformed into "rules" (Lane 26, 34-35)–which work together to provide

a framework for clowning performance. These rules are always framed in the positive

(things to do, rather than things to avoid) and are "*revealed* or *uncovered* through the

experiences of the training" (Lane 28) rather than explicitly taught or dictated to

students. The rules are used as reference points for clowns both in performance and

dramaturgically in the creation and shaping of material. Another key element of every

performance developed using MSLPTC methodologies is a *message to the world*, the

ultimately true argument the piece is meant to communicate. During the introductory

workshop, students of the Pochinko tradition make six masks, each of which has a

unique, personal message to the world. In later stages when work is being shaped for

public performance, the MSLPTC gives a specific framing to the message. Each message adheres to the following format: if one does X, they Y might/could happen, but if one does A, then B might/could happen. These specific, concrete messages give each performance a grounding in theme, regardless of how ridiculous or impossible the events of the performance may seem. These messages can be understood as the dramaturgical foundation of MSLPTC work and are a key tool in aligning this lineage with social justice work.

Social Justice and Fantasy

"It is our work, the work of our field, to highlight the ways that seemingly inconceivable futures are not inconceivable"

-Tuck and Yang (2018, 16)

Social justice is an almost impossibly broad term. In this paper, I use the term in line with Tuck and Yang (2018) who describe social justice as akin to a (star) sign under which one can be born, work, and/or live–an orientation or disposition as much as a specific set of pursuits. Like them, I understand social justice to be "a catchall term … [which] does a lot to try to contain multiple perspectives and futurities" (Tuck and Yang 2018, 6). Indeed, a concern with the future and making it better–however that might be defined–may be the common theme of this sign, the organizing principle of social justice. Like Tuck and Yang (2018), I recognize the contradictory nature of certain social justice aims, that "notions of justice may actually compete in some circumstances" (6) and that they may take on a certain "incommensurability" (2) whereby one social justice goal cannot be accomplished without foregoing another. Tuck and Yang (2018) point out, however, that "an ethic of incommensurability acknowledges that we can

collaborate for a time together even while anticipating that our pathways toward enacting liberation will diverge" (2). Though the term social justice and many terms like it may "disappoint and obscure" (Tuck and Yang 2018, 2), the calls to action and the myriad direct actions taken everyday, which can be understood as social justice pursuits, remain crucial. The term and the specifics of its definition–what exactly it might include or exclude–is less important to my thinking than the central question that such projects and people working under the sign of social justice ask: "What futures are possible for those whose futures are inconceivable?" (Tuck and Yang 2018, 16). Thus, when I speak of social justice in this paper I am invoking a variety of projects and goals which seek a more possible future for those (human and otherwise) for whom what Judith Butler (2004) calls a "possible life" (31) currently seems inconceivable, or at least unlikely.

In their thinking, Butler invokes the future in terms of norms which either allow or foreclose a future for certain bodies. In *Undoing Gender* (2004), Butler argues that many movements for justice are centrally concerned with "distinguishing among the norms and conventions that permit people to breathe, to desire, to love, and to live, and those norms and conventions that restrict or eviscerate the conditions of life itself" (2004, 8). To achieve newly possible futures, Butler invokes the need for "*fantasy* [which] is part of the articulation of the possible; it moves us beyond what is merely actual and present into the realm of possibility, the not yet actualized or the not actualizable" (2004, 28, emphasis added). Such fantasy might serve as a first step toward transforming things from how they are into how they might be. The work of social change involves critique of the status quo but also envisioning alternatives to that status

quo. In my view, framing this visioning process as fantasy serves to imbue it with a sense of pleasure, of joy, and of revelry quite distinct from how social critique is often understood: dry, humourless, and even mean. A framing as fantasy thus lends itself to the humorous, silly, whimsical, perplexing, and sometimes frustrating art of clowning.

When Butler writes about fantasy, they are not specifically writing about clowning. However, I invoke their work in the spirit of Butler's own argument that there is great value in applying ideas in novel ways: "the unanticipated reappropriations of a given work in areas for which it was never consciously intended are some of the most useful" (Butler 2011, 19). Thus, I bring into dialogue seemingly unrelated discourses of social justice and clowning practice. Similarly, I make no claims that those who have created and taught within the MSLPTC see their work as connected to social justice or that they would necessarily agree with my particular interpretations. I feel empowered to make my claims, however, because of Pochinko's imperative to innovate on his ideas and Butler's insistence that how a text (broadly understood) is intended and how it is most meaningfully used need not always be the same.

Intersections of M.S.L.P.T.C., Fantasy, and Social Justice

"We are all clowns and the whole world is a ring - but in this arena there is no audience, everyone acts, no-one sees us. Step forward the true clown, ie. our critical consciousness, and this is important: this clown comes dressed as one! We accept it because it has a red nose."

-Augusto Boal (2002, 295)

Augusto Boal, indisputably a great advocate of theatre's potential to transform individuals and societies alike, directly equates clowning and critical consciousness.

Boal suggests that the clown's red nose sets it apart–others it–in such a way that one is more willing to listen–or at least inclined to listen differently. Likewise, Butler (2004) writes of "a certain departure from the human that takes place in order to start the process of remaking the human" (3-4). It seems to me that the red nose–and/or the other amplified elements of a clown's performance (costume, props, physicality) which separate the clown from reality as we experience it in the everyday–might allow clowns to achieve this partial departure from the human which allows the human to be reimagined and remade in a more socially just manner. Butler (2004) describes "the critical promise of fantasy … [as a] challenge [to] the contingent limits of what will and will not be called reality … [which] allows us to imagine ourselves and others otherwise" (29). In many ways, clowning is an art dedicated to imagining otherwise. Clowns work in what one MSLPTC rule calls "clown logic" (Lane 2018, 27). Though not immediately recognizable to the audience as the most obvious course of action, clown logic must nevertheless be, in its own way, logical. By expanding, twisting, and warping an audience's understanding of logic, clown performance adhering to this rule offers us an imagined otherwise that asks us to rethink the categories by which we live our life. While this can sometimes evoke in an audience a sense of superiority over the clown (ex. I know and could do better than the clown) it can also invite the audience to admit the surprising ingenuity of the clown, thus calling into question the accepted wisdom of the (socially unjust) societies in which we live. Herein lies what Butler calls "critical promise" and what Boal calls "critical consciousness"–though for some clowns this may be better understood as a critical *un-* or *sub-*consciousness as the clown need not be conscious of their own critique, even if the performer embodying the clown is aware.

Clowning is well placed to imagine otherwise because it is an embodied artform. Butler (2004) insists that it is an "*embodied* relation to the norm [that] exercises a transformative potential" (28, emphasis added). Thus, *describing* otherwise is not the same–nor as powerful–as *living out* that otherwise. In MSLPTC, two rules are most relevant in bringing about this living out: "physicalize" and "take us into your world and bring us back transformed" (Lane 2018, 27). The imperative to physicalize keeps clowning not just in the realm of the embodied, where much performance lives to one degree or another, but centres that embodiment as core to the artform. There is no corresponding rule insisting that the clown vocalize, for example. Moreover, the imperative to "take us into your world" necessitates that the clown creates and maintains a world into which they can take the audience. Following this rule thus encourages the clown performer to avoid physicalizing or moving for its own sake. The purpose of physicalization is the making of and taking an audience into the clown's world. In combination, these rules encourage practitioners to imagine otherwise in ways that can be meaningfully directed toward social justice-oriented fantasy if the clown's world being physicalized is one that might have something to offer to social justice pursuits. The clown can bring to life a world of new possibilities via their performance.

A performance is a kind of storytelling and stories can transform the world. Thomas King (2011) famously asserted that "the truth about stories is that that's all we are" (2); importantly, King later argues that if one "want[s] a different ethic … [one must] tell a different story (2011, 164). In order to push beyond what we find in the world, what *is*, we need to fantasize about what *might* or *should be* and then tell *that* story. In shaping performances (embodied stories), MSLPTC focuses on a message to the world

which, due to its format described above, is itself a recommendation, a call to action, and a caution.

The message to the world is crafted by both the clown and the performer: it must ring true for the performer in the (real) world, but must likewise belong to the clown and its world. In a document sent to me as part of a creative process on which we were both working, John Turner (2021) insists that a message to the world is personal: "this is actually for your guidance, not so you can tell us [the audience] how to live" (1). Though in Turner's conception it is not meant to preach or dictate to others, the message to the world nonetheless grounds each MSLPTC performance in a sense of how one should behave in the world to ensure a better future. This is true even when the so-called negative side of the message is being played: when the clown is doing what the message suggests one should not do and is, therefore, suffering the consequences. Importantly, the message to the world is personally lived out by the clown. If the message is a caution to others, it is so only because the audience is invited to witness the clown's personal struggles in relation to it withing the context of their world. Because of this, I do not see a message as preachy or as the clown infringing on an audience's autonomy. In fact, a message-grounded performance invites the audience to learn *with* as opposed to *from* the clown. Importantly, the massage to the world is made manifest, given material form–physicalized, as described above–adding to its transformative potential. Moreover, the message is a guide which keeps the performance true to its intentions, even as the clown improvises and adapts. Clarity of intention is important for creators since, as Thomas King (2011) so poignantly insists "once a story is told, it

cannot be called back. Once told, it is loose in the world … So you have to be careful with the stories you tell" (10).

A dramaturgical focus on a message to the world ensures that laughter is not the sole goal of any MSLPTC performance. Though the clown or performer may hope to elicit laughter, this will not be "at all costs," but rather a byproduct of a performance which embodies a message and adheres to the clown rules–including the final clown rule "break all the rules" (Lane 2018, 22). Reilly (2015) celebrates "laughter's expressly serious work as consolation, coping mechanism and an agent of rebellion, liberation and empowerment" (51) which can "unlock creative channels that may otherwise remain dormant" (60). Reilly (2015) reminds readers, too, that laughter "can work to dismantle fixed, narrow views, but it can also reinforce pervasive and oppressive ideologies, thereby shoring up the status quo" (60). How, then, can artists work to ensure the laughter they elicit does not serve to bolster an oppressive status quo? One possibility is by envisioning and embodying new worlds in service of a specific social justice goal or liberatory goals generally. A creator working within the MSLPTC already has tools to do so in the message to the world and the unique world of the clown. Indeed, MSLPTC offers specific tools for creating, exploring, and sharing fantasies of a better future. Butler (2004) argues that "fantasy is what allows us to imagine ourselves and others otherwise; it establishes the possible in excess of the real; it points elsewhere, and when it is embodied, it brings the elsewhere home" (29). Understood within the framework of social justice-oriented fantasy, MSLPTC messages and clown worlds are "brought home" in embodied performances before an audience.

In the MSLPTC, clowns are well-placed to envision social justice futures due to a relative comfort with ambiguity. Rather than perfectly envisioning the outcome, MSLPTC rules dictate that the clown should "drop the script [because you can always come back to it]" and "go for the unknown" (Lane 2018, 27) while accepting unexpected events which deviate from what was rehearsed as "gifts from the gods" (Lane 27). The encouragement to drop the script and come back to it requires, however, that a script exist in the first place. Thus, clowning is not free from forethought and dramaturgy, even if part of that dramaturgy is an understanding that the script is something to be deviated from and returned to throughout a performance. Moreover, in both scripted and improvised ways, clowns interact with their audiences, free of the formality of a fourth wall. In MSLPTC, this is guided by rules such as "listen to us" and "be honest" (Lane 2018, 27)–and pretending that one is not standing in front of a large group of people when one is, in fact, doing so is understood to be inherently dishonest. Crick (2017) calls the clown's awareness of and engagement with the audience "performative liminality" (179), a state "whereby the characters relate and interact not just with each other but also the audience" (179). The clown can enter the auditorium itself and play *among* not just *before* the members of the audience. The porous liminality of the clown's dual existence in both the clown's own world and the "real" world of the audience suggests that these two worlds are not distinct; indeed, the clown's world–their social justice fantasy–has the potential to spill from the stage into the world of the audience, theatrically and thematically.

Conclusions and Provocations

"clowning evokes questions, meaning-making, and recognition and invites us to grapple with the complexities of ourselves, of each other, and of our world. In celebrating this capacity to simultaneously provoke and reimagine, the clown transgresses even the boundary between conservative and subversive and emphasizes, instead, the ever-present possibility for transformation"

-Julia Lane (2016, 79)

Clowns can pursue social justice, but not all clowns do. Social justice work might just be strengthened by engaging with clowns–including their messages, worlds, and particular brand of logic–but I do not claim that all social justice causes require clowns within their ranks. Instead, drawing on Butler, I propose that one way of understanding clowns in theatrical performance is as emobiders of fantasy which could be directed toward social justice pursuits. In this paper I have offered some ways in which clowns versed in the MSLPTC might orient their work toward social justice fantasy. My claims about the social justice possibilities of this form of clowning are not necessarily unique to MSLPTC. It is entirely possible that some or all of these claims can usefully be applied to other lineages of clown training or to non-clown performance work. I encourage others to explore the overlaps and ways in which my claims here can be applied elsewhere. I focus on MSLPTC as the lineage with which I am most familiar and to give specificity to my exploration.

By writing about how the techniques of clowning might be understood in relation to social justice goals, I hope to inspire clowns to create work that aspires to the lofty aims of social justice–while still remaining firmly grounded in the clowning methodologies and ethoses with which they are familiar and in which they have already

been trained. Conversely, I offer that those interested in social justice and agree with bell hooks' aforementioned insistence that social movements require humour to succeed might pursue clown training in order to find humour and lightness in their fantasies of a just future. In addition, I hope researchers and theorists might begin to consider clowning through this lens of social justice-oriented fantasy, thereby opening up new interpretive understandings–and yet further possibilities for clown praxis. In the end, it is up to each clown practitioner to decide how they will use their technique and for what purposes. I offer social justice pursuits as a worthy avenue of exploration.

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