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Performative Inheritance through Academic Theatre: Reframing Intercultural Communication as Reflective Reasoning

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ABSTRACT

This paper introduces performative inheritance, the idea that intercultural encounters are shaped not by complete or bounded cultural systems but by the philosophical fragments that individuals carry and re-voice in interaction. It argues that intercultural understanding develops not from certainty or mastery, but from the capacity to remain with doubt, tension, and partial clarity. Everyday exchanges reveal long-standing patterns of balance, conflict, compassion, and responsibility, now articulated through contemporary vocabularies such as sustainability, justice, and care. To render these fragments analytically visible, the study employs academic theatre, a scripted dialogic method that stages a composite vignette in which philosophical fragments drawn from the *Yijing* (易经), feminist thought, Islamic and Ubuntu-inflected ethics, and Southeast Asian civic ideals such as *adat* and *Rukun Negara* confront and recalibrate one another within a single institutional encounter. Rather than resolving difference through harmony, the staged voices interrupt, hesitate, and renegotiate, presenting interculturality as an ongoing effort to test meanings and rebuild connection under conditions of uncertainty. The paper contributes to critical intercultural communication by reframing interculturality as a reflective practice of reasoning, foregrounding how moral expectations are performed, questioned, and adapted in moments of ethical and communicative tension.

Keywords: performative inheritance, academic theatre, philosophical fragments, myths as disorientation, critical intercultural pedagogy

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1.0 Introduction

This article began with several classroom and staff-development discussions in which colleagues tried to explain what makes an interaction genuinely intercultural. What emerged in those conversations was how quickly attention moved toward what might be called ‘surface’ behaviour, how people talk, listen or negotiate across boundaries. None of this is incorrect, of course, but it became difficult to ignore the implicit assumption that communication begins only when words are exchanged. In practice, people walk into an encounter already shaped by ways of thinking that long precede the situation itself. They arrive with moral assumptions, habits of judgement and inherited expectations about social roles that have been absorbed slowly over years, often without conscious reflection.

These deep histories seem to shape how behaviours such as respect, conflict, change, and care are interpreted, although not always in predictable ways. These dynamics increasingly appear to act quietly in the background, even when no one is deliberately drawing on them. This angle did not feel natural at first. Philosophy is usually imagined as something remote, stored in books and lecture halls, whereas intercultural communication is imagined as something immediate, happening in classrooms, workplaces and digital environments. Ongoing observation of real encounters made the separation between the two domains increasingly unconvincing. People's reactions to cultural difference did not arise spontaneously. They followed older ideas about fairness, duty, respect and responsibility that appeared in seemingly small decisions: whether to repeat a point, to withdraw, to apologise or to defend a position. Everyday words such as harmony, justice and responsibility sounded familiar. However, they were understood in very different ways and these distinctions quietly influenced how coexistence was justified even when no one invoked theory explicitly.

These inherited assumptions have become especially visible in recent years. The debates about mask-wearing during the pandemic were not only about medical risk. On the surface they looked political, but the longer attention was paid to these debates, the more it became apparent that they also exposed deep tensions between valuing personal freedom and valuing collective care. The contrast became even clearer across contexts. In many East Asian societies, mask-wearing was framed as courtesy, privacy or even fashion long before COVID-19. In many Western countries, however, a covered face was more likely to suggest concealment or a constraint on individuality. These framings, however, were neither uniform nor uncontested, and responses to mask-wearing varied significantly within as well as across regions. When the pandemic began, these contrasting expectations collided sharply, revealing underlying assumptions that had been there all along but had rarely been named.

The present study takes these traces as a point of departure and names them a form of ‘performative inheritance’. People rarely begin from nothing when they attempt to understand one another. In many encounters, people reach, not always consciously, for fragments of reasoning that have travelled across centuries, whether through religion, education or family talk. The term ‘inheritance’ refers to those deep logics that continue to shape how we think and feel. The ‘performative’ aspect describes how those logics are re-voiced in specific interactions. From this perspective, interculturality is not a meeting between self-contained civilisations but an unfinished performance in which fragments are tested, adapted and sometimes resisted.

To develop this argument, the analysis draws on Dervin’s (2025) notion of myth as disorientation in critical intercultural pedagogy. A key implication of his work is the suggestion that intercultural learning does not begin with certainty or mastery; it begins with a willingness to stay with what feels unclear. Myth is not a complete truth to be defended but a productive interruption that unsettles fixed explanations and stable identities. Instead of being treated as something that can be mastered, interculturality can be approached as an ethical stance that remains close to what is unfinished. Intercultural encounters, when viewed in this way, are not predictable repetitions of inherited philosophies. They are moments in which those inheritances are performed again, resisted at times, softened at other times and occasionally reworked altogether through the encounter itself.

Methodologically, this is why the study turns to what is here called academic theatre. Instead of relying solely on interviews or textual analysis, the inquiry works with scripted conversations among figures who inherit different philosophical lineages. The cast draws inspiration from the Yijing, Heraclitus, Hegel, Buddhism, Islam, Ubuntu, Vedānta, Zen, Indigenous worldviews, feminism and Southeast Asian civic ethics such as adat and Rukun Negara. Each lineage is voiced through a character placed in a contemporary setting. The aim is not to represent entire traditions but to observe how traces of those traditions collide, blend or fall apart when brought into a shared communicative space. By allowing imagined descendants to speak to one another, theory becomes practice. Movement, hesitation and friction make hybridity visible rather than assumed.

The paper is guided by three questions:

1. How do people who inherit different philosophical lineages re-voice their logics of change, conflict and understanding in multicultural contexts?
2. How can staged dialogue serve as a method for examining the performative nature of intercultural reasoning?
3. What insights does 'performative inheritance' contribute to the critique of world divisions and hierarchies of knowledge?

There are five sections in this paper. The first section reviews theoretical debates on performativity, hybridity, and the critique of civilisational boundaries. The second section explains how the staged dialogue was constructed and why it takes the form it does. A single vignette is then presented to illustrate how philosophical fragments are activated in moments of tension. The discussion returns to the theoretical questions raised earlier and reflects on the implications of understanding intercultural communication as an unfinished performance sustained by fragments, tensions, and temporary solidarities. The paper therefore contributes to critical intercultural communication by (a) theorising 'performative inheritance' as a way to trace philosophical fragments in everyday reasoning, and (b) developing 'academic theatre' as a method and pedagogy for making such fragments analytically visible.

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Critical intercultural communication, world division, and the ethics of disorientation

During the early decades of intercultural communication research, many studies were framed around models that treated cultures as measurable, self-contained entities. Charts of values, dimensions, and typologies invited readers to picture the world as a tidy mosaic of predictable blocks: collectivist Asia, individualist America, high-context Japan, and low-context Germany (Hall, 1976; Hampden-Turner & Trompenaars, 2020; Hofstede, 1984). These frameworks promised clarity and managerial usefulness, and it is easy to see why they appealed to policy makers and educators seeking order. However, the same clarity often simplified human difference, making culture appear catalogued and comparable, as though its variations could be measured like rainfall. In practice, the comfort of neat categories too easily replaced the messy reality of lived encounters.

Over roughly the past two decades, this assumption has been questioned through what many now call the critical turn in intercultural communication. Scholars such as Adrian Holliday (1999, 2011), Ingrid Piller (2011, 2016) and Fred Dervin (2011, 2016) have repeatedly questioned the assumption that cultural difference can be mapped through stable traits. Holliday's idea of 'small cultures' is relevant here, since it suggests that people often form temporary communities around whatever task or situation they are dealing with at that moment. These communities may involve colleagues, project teams, or professional groups rather than national identity. The point becomes clearer in everyday workplaces. In a logistics company in Johor Bahru, for example, the language used for delivery planning sounded completely different from the language used in customer service, even though the same staff moved fluidly among English, Malay, and Mandarin. In this sense, what appears as "culture" is not a fixed property but the result of ongoing negotiation that shifts depending on setting, role, and relational demands.

Piller takes the critique further by highlighting the link between intercultural communication and inequality. She observes that access to English, or to another dominant national language, often determines who receives training and promotion. When such access is absent, people tend to become less visible, particularly when organisational issues arise (Piller, 2011). From this perspective, language does more than enable communication. It also shapes whose concerns are recognised and whose voices drop out of sight. Intercultural communication is therefore not only linguistic but also moral and political. Voices are filtered through institutional power and social hierarchy. Dervin carried this discussion further to a global scale, analysing the persistence of what he calls *world division*, the

tendency to imagine humanity as split into oppositional blocs such as East and West or developed and developing (Dervin, 2011, 2016). These binaries endure not because they describe reality accurately but because they circulate easily in public discourse. On digital platforms like YouTube and TikTok, short debates contrasting 'Asian discipline' with 'Western freedom' attract vast audiences precisely because their simplicity is clickable, reinforcing what Dervin (2016) describes as the persistence of world-dividing imaginaries in mediated discourse. Repetition produces a feeling of truth even when daily life in multilingual, diasporic settings, from Penang to Paris, is far more entangled and contradictory.

A central insight uniting these critical scholars is that 'interculturality is performative'. Difference does not precede communication; it is generated through communication itself (Butler, 1990; Dervin, 2011, 2016; Holliday, 2011). Each time colleagues decide whether to switch to Malay in a meeting, each time a migrant worker hesitates to speak in English, or a social-media influencer adopts a stylised version of Eastern politeness, difference is being enacted rather than mirrored. This enactment is rarely neutral; it carries traces of power, ideology and collective memory. Interculturality, then, becomes a kind of ongoing performance, sometimes deliberate, sometimes unconscious, through which social relations are continually produced.

Even with these advances, two questions remain unresolved. First, it is far easier to criticise binary models than to demonstrate how multiplicity can be represented. Many scholars reject the East–West contrast but seldom suggest workable alternatives for showing complexity in practice. This raises the question of what such alternatives might look like in concrete research settings. Second, we still know little about the reasoning that shapes how people interpret difference itself. Most studies analyse classroom talk, workplace exchanges, or online interaction without asking what underlying ideas about change, balance, or justice participants draw upon. We have learned much about how meaning is negotiated but far less about the inherited logics that influence what people think difference means.

The present study aims to address these gaps through the concept of 'performative inheritance'. It asks not only how interculturality is enacted but also what exactly is being enacted in those moments. The analysis developed here proposes that individuals inherit fragments of philosophical reasoning about balance, conflict, transformation and responsibility. These traces continue to resonate, sometimes clearly, sometimes faintly, within the hybrid conditions of modern life. They appear not as grand systems but as partial survivals that surface in conversation, in policy documents, in protest slogans, and even in the rhetoric of social-media hashtags. In this sense the analysis moves from behaviour to thought, from surface interaction to the deeper logics that lend intercultural encounters their ethical and emotional texture.

2.2 Philosophical inheritance, hybridity, and fragments

More recently, Dervin (2025) expanded this critical trajectory through the notion of 'myth as disorientation' in critical intercultural pedagogy. He argues that intercultural learning begins not with mastery or harmony but with the courage to remain inside uncertainty. Against the managerial desire for clarity and closure, Dervin turns to myth as a space where imagination unsettles fixed reasoning. This emphasis is particularly relevant since it allows confusion to become productive rather than paralysing. Building on his view, the present study suggests that such disorientation is not only a pedagogical stance but also something performed in everyday reasoning. What Dervin describes as an educational disposition can be observed in lived interaction, a form of 'performative inheritance' through which uncertainty itself becomes an ethical practice. Whereas Dervin's pedagogy of disorientation cultivates the ability to inhabit ambiguity, 'performative inheritance' shows how that ambiguity is already enacted through the continual re-voicing of inherited logics. In other words, what he theorises as a pedagogical attitude is here traced in everyday reasoning. Both perspectives challenge the intellectual comfort of coherence and invite us to see interculturality as a rehearsal of meanings that can never be fully completed. At this point, it is worth pausing. Dervin's recent work gives scholars permission not to close debates too quickly. It shows that confusion, when managed carefully, can open rather than obstruct dialogue. The analysis developed here is close to that insight but extends it into

lived performance: showing how the uncertainty he writes about in pedagogy is constantly enacted through fragments of thought people have inherited and adapted to modern life.

A familiar example is the Yijing (易经), compiled between the ninth and third centuries BCE and later extended through the Ten Wings (Matthews, 2020). Its basic intuition is that the world moves in patterned change. Yin and yang mark alternation, not accident. There is no promise of certainty, only guidance about timing and proportion. Something very close to this can be heard when environmental policy talks about keeping systems in balance, or when energy planners speak of adjustment rather than absolute control. The terms are modern, but the underlying logic of responsiveness feels old. Colleagues in Malaysia have pointed out that this is not always how the Yijing is taught locally, but the echo is still noticeable in public rhetoric.

The treatment of Heraclitus in Kahn (1981) highlights the notion that struggle constitutes the origin of all things. The position developed in this article does not challenge that claim directly, however it reframes the implications. Conflict is not taken as a malfunction of order; it functions as the mechanism through which order becomes thinkable in the first place. In this reframing, conflict emerges less as an interruption and more as a pulse that sustains the possibility of becoming. That thought still circulates in places we do not always notice. Innovation literature celebrates disruption as if breaking were the only way to make. Social movements talk about confrontation as cleansing (Christensen, 2015). Even when nobody cites Heraclitus, the idea that truth sharpens through clash is clearly there. Hegel, writing much later in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* (2018) and the *Philosophy of Right* (1821, 1991), stretches this into a social and historical movement. Contradiction drives development. Freedom is found where duty and self-realisation meet. When climate meetings turn angry slogans into negotiated targets, they are, in effect, following that Hegelian script where opposition does not end the story but pushes it to another level (Taylor, 1975).

Buddhist philosophy, from Siddhartha Gautama to Nāgārjuna (Garfield, 1995), offers almost the opposite movement. Impermanence, non-self, and emptiness are not ornamental ideas. They are disciplines that train people to loosen attachment and act from awareness of transience. We can recognise this tone in contemporary mindfulness programmes that teach people not to cling to every thought (Kabat-Zinn, 2023). The tension is that in corporate settings the ethical and communal intention of early Buddhism is sometimes flattened. What travels is the technique, not always the responsibility. That gap is itself a sign of how fragments move.

Islamic philosophy adds another kind of moral geometry. Built on the Qur'an and developed by thinkers such as Al-Ghazālī and Ibn Khaldūn (2005), it turns around unity (*tawhid*), trust (*amanah*), stewardship (*khilafah*), and justice (*'adl*). In many Muslim humanitarian initiatives today, food distribution is described less as generosity and more as fulfilling a trust that ultimately belongs to God (Bakar, 1999). The centre of gravity shifts from kindness to accountability.

Ubuntu, formed in Southern Africa and written about by Desmond Tutu (2000) and Mogobe Ramose (1999), does something similar but through relation. A person exists through others. You see it in community kitchens and restorative-justice circles where the aim is not punishment but the reweaving of ties (Metz, 2011). Here the portable piece is repair.

South Asian traditions give us even more textures. Vedānta, systematised by Śaṅkara (Deutsch, 1980) and by Rāmānuja (Carmen, 1974), debates how the self and the ultimate relate. Śaṅkara speaks of non-duality, Rāmānuja keeps individuality within union. Today fragments of this turn up in wellness discourses that talk about oneness, although they sometimes shrink it to personal peace and leave out social responsibility. Zen, emerging from Chinese Chan and shaped in Japan by Dōgen, values disciplined practice and direct perception. The phrase *beginner's mind* is happily used in management seminars, but often without the accompanying commitment to compassion and restraint (Suzuki, 2020). Again, we see translation at work, the form crosses over; the ethical weight is lighter.

Across the Americas, Indigenous philosophies offer a different starting point. Deloria (2023) and Kimmerer (2013) describe a world where land, plants, water, and animals are kin. Kimmerer's image of plants as teachers now sits inside movements such as LandBack, where rivers can be spoken of as sisters or legal persons (O'Donnell & Talbot-Jones, 2018). Here too, an old grammar of relation is being spoken in new legal and activist vocabularies.

Feminist philosophy, from Simone de Beauvoir's analysis of women's situation (1949/2011) to Bell Hooks' Black feminist critique (2014) and Kimberlé Crenshaw's intersectionality (2013), performs another kind of uncovering. It names power that has been normalised. Its echoes are loud in #MeToo and NiUnaMenos, where making harm visible is itself a communicative act (Gill & Orgad, 2018). Courtesy is temporarily suspended in order to repair justice.

Southeast Asian inheritances complete this picture. *Adat*, as described by Peletz (1995), is about gradual repair and social balance. Conflicts can be settled over tea, with compensation and with attention to dignity. Malaysia's *Rukun Negara* of 1970 sets out five principles of belief, loyalty, law, justice, and courtesy (Means, 1987). Together they model an ethic of courteous accountability. Justice is not abandoned, but it is spoken in a way that keeps social fabric from tearing.

If we place all these examples side by side, a pattern appears. None of these philosophies arrives today as a closed and unified system. They travel as pieces. A London student can talk about *yin* and *yang* while thinking about the climate. A Toronto activist can borrow *Ubuntu* to talk about inclusion. A Malaysian health worker can connect Islamic trust with *Rukun Negara's* civic language. What circulates across these settings is not doctrine.

Across recent scholarship that links interculturality with philosophical inquiry, there is a recurring observation that what travels across contexts is not a full philosophical system. What appears in interaction are the smaller elements that people find usable when trying to make sense of a situation. In most cases, individuals do not think about where such ideas originate, and they do not need to. The literature points out that these pieces do not form a coherent structure, but they still shape how people navigate difficult moments. This line of work therefore shifts attention away from doctrines and national traditions and toward the partial logics that coexist, overlap, or quietly compete during intercultural encounters.

3.0 Methods

This paper takes a reflexive rather than extractive methodological stance. Instead of working with interview transcripts or observational recordings, the analysis stays with the author's own experience as an intercultural encounter and works from within it. Academic theatre, a form of scripted role play used for inquiry and teaching, became the form through which this analysis happened. The assumption behind it is simple: philosophical inheritance does not show itself in population-level statistics, nor in neat typologies, but in sudden moments when competing moral logics collide in everyday life. The dental complaint vignette that appears later is offered in this sense, not as empirical 'data', but as a compressed moment in which questions of dignity, fairness, harmony, anger and gendered legitimacy surfaced all at once and forced a decision.

The reflexive orientation of this study grows out of the author's own position as a teacher-researcher working in intercultural communication and higher education. The vignette and the analysis are shaped by sustained engagement with intercultural teaching, classroom dialogue, and everyday professional encounters where moral reasoning, institutional expectations, and communicative norms often come into tension. This positioning inevitably influences which tensions become visible and how they are interpreted. It also informs how philosophical fragments are identified, staged, and worked through in the academic theatre, as these choices are grounded in lived pedagogical experience rather than abstract observation.

Academic theatre differs from the kind of roleplay commonly used in intercultural communication teaching. In traditional roleplay, students are given character sheets and improvise dialogue. The

pedagogical outcome depends heavily on how confident they feel improvising, and many default to polite and predictable conversation patterns even when the situation should involve moral conflict. It is difficult for reasoning to become visible under those conditions. Academic theatre works the other way round: instead of spontaneity, it uses scripting to make the underlying logics audible. The point is not realism but clarity of tension.

This orientation aligns with Dervin's (2025) idea of myth as disorientation in critical intercultural pedagogy. For him, intercultural learning does not start with certainty; it begins when someone is willing to stay inside confusion rather than fix it. Academic theatre operationalises this insight. By placing multiple philosophical inheritances in the same conversation, inheritances that usually remain half-felt and unspoken, the uncertainty becomes a site of learning. Theatre acts both as inquiry and as pedagogy. It exposes how inherited reasoning continues to operate even when we imagine ourselves to be acting rationally or professionally. It also reminds us that no researcher or participant stands entirely outside the fragments they perform.

The vignette was developed through a staged reflexive process. The analysis first returned to key moments in the dental dispute that triggered strong affect (i.e, indignation, shame, hesitation) then the shift into procedural language. The scene was then approached with a single analytic question: what expectations of moral conduct were competing here? From that question, characters were generated to voice the logics that were present at the time: harmony as self-protection; conflict as purification; fairness as procedure; anger as feminist self-defence. At the final stage, ChatGPT was used to help expand the dialogue, not to invent events or meanings, but to test timing, pacing and interruptions; all lines were checked, edited and sometimes rewritten by the author.

Reflexivity is not an appendix to this method. It is the method. The author is both the origin of the scene and the one interpreting it. Decisions such as whether a character pauses, apologises, interrupts or cites procedure are analytical choices about which inheritance to foreground and how moral legitimacy becomes negotiable. Academic theatre therefore does not reproduce reality; it intervenes in it. It amplifies what was already there but easy to miss.

There is also a pedagogical dimension. When used in intercultural communication workshops, the scripted scene created stronger engagement than unstructured improvisation. Students immediately recognised themselves in the tensions and commented that the clarity of the dialogue helped them understand why intercultural dilemmas feel personal and structural at the same time. In that sense, academic theatre does not replace roleplay but extends it. It gives shape to the moral reasoning that participants often feel but cannot articulate yet. It provides a shared language for asking how inherited expectations guide action even when nobody refers to a 'philosophy'.

4.0 Academic theatre

4.1 Context

Across teaching and staff training sessions, a pattern emerged that was not obvious at first. Many situations that appear to be intercultural communication problems are not caused by weak language skills or a lack of cultural knowledge. They happen because people call on very different moral habits when they make decisions. Some feel anger is a sign of integrity. Others believe keeping the atmosphere calm protects dignity. Some trust written procedures. Others trust personal relationships. These reactions are carried from earlier life without people thinking about them. During real interactions, nobody states the logic they are relying on. No one announces that fairness must come from rules or that harmony should come before conflict. Instead, these positions appear through behaviour and tone. They become visible in the moment someone is challenged or embarrassed or unsure what to do next. This is what is meant here by performative inheritance. Philosophy continues to live inside ordinary choices rather than in abstract theory.

To highlight how this works, the next section uses academic theatre. A dental complaint was selected not because of its financial value but because it created a compressed space where different ethical expectations collided: anger versus politeness, emotion versus procedure, personal obligation versus institutional order, and the difficulty of being heard as a woman in a highly regulated setting. The scene

does not attempt to record the original conversation. Instead, it concentrates the underlying logics so that the reader can see how competing inheritances push and pull within one person before a decision is made.

4.2 Characters and the philosophies they inherit

- Hannah Cheng: the protagonist; the site where different philosophies collide
- Rina Patel: Heraclitean inheritance: *truth through conflict; purification by fire*
- James Carter: Hegelian / procedural ethics: *resolution through lawful contradiction*
- Mama Cheng: Yijing–Confucian inheritance: *harmony sustains life; conflict damages fate*
- Dr. Sarah Thompson: feminist philosophy: *visibility as justice; silence as complicity*
- Narrator: makes inheritances explicit rather than implied

Scene

The clinic reception is calm. Too calm.

Hannah holds the surprise invoice.

Hannah: 'My treatment was all-inclusive. I paid everything upfront. No one mentioned any additional costs.'

The receptionist offers a polished, professional smile, the kind that ends conversations rather than begins them.

Receptionist: 'Shade correction is a separate procedure. It's standard policy.'

Hannah feels the flush of shame, not because she is wrong, but because she is being treated as if she has no ground to stand on.

Outside the clinic

Rina's voice arrives before the wind settles.

Rina: 'They do this because you didn't push. Injustice needs fire. If you don't fight, nothing changes.'

The Narrator interrupts briefly:

Narrator: *Rina speaks from a Heraclitean inheritance, the belief that conflict purifies and forces truth to appear. Anger is not chaos to her; it is clarity.*

Hannah swallows. She agrees, but anger scares her.

That evening

Mama Cheng is on speakerphone.

Mama: 'Mei, conflicts leave stains you can't erase. Harmony protects dignity. Let it go.'

Narrator: *Mama inherits the Yijing and Confucian logic: relationships hold the world together. Peace is survival; confrontation is dangerous even when justified.*

Two philosophies press on Hannah, *fight for justice* vs *preserve harmony*.

James places tea on the table.

James: 'I know you feel wronged. But here, feelings don't move institutions. Rules do. Use the language of the system.'

Narrator: *James inherits a Hegelian grammar: contradictions are settled not by emotion but by lawful procedure. Fairness emerges through structure.*

Hannah: 'So I must translate myself into the system's tone before I'm allowed fairness?'

James doesn't deny it.

Rina crosses her arms, rebellious.

Rina: 'Unbelievable. Women have to turn off emotion to be heard.'

Sarah, who has been silent until now, finally speaks.

Sarah: 'It's not emotion that's the problem, it's who's allowed to express it. When men get angry, it's passion. When women get angry, it's unprofessional.'

Narrator: *Sarah speaks from feminist philosophy, visibility as justice, silence as gendered punishment.*

Hannah opens her laptop, hands slightly shaking.

Hannah (typing): 'According to GDC Standards 1.7 and 1.8, patients must give consent to any change in cost. Please provide written evidence of when this was discussed.'

The email looks nothing like her voice.
But it looks powerful.

Two days later

The clinic replies: the charge is withdrawn.

Hannah: 'It worked.'

But the room does not celebrate.

Rina: 'So anger wasn't heard.'

Mama: 'And kindness didn't help.'

Hannah: 'Only rules.'

Sarah exhales.

Sarah: 'Exactly. The system hears women best when they speak in its voice. That's the real exhaustion.'

5.0 Discussion

The dental vignette does not claim to represent all intercultural interactions; however, it makes visible something that is surprisingly hard to notice in real encounters. The disagreement in the clinic was not simply about a bill or the quality of treatment. Every hesitation and emotional shift was shaped by inherited ways of reasoning about fairness, dignity, and responsibility. When Hannah hesitated between apologising and insisting, when Mama Cheng treated harmony as protection, when James leaned on procedural language, and when Sarah pointed to the gendered cost of emotional control, each of them was drawing on fragments of older philosophies without naming them. None of the characters declared a belief in balance, struggle, harmony or justice, and these logics quietly organised what counted as the 'right' way to act. Intercultural communication therefore cannot be reduced to personality or language proficiency. It is shaped by deeper moral grammars that people carry into a room long before any words are exchanged, for instance, in how a complaint email is drafted, or in who feels entitled to insist on a refund.

This scene also challenges the familiar assumption that intercultural difference appears only between well-defined cultural groups. The conflict unfolded between women who live in the same city, speak fluent English and share similar professional environments. What separated them was not nationality, but the moral inheritance activated by the situation. Ubuntu's ethic of repair appeared next to feminist

exposure; Buddhist non-attachment next to administrative proceduralism. None was superior, but each competed to determine which behaviour would be recognised as reasonable. This competition is rarely acknowledged directly, which is why disagreements can feel personal even when they are philosophical in structure.

The vignette further suggests that procedural fairness is not experienced equally by all bodies. For James, requesting written evidence was simply an exercise of consumer rights. For Hannah, whose early socialisation emphasised harmony and relational dignity, the same request risked appearing confrontational and unfeminine. Sarah's defence of anger as political visibility clashed with institutional expectations of calm neutrality. Through these frictions, the scene demonstrates how gender, migration and professionalism intertwine with philosophical inheritance, shaping who feels entitled to speak and who fears judgement. In this sense, performative inheritance is not only epistemic but embodied. These patterns are not equivalent to national character. What emerges from the vignette is a set of hybrid philosophical echoes rather than bounded cultural blocks. For instance, an Ubuntu-like ethic of repair can be read alongside feminist exposure, and a logic close to Buddhist non-attachment seems to resonate with the pull of administrative proceduralism. This interpretive framing does not claim that any participant consciously drew on these traditions. It simply shows how fragments of older reasoning remain available as moral resources in contemporary institutional encounters.

In this respect, the scene resonates with Dervin's argument that intercultural learning begins with disorientation. None of the characters was fully 'at home' in the moment. Each tried to perform her way through uncertainty rather than apply a ready-made model of culture. The tension forced reflection: what counts as respect, who holds the right to evaluate fairness, when politeness protects dignity and when it erases dissent. The discomfort did not resolve into harmony, but it opened a temporary space for ethical recalibration. This moment of uncertainty, rather than agreement, is what constitutes interculturality here.

Two broader assumptions are unsettled by these findings. The first is the belief that interculturality can be captured through surface behaviour or national categories. The voices in the vignette are not Chinese, Greek or Malaysian in any fixed sense, at least, this is one way of reading them. They are hybrid echoes of Heraclitus, the Yijing (易经), Ubuntu, adat and feminist critique, re-articulated through contemporary vocabularies such as sustainability, inclusivity, justice, and civility. Traditions do not survive as complete systems; fragments endure through translation. What people inherit is not doctrine but a repertoire of logics (i.e. balance, purification, detachment, stewardship and exposure) that can be reactivated when needed. Across public squares from Times Square to Dataran Merdeka, these vocabularies collide: stewardship meets labour demands, kinship meets compliance, civility meets critique.

The second assumption concerns performativity itself. Critical scholars have long shown that interculturality is enacted through practice rather than fixed by essence. What has been less visible is what exactly is being enacted. The concept of performative inheritance proposed here suggests that individuals never begin from nothing when they argue, interpret or decide. They carry forward half-remembered patterns of reasoning that shape what feels fair, respectful, or possible. The vignette shows how individuals perform these fragments, restaging ancestral logics as partial resources. A protest chant may echo Heraclitean struggle; an ethical appeal may recall Islamic justice; a call for civility may draw on adat; a restorative gesture may reflect Ubuntu. These inheritances do not predetermine behaviour, but they provide the scaffolding through which reason and emotion become thinkable.

From this perspective, interculturality resembles an unfinished theatre. The stage is crowded; voices overlap; no single logic claims the final word. What matters is not which tradition prevailing but how fragments are revoiced and recombined. This openness unsettles or at least complicates Hegel's synthesis, Heraclitus's purification and even the Yijing's confidence in cyclical return. Each logic remains partial, exposed to interruption and reinterpretation. Interculturality is therefore not a clash of civilisations but a continual re-staging of fragments that resist closure. Repair and reach, courtesy and critique, dignity and exposure pull against one another in dynamic balance rather than resolution.

There may be other ways to interpret the scene, and this reading is not presented as definitive. Its value lies in making these tensions discussable rather than hidden. The vignette invites us to address the deeper grammars of reasoning that shape how individuals experience fairness, legitimacy and belonging. In that sense, the scene functions not only as analysis but also as pedagogy, generating the kind of reflexive hesitation that Dervin identifies as foundational to ethical intercultural learning.

Finally, the researcher is not outside this theatre. To script fragments is already to decide what becomes visible and what remains silent. The author also carries fragments: habits of academic writing, traces of earlier study, and the cultural assumptions that shape everyday judgement. These fragments influence which voices are allowed to appear and which are faded into the background.

5.1 Theoretical Contribution

This study makes four interconnected contributions to the field of critical intercultural communication. First, it offers a conceptual contribution by developing *performative inheritance* as a way of understanding how intercultural encounters unfold through the re-voicing of *philosophical fragments* rather than through fixed cultural systems or national traits. Instead of viewing communication as an exchange between coherent traditions, the framework shows that people draw on portable ideas about balance, duty, conflict, repair, stewardship, or exposure that quietly shape what feels fair or possible in moments of uncertainty. Second, the paper introduces *academic theatre* as a methodological innovation. By scripting a vignette rather than analysing spontaneous talk or interview transcripts, the method makes visible how several philosophical fragments operate simultaneously within a single encounter. Academic theatre therefore turns tacit moral reasoning into observable interaction without claiming to replicate events exactly as they occurred.

Third, the study contributes to *critical intercultural pedagogy* by demonstrating that discomfort, hesitation and ambiguity can function as resources for learning rather than as signs of communicative failure. Academic theatre supports teaching practices that focus on reflective reasoning helping learners notice and question the moral expectations that organise their own communicative choices. Finally, the study extends this framework into the digital era by treating automated systems as new participants in *performative inheritance*. Algorithmic recommendation and moderation systems selectively amplify some philosophical fragments (such as conflict, challenge and optimisation) while muting others (such as repair, balance and courtesy). Recognising these systems as active performers rather than neutral channels opens up methodological and ethical questions about how digital infrastructures can support intercultural reasoning that holds critique and care in productive tension. Together, these contributions outline a research agenda that treats interculturality not as the mapping of difference but as a dynamic process of reasoning, inviting future work to examine how philosophical fragments circulate and evolve across institutional, professional, educational and digital environments.

6.0 Conclusion

To understand intercultural communication as *performative inheritance* is to picture every encounter as a small stage on which fragments of earlier thought continue to speak. People never arrive empty; they reason, hesitate and act through philosophical fragments that have been absorbed, revised and sometimes resisted over time. Ideas such as balance, conflict, repair, stewardship, and courtesy rarely survive as full systems. They circulate instead as pieces that are continually reworked into the vocabularies of sustainability, justice, inclusivity, or civility. What endures is not doctrine but usability in the present. This study reframes interculturality as *performative inheritance*, a reflective process through which philosophical fragments are re-voiced, adapted and negotiated in everyday communication. Rather than treating interculturality as a catalogue of cultural habits, the analysis foregrounds reasoning and interpretation as ongoing moral and emotional work. Tracking how fragments persist and transform offers a way to examine institutional interaction, public rhetoric and pedagogical practice without reducing them to national contrasts.

Academic theatre plays a significant role in this reframing. By scripting a vignette that compresses competing moral logics into a single moment, the method makes tacit reasoning perceptible. It enables both analysis and pedagogy by exposing how individuals navigate tension without the security of

complete philosophical systems. Academic theatre therefore offers a pedagogical means of cultivating critical intercultural reasoning across professional, educational, and digital contexts, encouraging learners to sit with ambiguity long enough for alternative understandings to emerge.

Finally, the researcher is not positioned outside this theatre. The act of scripting and interpreting fragments reflects the fragments carried by the author as well (i.e. habits of academic writing, prior training and everyday cultural assumptions). The study therefore ends where it began: with reflexivity. Interculturality, understood as performative inheritance, is never complete. It continues through the next classroom conversation, the next moment of hesitation and the next decision about what counts as fairness, respect or care.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

Author Contribution Statement

LZ: Conceptualization, Data Curation, Methodology, Formal Analysis, Writing – Original Draft Preparation, Writing – Review & Editing.

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Ethics Statement

This research did not require IRB approval because it is a reflective pedagogical study based on normal classroom activities. The academic theatre exercises described were part of regular teaching within the *Intercultural Communication in Business* module at the University of Portsmouth (2023-2025). The manuscript draws on the author's reflective analysis of teaching practice and on anonymised, composite reconstructions of classroom dialogue. No identifiable student data were collected or analysed.

Data Access Statement

Research data supporting this publication are available upon request to the corresponding author.

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