On the Tightrope Between Worlds: The Dramaturgy of Acculturation[1]

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Abstract:
Acculturation is a stage where individuals act as directors, choreographers, performers, audiences, and critics of their own behavior. This paper examines how migrants negotiate identity, authenticity, and performativity while adapting to a new cultural context. Migrants face pressures to craft and present intelligible, socially competent, and authentic selves, often at the expense of their pre-migration identities, their overall sense of identity coherence, and sometimes their close relationships. Drawing on philosophical and psychological literature on authenticity, including Goffman's dramaturgical theory, we explore how migrants experiment with self-reinvention, juggle multiple identities, and manage personal and relational costs. While performative adaptation can facilitate social integration and personal growth, it may also generate relational disconnection, chronic self-monitoring, and psychological strain, highlighting the delicate balance between cultural adaptation and maintaining continuity with one's prior self. We discuss all these phenomena through the lens of the actor's performance art.

Key words: *migration; authenticity; identity negotiation; performativity; acculturation.*

Introduction

In Kafka's unfinished novel *America*, the main character Karl Rossman finds himself perpetually trapped in the chronically absurd and unsuccessful pursuit to adapt to a new home in the country known as the global asylum. It seems that in this place, characters go to disappear, as the alternative titles of the novel suggest (*Der Verschollene: The Man Who Disappeared* or *Lost in America*). Therese, his friend and one of the few characters with which he eventually succeeds to establish a human connection, is sharing with Karl an intimate and haunting memory, the image of her mother in her last living moments, at the end of a long night wondering through the New York City blizzard:

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> Without giving in her name at the foreman's office, as was customary, and without inquiring of anyone, her mother began to climb a ladder, as if she already knew the task that was allotted to her. Therese was surprised at this, since the hod-women usually worked on ground level, mixing the lime, carrying the bricks and performing other simple duties. So she thought that her mother was going to do some better-paid kind of work today, and sleepily smiled up to her. The building was not very high yet, it had hardly reached the first storey, though the tall scaffolding for the rest of the structure, still without its connecting boards, rose up into the blue sky. Reaching the top of the wall, her mother skillfully skirted round the brick-layers, who went on stolidly setting brick on brick and for some incomprehensible reason paid no attention to her; with gentle fingers she felt her way cautiously along a wooden partition which served as a railing, and Therese, dozing below, was amazed at such skill and fancied that her mother glanced at her kindly. But in her course her mother now came to a little heap of bricks, beyond which the railing and obviously also the wall came to an end; yet she did not stop for that but walked straight on to the heap of bricks, and there her skill seemed to desert her, for she knocked down the bricks and fell sheer over them to the ground. A shower of bricks came after her, and then, a good few minutes later, a heavy plank detached itself from somewhere and crashed down upon her. Therese's last memory of her mother was seeing her lying there in her checked skirt, which had come all the way from Pomerania, her legs thrown wide, almost covered by the rough plank atop of her, while people came running up from every side and a man shouted down angrily from the top of the wall.
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> Kafka 1990, 144

What seems to be particularly eerie in this meticulously detailed scene is not only the visual brutality of this alleged accident but also its carefully crafted visual composition: the graceful dance on the scaffolds, resembling a funambulist's aplomb while crossing a wire without a safety net, quickly followed by a seemingly misstep ending in tragedy. The openness of the construction worksite where the scene happens, the noisy "misstep" that precedes the tragic end, forces the audience to watch and reflect. The reader is left questioning the cause of the accident: was it hubris that led the character to miscalculate her movements, or was it looking behind or below her daughter? Before we know it, the scene ends with the graphic depiction of a woman's body lying lifeless under the gaze of terrified or annoyed witnesses. The uncanny detachment of the narration reminds us how, in Kafka's world, suffering and death are daily work-site happenstances. The silhouette in a Pomeranian skirt, which could still be distinguished under the pile of bricks and debris, is a woeful caricature of the recognizability and authenticity that are both demanded from the newcomer immigrant, the last testimony she makes, pointing to her past identity and also to her human vulnerability. However, her tragic demise, in a way, achieved a symbolic reversal of the previous night, during which she struggled unsuccessfully to find shelter for her daughter and herself from the wind and terrible cold: her death has finally made others attend to her, this time with something other than hostility, indifference, or rejection.

Therese's mother demanded attention, a rare commodity in this mechanized world described by Kafka, if we define attention in the sense coined by Weil (2002), and also a skill perfected by performance artists: an open and receptive act of generosity toward reality or toward another person. The character directs this dramatic culmination herself, employing the props she carries with her at all times: traditional attire - the authentication of her heritage, in other words, of the specific type of difference that attached to her a certain place, outside of the New World, which is a faint attempt at identification in a world of the disappeared. In an individualistic, competitive, and fast-paced society, individuals' capacity for attention, which Weil defines as "that attention which is so full that the 'I' disappears—is required of me. I have to deprive all that I call 'I' of the light of my attention" (Weil 2002, 118), becomes precarious. This kind of attention is foreign or counterintuitive to the individual stuck in Kafka's world. As the bid of attention gets answered, it only lasts for a few seconds before it turns into annoyance and indifference. Such attention and receptivity are the bread and butter of an actor's work, trained to fully inhabit the moment, suspending self-consciousness. Not coincidentally, preliminary neuroscience data suggest that while embodying a character, individuals let go of their sense of self. For instance, neuro-imagistic data of actors reading parts from Romeo and Juliet (Brown, Cockett & Yuan 2019) show reduced activation of areas associated with self-processing or awareness (dorsomedial prefrontal cortex, superior frontal gyrus, and the ventral medial prefrontal cortex). A retraction or suppression of the self (self-emptying or "decreation", as Weil, 2002 names it, resembling Grotowski's (2002) "via negativa" technique of elimination of the blockages, pretense and phoniness and other aspects of the social persona that prevent authentic expression) may be crucial for the actor to fully inhabit the character and respond organically to co-actors and the environment.

Settling in a new place and self

Both in the philosophical and the psychological literature, there is a sustained discussion about authenticity, its meaning, varieties, ontological status, and possibilities of measuring it. In accordance with Harter (2002), we will opt for a general definition that calls authenticity the experience of self-concordance or unity between one's expressive, external behavior, as autonomous and self-chosen, and the internal perceptions of the true self: feeling authentic implies "owning one's personal experiences, be they thoughts, emotions, needs, wants, preferences, or beliefs, processes captured by the injunction to 'know oneself'" (Harter, 2002, p. 382). We agree with this definition, as it reflects the work the individual does to preserve the elements constitutive to one's identity against the friction of external pressures of expectations. From gaining awareness of one's feelings and motives, mitigating distorted thinking, acting in accordance with one's self-concept, and making this self-presentation openly available to others, acculturation and displacement can be the perfect context to expand that Weilian capacity for

attention, and Grotowski's capacity for encountering what is outside of ourselves, to step out and achieve self-transcendence (2002).

Cut off from the familiar support of family, friends, and community, newcomers often struggle to rebuild the sense of self that once gave them coherence and direction. Juggling new work roles, language learning, and resettlement, they rarely have the time or social grounding to form a new self-concept with the depth needed to make it sustainable or meaningful. They may lack the interpretive tools to make sense of such rapid change. As they adjust to conflicting cultural expectations, immigrants may feel inauthentic, as they are unable to express emotions or aspects of identity that once felt natural. This loss of authenticity worsens the psychological costs of suppressing parts of their identity to fit in, and this "self-discrepancy may pose a significant cognitive burden and limit an individual's ability to be present" (Xu, Zhang & Tsai 2025).

In addition to seeking immediate survival means to help them start their lives over and build a new career, the newcomers also face the daily task of making themselves intelligible, predictable, and comprehensible to others. To achieve that, they need to put forth or display a culturally-appropriate façade, and comply with the elements that are expected from them, demands designed to gradually or temporarily conceal the traits that made up the persons they used to be in the past, and which they could easily and unequivocally identify as their own. This act of linguistic and cultural translation of the self in the socio-emotional vocabulary of the receiving culture makes the intrapersonal alignment between inner and outer behavior proposed by Harter (2002) a Herculean task. It is inside this reflective and embodied act that individuals come to understand the external pressures that molded who they are now, the foreign culture in which they are embedded, revealing them easily.

"Our health and well-being […] depends on our ability, like a good actor, to move in and out of roles and between roles we play with a sense of spontaneity, integrity and balance", write psychotherapist Paul Marcus and his daughter, actor Gabriela Marcus, in their co-authored book, *Theatre as Life* (2011, 12). If individuals attach the experience of owning a true, core self to the pre-migration identity, a deep sense of discontinuity and incongruence will follow them along in this new context. Sometimes, a "true self" could act like the pull of gravity that ended Therese's mother's spontaneity and balance. This psychological rupture often takes the form of a subtle but persistent dissonance: a sense of being painfully or embarrassingly out of sync with one's own gestures, words, and emotions, while one rehearses the embodiment of a new accepted sociality. The sense of self that once seemed readily accessible and transparent can, as a consequence of its expressive suppression, gradually start to feel distant, filtered through unfamiliar cultural meanings that must first be learned and rehearsed before they can be experienced fluidly as one's own. Adapting, therefore, demands more than social or linguistic competence; it involves a delicate construction and reconstruction of selfhood achieved dynamically through engagement with a new environment, comprised of its own practices, norms, and values. This demands, at least in the beginning, an ongoing effort to

make one's inner experience both authentic to oneself and intelligible to others within a new symbolic world.

Feeling rejected and alienated, Therese's mother's act can be seen as a desperate plea to be recognized as a human being, equally deserving of attention, respect, and care as any other person. She pleads for the kind of attention Weil (2002) talks about and to be recognized as having existed, a plea for acceptance among human beings. Kafka describes her surefootedness on the scaffolds, followed by the attempt to execute an impossible leap or balancing act, almost as a theatrical or acrobatic performance, as if she were trying to make a demonstration of her ability to embody all the qualities making newcomers worthy of respect in the world she found herself thrown in: resoluteness, autonomy, industriousness, and confidence. Having to perform what was considered expected of her, she puts on an act to suppress the feelings of frustration, inadequacy, or loss of confidence. Alternatively, she might have tried to enact something that might be for some people, the only solution, and also the only momentarily conceivable way out of a difficult situation, as is the case for many deaths of despair.

The warning Therese's mother casts contains one of the riddles almost every individual, at least the ones who opt for an existence fully embedded in society, needs to solve daily, and which it is especially acute to the experience of the immigrant in the process of adapting to a new homeland: to forge a new interface with the world, get ready for a suspension, then a revised definition of the self. Both perceived and actual discrimination or hostility from the host society's members can gradually undermine immigrants' sense of self-worth and destabilize their self-concept. When repeatedly cast as burdens or threats, newcomers face not only external stigma but also the strain of resisting its internalization. Constantly having to disprove such labels and prove their worth becomes exhausting identity work, shaping both how others see them and how they see themselves.

This challenge is almost unavoidable. Preserving a coherent sense of self depends on one's ability to navigate conflicting values, norms, and expectations, and to resist or negotiate the implicit demands placed on newcomers, such as proving independence, competence, and adaptability. Shaped by dominant cultural narratives and intensified by anti-immigrant sentiment, these pressures force immigrants to continually demonstrate worthiness and compliance, leaving little space for authentic expression. Such tensions strain both identity coherence and authenticity. While Harter's model assumes a stable "true self," the early stages of migration reveal a more fluid, relational, and continually negotiated self.

The dramaturgy of the self within and between cultures: managing multiple cultural identities

Multiplicity is the default condition of human existence, the "stage" of everyday life is unavoidable, and the very act of navigating social interactions is itself a performance whose aesthetic qualities infuse our sense of identity and authenticity. The majority of

human beings have multiple, layered identities, whose expressions take turns based on the context in which one is situated (Goffman 1959). We habitually code-switch between these different, more or less overlapping versions of us (going back and forth between a front stage and a back stage), who tend to use different ways of speaking, jargon, dialects, and mannerisms. Our challenge is managing impressions and performing identities within specific social contexts that define what counts as "authentic," which means that the content definition of authenticity is shifting from one context to another as well. The personas we craft in front of a jury, recruiter, or admission committee are probably dramatically different from the persona our grandmother is acquainted with, which also probably still quite different from the one we display in interaction with our intimate partner, especially in the first stages of a relationship, which can still be surprisingly different from the one we will display to our partner after years of tenure in that same relationship. In general, depending on the configuration of our professional and personal lives, we will tend to make more frequent use of one or the other, just as we may feel more closely connected with one or another, or put differently, we will tend to feel more "like us", "at home," or natural while embodying a certain hypostasis. Ultimately, modulating these parameters, whether to conceal, emulate, or project a particular identity tied to race, class, religion, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, or occupation, is a fundamental aspect of social life.

What is different in the particular case of acculturation is the heightened pressure on newcomers, who must navigate the overwhelming demands of "performing" before a live, unfamiliar audience while simultaneously learning and negotiating the norms, values, and expectations of a foreign culture. Opening up to counter the accommodation of new aspects of identity on top of the existing layers of the self or while shedding strata of an old self, that may be incompatible or in friction to its new habitat, can leave one split, emotionally vulnerable to paralyzing ambivalence or to internalizing others' indifference or overt hostility, or with a chronic emotional and behavioral volatility. Even in the case of integrated identities, the new hyphenated one is not merely the sum of its parts (e.g., the Romanian plus the American/French/Canadian/etc cultures), but it is a specific, unique result of the combinations that emerge at the intersection of the ethnic with the dominant culture (Roccas & Brewer 2002). The identity work necessary has to deal with not always compatible or harmonious elements, and there is a frequent tension or sustained bargaining that takes place between cultural elements.

However, such a tension manifests with variable degrees, dictated by the explicit and implicit normative pressure within certain cultures and societies, especially strong where public multicultural policies coexist with strong societal expectations for immigrants to assimilate. Newcomers frequently face subtle but pervasive demands to adopt and conform to the dominant group's cultural values (e.g., Oudenhoven et al. 2006). For example, despite the United States' reputation for embracing cultural diversity and welcoming people from all nations, immigrants often encounter pressures to mask their differences. A case in point is the widespread availability of English language courses designed not only to teach functional language skills but also to help

non-native speakers reduce their accents and adopt a Standard American English pronunciation that signals an "authentic" American identity. Workplaces may press for newcomers to adopt "easier-to-pronounce" or more culturally familiar names to fit in socially or professionally, adopt Western business attire or beauty standards in professional or educational settings, or downplay religious markers.

Moving to a new country brings constant pressure, both overt and subtle, to navigate unfamiliar norms of behavior, speech, and appearance. Even without personally embracing the dominant culture, newcomers are often expected to conform, producing a tension between private attitudes and public actions that fuels anxiety and stress. Success in this context demands a layered performance: mastering language, accent, tone, and register, while aligning gestures, body language, and dress to signal cultural fluency, all while projecting credibility and authenticity. The inclusiveness of the host society further shapes these demands, dictating how much newcomers must conceal aspects of themselves and adopt new performative styles simply to be accepted, implicitly requiring a sophisticated blend of social, linguistic, and performative expertise.

Continuing the analogy between the actor's emotional labor and the immigrant's emotional acculturation experience, we entertain the idea that this balancing "act" or constant switching between identities has the potential to make or break somebody, in a way similar to Therese's mother's fall under shaky scaffolds. Her performance is an open-ended question at the same time, prompting us to question the risk or trade-offs of "emptying ourselves" during performance, in order to achieve a perfect performance, unadulterated by hesitation or looking below.

On the one hand, seen through the lens of theatre and acting, analyzing this process can be the path to helping newcomers assemble a new version of the self they might feel comfortable in, as they have the freedom to escape elements that were not too close to "home". In other words, the process of emigration, namely, can become a form of open-ended self-experimentation leading to growth and meaning by exploring, constructing, and reflecting on one's own identity (Haraldsen & Ingul 2017). As the cited authors show, the way a person tells the story of their life, who they are, and embodies that story, is challenged in intercultural contexts where multiple cultural frameworks, languages, and expectations intersect. What is notable in their applied research is the idea that the *aesthetic/embodied* dimension of theatre (as opposed to purely discursive talk, or writing), allows individuals to engage differently with their own stories: seeing, performing, re-performing, shifting vantage points, which allows new identity configurations to emerge. Without sufficient social support to provide understanding, control, and autonomy, individuals must rely on an unstable, improvised scaffolding, which can result in intense psychological distress, alienation, or a sense of symbolic self-erasure. This is particularly true when pressures from the host culture, such as the expectation to adopt specific impression-management strategies, especially across large cultural distances, make authentic self-expression nearly impossible. Deliberately practicing acting

or performative skills, however, can offer a space to process, navigate, and work through these tensions rather than suppress them.

We consider acculturation a potential base for undertaking "experiments in living", as Iftode (2019) defines the main avenue for finding the authentic self, offering the possibility of "the inclusion of variation and experimentation with oneself in our search for authenticity that we are becoming able to speak retrospectively about our 'true' projective self and tested beliefs and values" (Iftode 2019, 2). The frictions between the self and the new scenery become the place where the individual is driven to scrutinize the firmness of his attitudes and beliefs, question the stability of their personality traits, and also the strength of their commitment to certain values.

However, this experimentation requires a combination of self-awareness, grace, and retrospective evaluation of one's own abilities and propensities, to avoid it from morphing into a perilous pursuit. In a way, if we think back to Kafka's depiction of Therese's mother's performance in her last moments, we get a glimpse of the interplay between self-awareness and caution in improvising. This interplay is opposed to (but no less spontaneous than) a radical, fast-paced process of self-reinvention that reminds us of the practical philosophy of "fake it till you make it". If we think about Therese's mother's act as a direct consequence of spending the previous night knocking at strangers' doors, with a child and a bag of unusable rags – their traditional Pomeranian clothes, the only thing that reminded them of their home country- it is not unjustified to read this story as an act of desperate self-obliteration. It is the combination of surefootedness, self-confidence, and grace that confuses the reader by muddying the reliability of the suicide explanation. Kafka subtly warns of the dangers of hollowly enacting master narratives, like the American Dream, which demand immediate confidence and self-reliance from newcomers. Acting competent or "acting American" may foster a sense of skill or belonging, but it does not protect the sense of authenticity as much as it demands it.

Expected to adapt quickly and learn on the fly, suppressing frustration, uncertainty, and hesitation, the normative imperative of "fake it till you make it" exposes its inherent existential slipperiness. While it promotes agency and independence, it can just as easily push individuals to their limits. The moral expectation to adjust with minimal support becomes, in itself, a test of resilience. Kafka portrays the demise of his minor character with uncanny detachment, yet he emphasizes the daughter's awe as she observes her mother's precarious balancing act, which quickly turns into suspense, dread, and horror. The scene captures the immigrant experience as inherently acrobatic, requiring constant negotiation of skill, risk, and exposure. Therese and her mother are, in a sense, thrown into this world after her father fulfills his goal of bringing the family to America, ostensibly proving his care before departing for Canada. Kafka's ironic depiction underscores the precariousness of the newcomer, using metaphors of burial beneath scaffolding rubble and bricks to evoke the weight of social, cultural, and existential pressures faced by those navigating an unfamiliar environment.

Significant others and revised authenticities. Promises and interpersonal dangers of self-improvisation

Nevertheless, as an alien "thrown into the world" and physically separated from the bonds that anchor self-recognition, one also has the opportunity to explore different forms and contexts for self-creation. In a place where you are a nobody, one finds solace in the possibility of becoming anybody, in other words, variants of being themselves that they can conceive or discover. In addition, without individuals, groups, and communities to enforce the parameters of your personal historical narrative or impose a common set of narratives, norms, beliefs, and references to share, one can benefit from a sort of personal historical amnesia. Many immigration stories are filled with images of reinvention: discovering a new self, finding a true vocation, or breaking away from a traumatic past, limiting, or being stuck in a stagnant status quo. This radical self-revelation is oriented toward the present and the future, celebrating the achievement of the tightrope's end, a goal that requires a profound psychological detachment from the past. The reinvented subjectivity doesn't long for its etymologies anymore, and the past only makes sense as a stockpile of ashes from which the new self is born like the phoenix.

Put differently, the unfamiliarity and strangeness of a new social context, combined with the state of being unknown and invisible, provide the individual with a clean slate and a platform for existential self-experimentation. This experimentation resembles a theatrical, improvisational act that demands spontaneity while also functioning like a sport or mental game, in which the individuals are required to constantly calculate moves based on available resources rather than solely on end goals. The pile of bricks Therese's mother steps on represents the sum of societal perceptions and expectations encountered along her identity-building journey. The "audience" providing these bricks includes close acquaintances, both at home and abroad, the receiving society, and her own self. We witness her story, as told by her daughter, with the same curiosity and awe of a small child recalling a tragic event, unsure where it may take us.

The unfolding of this event evokes Walter Benjamin's depiction of Kafka's characters, who appear devoid of fixed character, moral purpose, or a predefined story, instead presenting a series of gestures, attitudes, and actions that resist interpretation while expressing something essential about human existence. It is as if the author is experimenting with characters and their environments, testing their mechanics through interaction as they move through shifting scenes:

> Kafka's entire work constitutes a code of gestures which surely had no definite symbolic meaning for the author from the outset; rather, the author tried to derive such a meaning from them in ever-changing contexts and experimental groupings.
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> Benjamin 1968, 120

Similarly, the theatre of acculturation is improvisational and open-ended, with the migrant staging and rehearsing cultural gestures to see what they reveal. Often, only

through repeated embodiment and enactment of foreign (at the beginning) gestures in varying contexts does meaning, especially shared meaning, emerge. The newcomer discovers the new society by actively engaging with it, inferring invisible power relations, implicit expectations, norms, and guiding narratives. To observe and navigate a culturally distant environment with clarity, one could take the "via negativa" of letting go of pre-existing cultural understandings, narratives, and goals, temporarily becoming a "character without character", as Benjamin describes Kafka's figures. Just as Kafka reconstructed America through relatives' letters and stories before exploring it through his characters, the migrant learns a new world and learns more about himself by engaging with this world experientially. What feels staged, performative, and fake in the theatre of acculturation is actually integral to the act of learning, in order to assimilate the meanings of the new world, instead of assimilating to it.

As Thomas Pickett (2017) argued in his book *Rethinking Sincerity and Authenticity: The Ethics of Theatricality in Kant, Kierkegaard, and Levinas*, when putting forth and arguing for a "virtuous hypocrisy", not only theatricality is an unescapable human experience, but also radical openness and self-expression might at times not be ethically justified, just as the act of self-expression carries with it the dangers of developing narcissistically. Drawing on the works of the three philosophers, Pickett is illustrating how incongruence is embedded in an ethical way of being, something that threatens the possibility of living a good life univocally committed to an undeniable ideal of authenticity. Making special reference to Kierkegaard's pseudonymous author of *Fear and Trembling*, Pickett shows that "the ethical individual performs—theatrically, Silentio implies—for the community. As a result of that performance for the community, the 'tragic hero' finds himself infected with characteristics of the theater: insincerity and hypocritical pretense". As Kierkegaard's own authorial method of playing with multiple pseudonyms betrays, there is an underlying belief that building a better version of the self, aware and self-reflective of all its multitudes, can benefit from experimenting with different voices and personas. In contrast to Kierkegaard's open-ended exploration with identities that encapsulate qualities that he feels the need to publicly distance himself from, blind commitment to debatable ethical ideals, such as strict meanings of authenticity, can actually impede a free, harmonious building of an ethical self. This rigidity often stems from the essentialist view of a "true self" that dominates much of psychological and popular discourse.

If Goffman's model implies that successful interaction relies on consistency of behavior, the act of experimentation is potentially corrosive to the strength and stability of one's social network. In addition to the alienation experienced on an interpersonal level, the iterative and performative testing of possible selves entails a latent danger of chronic self-deception. During the early moments of acculturation, this danger assumes the form that Iftode characterizes as being "caught up in a process of self-experimentation", one in which "it would follow that she can never actually grasp her 'own' self, either in the form of some core natural traits, or as an immutable set of beliefs and desires." To the same author, the individual would still be capable of the

> […] retrospective gaze: something like the chemical 'precipitate' of numerous variations, trials, and experiments with oneself", formed of "what we chose to return to, after experiencing different things, different perspectives on things and even different mind-sets.
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> Iftode 2019, 11

In the case of the immigration experience, this retrospective gaze may not be employed for months, even years, until a steady style of self-configuration is achieved. Similar to the tightrope walker, attempts to look down or behind, as Therese's mother looks at her candidly before she takes her audacious but final step, can be felt as threatening to the focus and balance. Our question here is what are the conditions that enable the individual to achieve the steadiness, balance, and stability that offer the possibility of an enriching or meaningful retrospective gaze. Or is, in this case, maybe the retrospective gaze itself (and not its suspension), one that can bring balance and stability to the tightrope walker, mid-performance? Would this gaze be a prop in itself, one that would protect against the dangers of switching, compartmentalization, and alienation?

The more an individual adjusts, adapts, and performs for recognition in the host culture, the greater the risk that family members, friends, and other significant others from the original community perceive them as distant, inauthentic, or disconnected from shared values, especially when the cultural distance between the home and host countries is considerable. This tension can lead to misunderstandings, emotional distance, and, in some cases, the long-term erosion of trust or support. In essence, the very strategies that enable immigrants to be intelligible and accepted in a new society may inadvertently undermine the relational foundations they carried from home, creating a persistent push-and-pull between adaptation and preservation of prior social bonds.

Conclusions

Like actors learning new stages, immigrants must master unfamiliar scripts and audience expectations, yet, maybe unlike theatrical performance, this rehearsal may fundamentally transform the performers themselves. We believe that paying attention to the experience of migration and acculturation, we can better understand the nature of self-development, the sources of felt authenticity, and the act of performing itself. In a subsequent paper, we will further explore the sources of (in)authenticity and the promises and trade-offs involved in improvising between languages, drawing on examples from psychology, philosophy, and migration memoirs. We aim to build specific and productive analogies and conceptual bridges between theatre studies and the psychology of acculturation. We strongly believe that performance arts, namely theatre, with its philosophies, goals, and purpose, can inform the way we understand our identities, especially in stressful, new, and dynamic environments. We call for a stronger interdisciplinary collaboration between theater experts, on one hand, and psychologists, educators, and philosophers to get the most out of this dialogue.

Our further investigations will address questions such as: Do immigrants, like actors, deliberately shape their performance in a unified and intentional way that integrates both self and character? Or do they instead enter altered states of consciousness in which awareness is split between self and performed mask? If the latter, is this a split in which self-awareness is sustained, or one in which an authentic sense of self is relinquished in favor of the role being enacted? Reflecting on the actor's simultaneous attention to audience and immersion in character, we might ask whether both the unified and divided experiences of self are, in fact, forms of constructed perception—illusions akin to mirages. Drawing on this analogy, to what extent might immigrants experience similar perceptual illusions when navigating the demands of adaptation and belonging in a new cultural context?

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