

## Disappeared Dances: Debunking the Culturelessness of Whiteness

### *Tracking Whiteness 1*

*In a recent phone call to my father, a third generation American of Eastern European Jewish heritage, I asked him, "Dad, do you know our dances? Like our cultural, ritual dances?" He answered, "You know, I don't, Sarah... But I bet we are not the only ones. Go ask your other white friends if they know their dances. I bet they won't either." I was not surprised by his answer. I felt that this void of cultural specificity as Americans of European immigrant heritage was not unique to me or my family. Nonetheless, I felt a loss, though intangible, that some people knew their cultural dances, were enfolded in their dancing rituals, and I only carried a hole where that dance might have lived in me.*

The anecdote above illustrates the conditioned mirage of 'culturelessness' that informs many white Americans' cultural identity. In the following paper I hope to unpack the ways in which historical and *affirmatively cultural* modalities of whiteness intentionally construct an experience of 'culturelessness', and how this phenomenon affects white American cultural understanding. I will first engage the work of critical whiteness scholars to define and contextualize whiteness as a self-made habitus of culturelessness. Then I will analyse the ways in which white American cultural identity positions itself at odds with transformational ritual practice, and in doing so further erases the marks of cultural whiteness. Finally I will discuss the affects of a self-conjured cultureless and ritualless identity upon the dancing white male body. This paper hopes to debunk the construct that white people have no culture, no rituals, no body, no dances. Rather through the historical construction of white American cultural identity, all markers of culture been neutralized and erased in exchange for whiteness.

### **I. Culturelessness**

#### *Tracking Whiteness 2*

*I didn't even think to ask my mom, my fourth generation American mom of Welsh and French descent, when I was wondering about our ritual dances. I imagine the internalized logic went something like: Mom is so white. Whiter than Dad. Mom, as the whiter parent, has even less of a clue about the colorful, musical, spiritual dance that I was yearning to uncover.*

The invisibility of whiteness to white subjects is central to the discourse of whiteness as an ontology of racism. This invisibility is constructed through repetitive rhetoric of 'normalization', which erases the markings of the American white body and its white cultural and historical identity rendering them 'neutral' (Warren, 2001). Black Feminist scholar Sara Ahmed explains:

...there must be white bodies (it must be possible to see such bodies as white bodies), and yet the power of whiteness is that we don't see those bodies as white bodies. We just see them as bodies: the history of whiteness can be traced through its disappearance as a bodily or cultural attribute (Ahmed, 2004).

This process of neutralization is no way benign; establishing whiteness as neutral throws all those non-white bodies into stark relief as deviant, thereby sealing white superiority and whiteness as synonymous with humanity (Perry, 2001).

In her book, *White Women, Race Matters: The Social Construction of Whiteness*, American Studies scholar Ruth Frankenberg found, "For a significant number of young white women, being white felt like being cultureless" (Frankenberg, 1993). One of her interviewees, Cathy Thomas describes: 'to be a Heinz 57 American, a white class confused American, land of the Kleenex type of American is so formless in and of itself' (ibid). Though the interviewee felt she was unable, as did I in my opening anecdote, to claim white cultural traditions and beliefs, her testimony indeed reveals the pillars of white cultural identity. As Frankenberg's research illustrates, white Americans are not cultureless, on the contrary a feeling of culturelessness is a cultural marker of whiteness. Focusing on Cathy's term 'formless', Frankenberg theorizes the writing of feminist author Trinh T Minh-ha. Minh-ha links the bounded constraints of minority neighborhoods like Chinatown, the African American ghetto, or Native American reservations to the formation of 'bounded minority culture' in the white imagination, self describing white culture then, as 'unbounded' (ibid).

In ways that whiteness often operates, this language of bounded and unbounded, cultural and cultureless, works to disappear the definable edges of whiteness while simultaneously establishing superiority. Though I might have had a romanticized desire to know my dances, to define my culture, what privileges might I enjoy from not being marked, or bound? Foremost, whiteness as unbounded profits from mobility. White culture can be marked by this mobility, or in historical terms as the instigators and beneficiaries of colonialism.

## **II. White American Culture**

### *Tracking Whiteness 3*

*In describing how European immigrants transformed from marked ethnicities to white Americans James Baldwin writes: 'It bears terrifying witness to what happened to everyone who got here, and paid the price of the ticket. The price was to become "white." No one was white before he/she came to America. It took generations, and a vast amount of coercion, before this became a white country' (Baldwin, 1984). So if I cannot name my dances, my Jewish dances of Eastern Europe, my Welsh and Irish dances of the West it is because my family traded them? Traded our culture to be white?*

## **Colonialism**

When defining imperialism/colonialism as one of the key building blocks of white culture, Richard Dyer, Whiteness and Media scholar writes in his book *White*: 'colonialism...could be conveyed in terms of excitement of advance, of forward movement through time, and of the conquest and control of space' (Dyer, 1997). He continues that imbued within colonial discourse wherein there is "a sharp distinction between modernity and tradition in which "traditional" societies were deemed repositories of culture, and modern societies not so (ibid). Though the colonial project of Manifest Destiny was clearly dedicated to spreading Western European culture through land seizure, missionary practice, slavery, and genocide, the belief that whiteness is anointed by god, pure, normal, and untainted by culture enabled early colonizers to trust in the morality of their conquest. In framing whiteness as neutral and white people as

cultureless, colonial conquest of nature and non-white bodies became justified in white minds. Historical and present day practices of colonization are purified from being acts of violence and destruction, and are rationalized as acts of naturalization.

## **Rationalism**

Sociologist Pamela Perry picks up on Dyers work of defining white culture with her research on European Enlightenment and specifically the 'rule of reason' established in this period. In her research project, *White Means Never Having to Say You're Ethnic: White Youth the Construction of "Cultureless" Identities*, Perry asserts:

everyone has culture: it fundamentally shapes all people's understanding of themselves and the world. But the visibility of one culture differs according to social status...

Cultural invisibility is a privileged status marking the most "rational" (and hence, deserving of power and privilege) peoples against those who are not rational, those who are "cultural" (Perry, 2001).

Perry continues: 'racial exclusions and inclusions have historically been made and authorized by Western rational authority. The grounds for exclusion of non-Westerners has been reason or, rather the claimed absence of reason' (ibid). White culture based on rationalization becomes linked with 'a self concept that is wedded to freedom from the past, and the primacies of the mind over the body, the intellect over emotion, and order over chaos' (ibid). Hence, non-Westerners associated with the body, emotion, tradition, and the irrational are categorized by white reason as cultural, deeming rational whiteness cultureless. As a mechanism of racism, reason and its arms of Western philosophy and science have been used to grant truth, power, and understanding to those who prescribe, and darkness, weakness, and savagery to those who do not. Though undefined by white experience, Perry points out, Western rational authority is not merely a marker of white culture. Reason has been historically weaponized in the likes of eugenics, the Atlantic Slave Trade, and the Native American Reservation System, as a pseudo philosophical and scientific proof that those demonstrating a claimed absence of reason are lesser than, and are therefore worthy subjects of discrimination, slavery, relocation, and eradication.

## **Protestantism**

Embedded deeply within the white cultural practices of Western colonialism and rationalism is a final key marker of white culture: Anglican Protestantism. A primary tenant of white culture provided by Protestantism is hierarchical dualism. Christian morality establishes hard lines between heaven and hell, purity and sin; 'Calvinist theology holds that only an elect few are predestined for salvation from birth, while the rest are damned' (Massey, 2015). This simple hierarchical system created a moral rationale for Western Europeans to move forward in their American colonial project (Dyer, 1997; Harvey, 2007).

Another key element of white culture offered by Protestant ideology is the 'Protestant work ethic' famously analyzed by sociologist Max Weber in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Weber explains it is the individual's 'duty to attain certainty of one's own election and

justification in the daily struggle of life' (Weber, 1930). In order to secure one's place in heaven, one must answer his calling to hard work in the name of the Lord:

Labour is, on the one hand, an approved ascetic technique, as it always has been in the Western Church... It is in particular the specific defence against all those temptations which Puritanism united under the name of the unclean life... But the most important thing was that even beyond that labour came to be considered in itself the end of life, ordained as such by God. St. Paul's "He who will not work shall not eat" holds unconditionally for everyone. Unwillingness to work is symptomatic of the lack of grace (ibid).

As Weber describes, individualism, and dutiful hard work rooted in Protestant ideology are the bedrock of American capitalism, and are integral white American cultural attributes. Following the rule of whiteness, these markers of white American culture at once secure white superiority whilst making themselves invisible to white cultural agents. Individualism contends that all wealth earned belongs solely to the individual, and if he owns it, he deserves it. This train of thought wipes all traces of exploitation, slavery, and stolen resources and renders the white capitalist a good businessman. By the same token, the marker of a strong white American work ethic establishes white Americans as the laborers of the lord, and all other non-white bodies, though they have been historically and institutionally blocked from earning equal wage and accruing equal assets, become cast as lazy and sinful.

To review, whiteness renders white subjects unable to see themselves as white cultural agents upholding white superiority. Though many white Americans experience a sense of culturelessness as discussed in the research of Frankenberg and Perry, white American culture indeed exists and is rooted in Western colonialism, Western rational authority, and Anglican Protestantism. Attributes of white American culture include a desire to conquer nature and the other, a future-orientation, a refusal of the past and tradition, rationalism, prioritizing mind over the body, the intellect over emotion, and self control over passionate expressivity, the denial of magic, dualistic morality, individualism, personal responsibility, and a strong work ethic. Though 'invisible' to its agents, white American culture is deeply understood and practiced as normative and therefore superior. Historically white American culture as a conduit of white supremacy has consequently cast and continues to associate culture with bodies of color, weakness, nature, the past, tradition, irrationality, the body, sexuality, passion, expressivity, believing in magic, complex systems of morality, communalism, shared responsibility, and laziness. As I will lay out in the following section, these attributes associated with 'culture' in the white imagination, also make up the qualities found in ritual practice. As ritual is an important element of cultural construction, I will now look to the white American refusal to be associated with ritual transformation to further contextualize the white myth of culturelessness.

### **III. Resisting Liminality and Communitas**

#### *Tracking Whiteness 4*

*Well I do have dances. I am a professional dancer. But my dances are not rituals, they are not ceremonies, they are not something I do with my mother, my sister, my grandmother. When I dance on stage, performing my training in modern dance, the audience learns nothing about who I am or where I come from. I am made to feel I am a blank slate dancing a blank dance.*

In terms of understanding the constructed blindspot of white American culture to white subjects, it is useful to understand the ways in which the key phases of transformational ritual are denied by the forces of whiteness. Anthropologist Victor Turner in his book *The Ritual Process* defines transformational rituals as occurring in three primary phases as established by his predecessor Van Gennep: 1) Separation 2) Margin 3) Aggregation (Turner, 1969). Turner was particularly interested in the second phase which he called the Liminal Period. He describes those in the Liminal Period, having surrendered their previous status, now exist in an ambiguous condition: 'Liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned... Thus, liminality is frequently likened to death, to being in the womb, to invisibility, to darkness, to bisexuality, to the wilderness, and to an eclipse of the sun or moon' (ibid). Though white Americans undoubtedly experience rites of passage and undergo the Liminal Period, their constructed sense of whiteness is in direct opposition to these qualities related with women, marginality, nature, and sexuality.

Further, liminality challenges dualism, hierarchy, and order. Turner explains:

The first [phase of ritual in which the initiate is separated] is of society as a structured, differentiated, and often hierarchical system of politico-legal economic positions with many types of evaluation, separating men in terms of "more" or "less." The second phase], which emerges recognizably in the liminal period, is of society as an unstructured or rudimentarily structured and relatively undifferentiated comitatus, community, or even communion of equal individuals.. (ibid).

The liminal society Turner describes removes subjects from the Protestant capitalist white American cultural practice of individualism as it acts as equalizer amongst initiates creating what Turners calls a feeling of 'communitas' (ibid). Communitas is 'the being no longer side by side (and, one might add, above and below) but with one another of a multitude of persons. And this multitude, though it moves towards one goal, yet experiences everywhere a turning to, a dynamic facing of the others...' (Buber as quoted by Turner, 1969). This dynamic recognition of others as equal tears down Western colonial culture, and once again rattles Protestant capitalism in its communal desire to work toward a shared goal.

If whiteness rejects liminality and communitas and therefore the Liminal Period all together, what happens to white rituals of transformation? Here I would propose that they become submerged, erased, and invisibilized. For though they occur in the military boot camp, in the election campaign, in sorority and fraternity pledging, in Black Friday Sales, in baptisms, in corporate internships, in the procession, dancing, and consummation of christian weddings, high school dances, and many more, whiteness repaints these moments of ambiguity, inferiority, and community as 'unmarked' so that they may pass under the radar as cultural rituals into a conjured white culturelessness.

#### **IV. White American Men Don't Dance**

*Tracking Whiteness 5*

*When we ask Whiteness “What does the white body look like?” It answers, “Normal.” When we ask Whiteness, “Where does the white body belong?”, it answers, “Everywhere.” We say, “Then what is your culture?” It answers, “I have no culture.” Finally we ask Whiteness, “Then how do you dance?” It answers, “Sorry, I don’t dance.”*

In this final section of the paper, I shift my focus from deconstructing the experience of culturelessness and rituallessness felt by white Americans, to the affect these phenomena have upon the dancing body. I have chosen to focus on the body of the white American male as a final manifestation of white American culture. Though women are arguably the historical keepers, creators, and enthusiasts of white American cultural dance, it is in the body of men where dance often dissipates and disappears that we can follow the trail of whiteness as a lack of culture.

Before this point in the essay I have not yet associated white Americanness with masculinity, as the felt phenomenon of culturelessness belongs to white American women and men alike. However hetero-patriarchy is in fact an important facet of white American culture, which orients heterosexual men as superior to women as the gender that most purely embodies American virtues. Throughout the history of whiteness, white women have been made inferior to white men as they, along with homosexuals, and people of color, are linked with weakness over strength, the body over the mind, sexuality, passion, and expressivity over self control, and irrationality over rationality. For these reasons, white American dancing, as an expressive/sexual/cultural act of the body, has been associated primarily with white American women and people of color. In her book *Sorry I Don’t Dance: Why Men Refuse to Move*, sociologist Maxine Leeds Craig interviews fifty men on their experiences and perceptions of dance and gender to explain the pattern of white American males refusal to dance. Her work produces a fascinating picture of white American cultural embodiment.

Recalling the importance of Protestant values within white American cultural practice, and value given to hard work not only as a means of amassing godly wealth, but as an activity that keeps the body from sexual indulgence. Craig explains that dancing was seen by Protestants as a useless sinful activity associated with sexual desire: ‘At the turn of the century Conservative Protestants were among the anti-dance campaigners and linked dance to a disparaged sensuality, which they located primarily in women’s bodies’ (Craig, 2013). This Christian rationale that linked dance with women, sexuality, and sin has impacted men’s participation in dance. Not only does dance lead white men astray from ‘developing healthy Christian characters’, its practice also emasculates them:

When and where masculinity is represented as opposite and superior to femininity, what may be called femophobia, or fear of performing feminine activities, especially activities associated with the body, arises. When expressive movement is defined as feminine, boys learn to avoid it ...Furthermore, within homophobic contexts, to the extent that boys view dance as a sexual activity, it is impossible for them to practice it among themselves. Thus femophobia, homophobia combine to make boys avoid dance (ibid).

When we link culture with the body, and the body with women and homosexuals we can see how in self preservation, the discourse of whiteness continues to paint white American men as bodyless, danceless, and therefore cultureless.

Craig uncovers that white American men upholding their racial purity refute dances that are inherently expressive and sexual, as these characteristics are not only associated with women and homosexuals, but bodies of color/ bodies of culture. In the early 1900s, social dancing began to become popular among the white middle class thanks to the films and instruction books created by elegant white dancing couple, Vernon and Irene Castle. At this time ballroom dances which had been originally danced only by the elite became popularized. In ballroom settings white men could 'perform credible, upper middle class white masculinity... as the leading half of a heterosexual couple' (ibid). However, new less rigid social dances were also being invented and propagated throughout the Americas by African American and Latino dancers including the Turkey trot and the Tango. These dances became termed by white socialites as the 'tough dances' or 'animal dances' and were banned from white debutante balls and dance studios for their overt use of the pelvis. Published in the New York and London Times in 1913, a white male elite requested:

I need not describe here the horrors of various American and South American dances of negroid origin. I would only ask hostesses to let one know what houses to avoid by indicating in some way on the invitation cards whether the Turkey Trot, the Boston,(the beginner of evil) and the Tango will be permitted (ibid).

However in the capitalist, colonial fashion the Castles visited places like Harlem to learn the Turkey Trot and the Tango, and then transformed them to meet the criteria of white American embodiment: 'The Castles removed much of the full-bodied expressiveness from the black dances but retained elements of their syncopated rhythms to produce a dance style that middle and upper class welcomed as fresh but acceptable' (ibid). Along with cleansing the white dancing body of expressivity of the pelvis linked with African American body, the Castles are also famously known for creating the 'Hands-free Tango' eliminating all sexualized physical contact associated in the white imagination with Latino embodiment. At the heart of retaining the white American cultural aesthetic of self control and crafting a 'cultureless' white dancing male body was Vernon Castle, 'Smoothly gliding and holding his carriage erect, Vernon Castle embodied a manliness that was not visibility sensual, a manliness of men who do not move their hips' (ibid).

Similar to the practices of Frankenberg, Perry, Dyer and Harvey, Craig makes a priority of denying white American men as bodyless, lacking embodiment, or cultureless by naming white American male embodiment outright: 'The successful white male middle class body is imagined as a product of self-control. This productive male body does not sweat, is not especially muscular, is covered in a suit, and is ready to secure masculinity by earning money indoors (ibid). She continues:

White middle-class heterosexual masculinity is equated with a stolid, self-contained, non sexualized, minimally expressive body. It is a body characterized by goal-oriented use of arms and legs that are attached to unmoving hips and torso. This form of embodiment occupies a position of dominance, which rests on a claim of normalcy,

because of its distance from physically expressive and sensual gay men, women, and men of color (ibid).

In her description, we can note the clear markers of Western colonialism, rationalism, and Protestant capitalism that render the white American male body prepared to accomplish his goals in relative isolated stillness.

## **Conclusion**

### *Tracking Whiteness 6*

*Questions to myself: What are the ways the white American cultural tributaries of Western colonialism, rational authority, and Protestant capitalism construct my dance making, rehearsal structure, business model, and performance? How does the unmoving white man inform my body and social dance practice? What dances have I stolen and stripped of expressivity today? Yesterday? Did we lose our dances when my ancestors changed our name at Ellis Island? What dances of whiteness do I do in their place today?*

In this paper I have attempted to illuminate the white American feeling of culturelessness as a constructed experience of whiteness. It is crucial to remember that no human is cultureless or ritualless, nor can any body exist as a lack of embodiment. Whiteness attempts to eliminate distinction and neutralize nuance in its project to normalize and in doing so disappears a history of white terror. Though I cannot and should not try to escape my American whiteness in order to reclaim a body lost, a culture erased, it is my work to recognize these holes I carry are not holes at all, but rather marks of my whiteness.



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