

Learning How to Make Life Swing

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Abstract How do we explain the contradiction between the centrality of African-American culture in the U.S. and the simultaneous marginality of African-American people in contemporary American society? Pursuing an answer to this question through my ethnographic work on the Lindy Hop led to a radical rethinking of current approaches to cultural appropriation. This article serves as an intervention into ethnographic research on race and ethnicity by synthesizing Wacquant's carnal sociology with his call for the formation of an analytical theory of racial domination. This synthesis, in which theory and method work reciprocally, offers a new model for undertaking research in the areas of race and ethnicity by which we are able to differentiate and dissect the material and symbolic mechanisms that generate racial domination in particular historical contexts.

Keywords Analytic of racial domination · Body · Carnal sociology · Reflexivity

Without the presence of Negro American style, our jokes, tall tales, even our sports would be lacking in the sudden turns, shocks and swift changes of pace (all jazz-shaped) that serve to remind us that the world is ever unexplored, and that while a complete mastery of life is mere illusion, the real secret of the game is to make life swing. It is its ability to articulate this tragic-comic attitude toward life that explains much of the mysterious power and attractiveness of that quality of Negro American style known as "soul." An expression of American diversity within unity, of blackness with whiteness, soul announces the presence of a creative struggle against the realities of existence. (Ellison, 1995a, pp. 109–110)

Learning how to dance the Lindy Hop is an arduous task. Acquiring all the components of the dance, as well as getting those components to fall into alignment, required both intense and extensive bodily training and labor. In my own experience in learning to be a dancer, I often became incredibly frustrated and embarrassed as I tried to force my body into

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movements that it was far from accustomed to doing. As I listened to other dancers vent their frustrations, I started to hear a common theme in their explanations. Strangely, comments of frustration and exasperation were almost always expressed through self-consciously marking oneself racially as White. Failing to master a particular figure or step generated the common declaration of “I just can’t get it! I’m so White!” Or as I would see dancers look for empathy in others with the remark: “This really makes you feel White, huh?” Or, as an excuse for dancing poorly, people would often use the phrase “You’ll have to forgive me; I’m dancing so White tonight.” While still at other times, people would often say, “Doesn’t he/she make you feel White?” when watching another more skilled dancer. While these concerns and criticisms were always about dancing, the comments also revealed a racialized value system that consistently marked poor dancing with the category of Whiteness.

In the case of the Lindy Hop revival, as well as other forms of White cross-cultural engagement with African American cultural forms such as blues, jazz, and hip hop, it is traditionally argued that White cultural appropriation is a fact. Even the most transgressive examples of White resistance to White racial domination are, in the end, just narcissism on the part of Whites, or a way to avoid the guilt resulting from the history of White racism.¹ White cross-cultural engagement is consistently framed through the theoretical paradigms of structural domination, commodification, cultural autonomy, and colonization that seek to assess White interaction with African American culture and the consequences of that interaction. However, these paradigms logically fall into a racial essentialism and into what Wacquant refers to as the “logic of the trial”: parceling out guilt or innocence to participants in attempts to convict or vindicate Whites of racism (see Wacquant, 1997a, p. 222).

Instead, Wacquant argues for an analytic of racial domination as a model for undertaking racial analysis. In other words, this means examining the specific symbolic and material mechanisms that produce and circulate racial domination in particular historical contexts. Wacquant’s alternative theorization of race allows us to abandon these moral models and analyze how race operates in everyday cultural practices in real time and space. It also enables me to simultaneously examine how those practices are linked to the transmission and translation of the dominant racial ideologies of Blackness and Whiteness in contemporary American society. This theorizing looks at the particular contextual circumstances and enables me to move beyond the racist/antiracist rhetoric that frames much of the sociological work on race, especially in the areas dealing with Whiteness and White racism. (For recent sociological attempts to overcome this, see Bonilla-Silva & Doane, 2003; Bonilla Silva, 2001, 2003).

This article examines the revival of the Lindy Hop, the original Swing dance that emerged out of the ballrooms of Harlem in the late 1920s. Swing dance fell out of national popular consciousness after World War II and underwent a renaissance in the late 1990s.² During the late 1990s, the Lindy Hop’s popularity became pervasive throughout mass-mediated culture: in live entertainment (Super Bowl and Orange Bowl half-time shows, “Live from Lincoln Center”), in movies (*Swingers*, *Swing Kids*, *The Mask*, *Blast from the Past*, *Malcolm X*, *Hoodlum*, *Three to Tango*), and in advertisements and the marketing of consumer goods

¹ Bonnett (1996a, 1996b), Dyson (1997), Fine (1997), Frankenberg (1997), Giroux (1997), Hill (1998), Karenga (1999), Kincheloe, Steinberg, Rodriguez, and Chennault (1998), Kolchin (2002), Rodriguez (2000), and Rothenberg (2002).

² While beyond the scope of this paper, it is the process of the dance going underground or off the popular consciousness for several decades and creating a cultural absence that allows for this particular de-racialized revival of the Lindy Hop to occur, as opposed to contemporary African American cultural forms like hip-hop which are clearly marked as Black in the contemporary popular consciousness.

(Gap, Coca-Cola, Hagger Clothing). This Swing dancing revival was in turn part of a much larger “retro revival”: the resurgence of interest in the Rat Pack and Sinatra, the cocktail nation or *Swingers* subculture of the 1940s and 1950s, the “cigar and martini” atmosphere of indulgence, and traditional gender roles, styles, and decadence.³ At the same time, on the larger cultural scene of America, Ken Burn’s documentary *Jazz* was airing on PBS, “Jazz at Lincoln Center” was becoming an institutionalized program, and Wynton Marsalis was touring with his big band celebrating the music of Duke Ellington.

This article serves as a point of entry into current theoretical and methodological debates on race and ethnicity to address this aspect of cross-cultural engagement by synthesizing Wacquant’s methodological project of a carnal sociology with his theorizing of an analytic of racial domination. (This article draws primarily on Wacquant, 1997a. See also Wacquant, 1992, 1995a, 1995b, 2002, 2003). Being there on the Lindy Hop scene, participating and observing, simply was not enough to explain my own embedded and embodied complicity. I argue that only through a carnal sociology, an *analysis situs*, putting myself at the “epicenter of the array of material and symbolic forces that [I] intend[ed] to dissect,” could I have developed the bodily consciousness and practical mastery of the dance necessary to obtain the analytical tools to understand how culture and racial essentialism, i.e., racial mythologies simultaneously become embodied through mechanisms of inculcation, transmission, and translation (Wacquant, 2003). That is, no one is a natural dancer; one becomes a good dancer only through acquired skill and training, not through inherent racial marking. While the dynamics of dance can be understood cognitively through other approaches, my acquisition of a practical embodied knowledge of dance through my own lived experience opened up a new level of questioning and a new depth to understanding the intersections of the body, culture, and race.

I use Wacquant’s approach to carnal sociology and his analytic of racial domination to understand and discuss the Lindy Hop. In this article, I first discuss my own involvement with the Lindy Hop scene and the initial questions that were raised through this immersion. Second, I discuss the four prevailing accounts of how White cross-cultural engagement operates and how those accounts ultimately fail to do justice to the phenomena they seek to explain. Third, I turn to discuss Wacquant’s approach to carnal sociology and his analytic of racial domination in relation to my own fieldwork. And fourth, I reflect on some of the general conclusions that this approach yielded in my own ethnographic work in an effort to advance theoretical and methodological perspectives in the area of race and ethnicity. These general conclusions will touch upon carnal sociology’s and the analytic of racial domination’s importance and contributions to the field of sociology.

While this article focuses on a particular theoretical and methodological framework, it is part of a much larger project that examines the revival of the Lindy Hop within White America in order to address the contradiction between the centrality of African American culture in American society and the simultaneous marginality of African American people. In order to address this contradiction—one of race, culture, and identity—this project draws inspiration from the work of Ralph Ellison and poses a series of Ellisonian questions: How does the simultaneous embrace of African American culture and the marginalization of African American people serve to secure and perpetuate White racial domination? How does this blending of identities force us to look beyond simplistic binaries of Black and White racial identity? Finally, and most importantly, how does the world of Lindy Hop allegorically characterize the way that race is played out in American society?

³ See Penner (1999) and Vale (1998).

Immersion and initial questions

***⁴ Here I was, both a dancer and a sociologist, writing a study of the White engagement of African American culture—in this case, the Lindy Hop—and I could not help but think to myself: How was this or was this not about race? How was I different from the rest of the dancers in this community? I felt I was different; I thought that my racial politics and sociological interest in race and culture gave me self-awareness and a social consciousness that necessarily made me more “sensitive” than everyone else. I could not be writing a study of White appropriation and perpetuating it at the same time. Could people tell the difference? And yet at the same time, how could I learn to dance in the same classes from the same instructors as everybody else and not be dancing the same way they did?

I went through numerous exercises and watched my movements in the mirror; I studied the shapes, the lines, the angles, the flow and style of each step, scrutinizing every inch of myself. Each mistake, each flaw brought me to a halt, to correct, refine, and repeat until the movement was corrected. Yet my steps still seemed awkward and constrained. My movements lacked the fluidity and ease that great dancers have. The difference between my dancing and the ideal was painful to recognize. Then, suddenly, I stopped and stared straight ahead. Looking at myself in the mirror, I began to feel myself as a dancer as if for the first time. A sudden and strange realization came over me as I stood there: I felt my body as both the sensing subject in motion and the object of my own analysis looking at my reflection. Despite my reflexivity and conscious intention to chronicle this White appropriation of the dance while keeping myself outside of that perpetuation, I realized that there was no difference in the way the other White Lindy Hoppers danced and the way that I did. I was not exceptional despite my reflexivity or self-awareness; I was part and parcel of the same socialization and embedded in the same context of the Lindy Hop world. This was not a matter of what I thought or what I intended; I had embodied the dance just as they had. I had embodied the same racial mythologies in my very motions.

Ironically, when I questioned Lindy Hoppers about what drew them to the dance, their responses were always based around pleasure. As one dancer told me, “Why do I dance? Because it’s so much fun. Why else? I mean, it’s so much fun to get out there, and you can just let yourself go.” Another dancer echoed those feelings: “My day job is pretty boring, so when I get to dance I can just totally forget about work. That’s what’s so great about Lindy, it’s so expressive and fun to do.” When I brought up the issue of race—trying to make sense of these racialized explanations of the way people danced in relation to the African American identity of the dance—people flatly denied that the dance had anything to do with it. Most dancers I spoke with held firmly to the dominant color-blind belief that discussing race would somehow undermine the dance’s enjoyment. This sentiment was expressed in numerous ways: “People dance it just to have fun. It’s fun to go out and dance. It’s nothing more than that.” Or, as another dancer put it, “We’re just dancing—what’s the big deal?” Most dancers seemed defensive toward this questioning and would immediately ask me why I was “bringing race into this” or thought that I was “bringing up something that’s not there” or “making it into something that it’s not.” Most dancers reacted with perplexity at my interest in

⁴ I use the symbol *** to designate the use of my fieldnotes within the text.

the connection of Lindy Hop and issues of race: “Why does it [the dance] have to be so serious?” or “Why does it [the dance] have to be about race?”***

Current theoretical models

My entry into the world of Lindy Hop was motivated purely by my desire to learn how to dance. I had just moved to Chicago and was eager to immerse myself in this popular trend on the Chicago nightlife scene. I enrolled in dance classes, took private lessons, went to nightclubs and social dances, traveled to dance camps across the country, and eventually over the course of my seven-year dance immersion went on to teach and perform the dance professionally. From the start, I was fascinated by the fact that this African American dance had become the craze of contemporary White society. I decided to investigate the history and culture of the dance solely for pleasure. In looking for information about the Lindy Hop, I started reading the scholarly literature on African American dance, which then led me into the genres of African American Studies, Cultural Studies, Performance Studies, and eventually to Whiteness Studies. The scholarly literature suggests four paradigms through which this cross-cultural engagement could be analyzed—structural domination, commodification, cultural autonomy, and colonization—all of which define White interaction with African American cultural forms as cultural appropriation. Working through these dominant paradigms forced me to confront these issues head-on through my own personal experience of becoming a Lindy Hop dancer. In the next section I will discuss four dominant models of cultural appropriation and their usefulness for explaining White cross-cultural engagement. In doing so, I will focus on their logical contradictions and limitations for explaining macro level racial dynamics.

Structural accounts of cultural appropriation

Several scholarly works, most prominently Richard Delgado’s book *Critical Race Theory* and Ian Haney Lopez’s book *White by Law*, seeks to explain this cross-cultural engagement through structural relations of power: economics, law, or simply via “White skin privilege” (see Feagin, 2000; Delgado, 1995; Delgado & Stephanic, 1997; Crenshaw, Gotanda, Peller, & Thomas, 1995; Kincheloe et al., 1998; Haney-Lopez, 1998; Perry, 2001; McIntosh, 1989; Wildman, 1996; Rothenberg, 2002). This structural domination produces cultural appropriation because it enables Whites to momentarily imagine themselves as or as to play at being African American or “acting Black.” The reverse of which is a privilege African Americans cannot enjoy because of structural boundaries. By viewing cultural interaction in terms of structural relations of domination and subordination, appropriation always racializes and essentializes the structural positions of Whites as the dominators and non-Whites as their victimized subordinates.

This structural determination of race and racism projects an assigned racial identity according to skin color whereby racial groups and their members easily fit into racially assigned categories. Thus, assuming these structural relations between races and appropriation becomes the sole mode of participation in the Lindy Hop. If White identity is the exploitative colonizer, then all participating Whites are guilty of cultural appropriation because of their structural position in society. Accordingly, we base our evaluation not on people’s performance of a cultural practice, but on their racial status and structural position alone. The structural guarantee of appropriation reinscribes the very essentialism that traps us in these

naturalized conceptions of race that we seek to overcome on two fronts. First, it assumes that all White performances are exploitative because they are White, while all African American performances are authentic. Second, the structural model guarantees the qualities and characteristics of a particular group by their very structural position and limits the possibilities and diversity of what African American or White identity can be.

Because this model is limited to structural relations, it is acontextual and never examines the specificity of those relationships in context or the intentions, competences, or orientations of the actors. Cultural practices and performances of identity are too complex and contradictory to simplistically assume that all White people appropriate African American culture or participate in it the same way, or conversely, that all African Americans do not exploit or commodify the Lindy Hop. By trying to account for the differences in structural power between racial groups, appropriation reduces all African Americans and all Whites to one-dimensional groups with uniform attitudes and identities. Structural accounts of appropriation maintain a strategic essentialism whereby racial domination operates through skin color. However, this “skin privilege” cannot explain why Whiteness as a system of racial domination is so powerful, resilient, and pervasive. As a result, we must break with the logic of White racism and instead investigate the mechanisms that structure societies through racial dominance.

Commodification accounts of cultural appropriation

In addition to essentializing identity, the appropriation paradigm sometimes reduces culture to commodities as is the case in the work of Deborah Root’s *Cannibal Culture* and Bruce Ziff’s and Pratima Rao’s edited volume *Borrowed Power: Essays on Cultural Appropriation*. By theorizing culture as a thing, a style, or a fashion that can be consumed, the paradigm of appropriation no longer treats culture as a way of life, but instead as a detached thing available in the marketplace to be used utilized and consumed regardless of cultural logic or interpretation (see Chin, 2001; Deloria, 1998; Lury, 1996; Kondo, 1997; Briggs & Colby, 1999; Cutler, 1999; Wood, 1997; hooks, 1992a, 1992b, 1994; Hall, 1997; Maira, 2002; McClintock, 1995; Featherstone, 1991; Root, 1998; Miller, 1987, 1998; Ziff & Rao, 1997; McCracken, 1991; Appadurai, 1988). By reducing culture to consumer goods, all cross-racial interaction is reduced to a simplistic consumption of goods as a substitute for real human interaction. Consequently, the paradigm of commodification takes culture out of its context and distorts its embedded connection to larger social and cultural processes. In the end, appropriation transforms all culture into nothing more than a consumer good, adrift in the marketplace without any identity beyond its racialized owners and those who appropriate them in consumption.

Theorizing the Lindy Hop as a commodity assumes a one-dimensional model of consumption. Culture is for consumption but it can be legitimately enjoyed only by the group that produces those commodities. Like the essentialism that accompanies previous structural explanations of appropriation, commodification of culture also assumes that racial groups and their corresponding culture are directly isomorphic rather than contingent to each other. Rather than looking at the specific context of human interaction, the commodification of culture decontextualizes and essentializes culture by implicitly assuming racial identity to be “authentic.” By reducing culture to race, we generalize a particular cultural practice to an entire group of people, as if everyone who is African American naturally and logically identifies with the Lindy Hop dance as “theirs.”

In this flawed model of the conflation of appropriation and commodification, the Lindy Hop is considered an African American dance and can be consumed only by Blacks; all other consumers are necessarily exploiting and appropriating. Extending this logic into the marketplace would create a bizarre and narrow world upheld by rigid monolithic identities. By naturalizing the culture of a particular racial group as authentic, the idea of legitimate consumption functions as an essentialist conception of racial identity. Mistaking what is cultural and historical for what is natural and authentic, as if culture were genetic and not a constructed identity, we valorize the very ground of racism that we seek to overcome (Hall, 1996).

Autonomous accounts of cultural appropriation

The outcome of theorizing race and culture through the prism of cultural appropriation is that one must necessarily conceptualize cultural forms and racial identities as separate, autonomous, and easily identifiable entities. Each racial group produces its own distinct and easily recognizable cultural forms. In terms of African American culture, jazz, and blues are easily identifiable because they are “Black” art forms. These cultural forms are separate from “Latin” salsa or “White” classical music because they are marked as “Black.” In this case, the defense against appropriation cultivates a politics of racial preservation based on cultural autonomy. For instance, as a defense against White domination, a particular group will downplay the mixed element that contributes to its identity. The appropriation model furthers the misconception that each cultural form is considered pure and autonomous because it originates from a distinct racial background. The argument with this model is that if a cultural form is labeled “Black,” one must be African American to participate in that form. Consequently, anyone who is not African American is necessarily not authentic and cannot make anything but inauthentic derivations or parasitic copies. As represented in the work of LeRoi Jones’ classic *Blues People* and more recently in Greg Tate’s *Everything but the Burden*, “authenticity” is used for “strategic essentialism,” whereby dominated groups work to preserve a sense of autonomy by carving out an essentialized identity. (See Jones, 1963; George, 1988, 1992; Lipsitz, 1997, 1998; Tate, 2002; Michaels, 1997; Boyd, 2003; Maira, 2002. For a critique of this position through the model of hybridity, see Flores, 2000; Modood & Werbner, 1997; Canclini, 1995). Like the biological models that precede appropriation as fundamental guarantees of identity, authenticity becomes the unimpeachable transcendental category by which appropriation is explained. Culture accordingly is not a set of relations defined within a larger social context, but an a priori status fixed by phenotypical or rather “authentic” categories of race.

If we analyze culture strictly within the appropriation model, then cultural forms like the Lindy Hop must be generated without any interracial contact or influences from other groups. Therefore, appropriation either reduces multiculturalism to a set of isolated differences set side by side, like a salad bar of cultural choices to be sampled. For instance, a White middle-class individual may try Japanese food or learn how to dance the Lindy Hop, but their involvement with those cultures ends there. Because they are never directly interacting with anyone from that culture, their level of involvement is individualistic. The Lindy Hop, like all other cultural forms, is a product of many diverse and varied cultural practices that congeal into one particular practice. The Lindy Hop contains movements from African dance, European ballroom, and American folk dances. Similarly, the music that accompanies the Lindy Hop is a product of the intertwined music from Africa, Europe, and America. Reducing the Lindy Hop to a simplified origin and identity not only diminishes its complexity, it also negates the very basis of the cultural form.

Colonization accounts of cultural appropriation

Because of the historical struggle between racial groups, cultural forms become a way to fix or certify racial identity and exclusive ownership. In the case of the Lindy Hop, White-washing and commodification have become strategies for dislodging the Lindy Hop from its African American cultural context for White ownership and gain. Cultural appropriation arguments try to defend the purity of African American identity against these tactics of White colonization.

As a result, the appropriation model explains White interactions with African American culture as the desire to “eat the other” where Whites appropriate and colonize other cultures for their own fulfillment and satisfaction (hooks, 1992b). The idea of cultural colonization, as exemplified in the work of David Roediger and Noel Ignatiev, presupposes a vacuous and autonomous White society that somehow is devoid of culture or unable to manufacture pleasures internally. (See, for example, Ignatiev & Garvey, 1996; Roediger, 1991, 1994, 1999, 2002; Garon, 1995; Spivak, 1998; Fusco, 1995; Ziff & Rao, 1997; Frankenberg, 1993, 1996, 1997; Gallagher, 1999; Perry, 2001; Conley, 2001; Waters, 1990; Wald, 2000; Kalra & Hutnyk, 1998; Tomlinson, 1991; Rogin, 1996; Fusco, 1995; Turner, 1994). Accordingly, Whites have to seek out identity in the richness of others’ cultures to offset their own impoverishment. While this desire may be for domination, or alternatively to praise the value of other cultures as positive, resistive, or liberating, it still re-essentializes Whiteness as normality and Blackness as distinct, apart, and different. By focusing on the desire of Whites to appropriate and consume the other because of the other’s so-called “difference” and “exotic flavor,” we maintain the normality and neutrality of Whiteness as the category against which everything else is measured. By treating Whites as devoid of culture, the colonization model reinscribes essentialism, not only by reifying culture into objects to be consumed, but by treating White culture as null and void. By misrecognizing the constructed nature of social difference, the colonization model essentializes both the colonizer and the colonized.

While these approaches lead to a racial essentialism on the macro level, however, they do help illuminate the interconnection between bodily practices and the dominant mythology of racial differences. While cultural practices like dance may appear to be separate from the dominant racial mythology, they are in fact intimately interrelated. In the case of African Americans, the Black body has traditionally been mythologized as innately and essentially exotic, sexual, expressive, and naturally rhythmic. This sense of Blackness is constructed as exterior to Whiteness, where the White body is marked by its rationality, restraint, and rigidity. As a result, African Americans are seen as natural dancers, while Whites are considered naturally awkward and arrhythmic. This dominant racial mythology has served historically to reinscribe positions of domination and subordination through the naturalizing of certain competencies and attributes as “Black” and “White” (Lott, 1995; hooks, 1992a, 1992b, 1994; Radano, Bohlman, & Baker, 2001; Radano 2003; Roediger, 1990, 2002; Baker, 1998).

This racial mythology underlies a long tradition in Whiteness Studies in conceptualizing White people and the White body as emotionally and culturally vacuous (Rogin, 1996; Lott, 1995; Gubar, 1997; Radano et al., 2001; Radano 2003; Roediger, 1991, 1994, 1999, 2002). From the days of minstrelsy, to Elvis Presley and rock-n-roll, to the wiggers and Eminems of today, White society has always imitated and emulated African American cultural forms (see, for example, Ignatiev, 1996; Roediger, 1991, 1994, 1999, 2002; Spivak, 1998; Fusco, 1995; Ziff & Rao, 1997; Frankenberg, 1993, 1996, 1997; Gallagher, 2001; Perry, 2001; Wald, 2000; Kalra & Hutnyk, 1998; Rogin, 1996). Whites have used, borrowed, and appropriated African American culture as a surrogate vehicle to express their own rebellion, sexuality,

and pleasure denied due to the repressive nature of White society (Deloria, 1998; hooks, 1992b, 1994; Fusco, 1995; Lott, 1995; Radano et al., 2001; Radano, 2003; Roediger, 1991, 1994, 1999, 2002; Rogin, 1996; Wald, 2000). As a result, these cross-cultural engagements afford Whites an opportunity to transcend, however fleeting, the repression of White society. In the next section, I turn to discuss Wacquant's project of theorizing an analytic of racial domination and carnal sociology.

Carnal sociology and the analytic of racial domination

An analytic of racial domination

Theorizing the racial dynamics of White interaction with the Lindy Hop as cultural appropriation has serious shortcomings that must be examined. While the appropriation model illuminates certain tendencies at the macro level of racial domination, it ultimately reasserts the very racial essentialism, social determinism, and monolithic racial identities that sociological analysis seeks to deconstruct. If race is socially constructed, and power and racial hierarchies are arbitrary products of history instead of monolithic essences, then essentialized notions of race that enable "cultural appropriation," "cultural theft," and the "colonization of the other" must be undermined as well. If race is socially constructed and a historical product, it cannot simultaneously be the essential guarantee of group membership or the criterion for who can participate "authentically" in cultural practices. In short, appropriation leads us into the asociological cul-de-sac of cultural and racial essentialism.

Each of these explanations necessarily engages in pejorative moral judgments rather than scientific interrogations, simply reaffirming the essential evilness of the dominator and the inherent goodness of the dominated (Wacquant, 1997b). As a result, Whites in the present are held accountable for the unfortunate and unpalatable past injustices of White racism; Whites must now prove the negative, as it is assumed that all Whites are racist. Conversely, if White domination is so pervasive, this leads to describing African Americans as powerless and passive victims, who have no role in shaping their reality in American society. This approach does little to help us understand how race operates and how domination occurs; it collapses different dimensions of racial domination, obscuring crucial differences, bases, forms, and implications of racial divisions (Wacquant, 1997b, p. 225). As a result, this paradigm of Whiteness or White racism makes moral and value judgments by assigning blame or innocence for unpalatable social facts by falling into the logic of the trial. The alternative model proposed here advances a generative framework for explaining the interlocking symbolic and material mechanisms that generate and reproduce racial domination in order to help us differentiate, unhinge, and reassemble the diverse forms that relations of racial domination assume in different times and places (Wacquant, 1997b, p. 226).

The use of Wacquant's theoretical approach of racial domination moves beyond the limitations of cultural appropriation paradigms, which analyze racial dynamics through the conscious or intentional outcome of White prejudice or racism. Instead, it offers a more accurate and powerful explanation of the phenomenon in question by illuminating how racial domination works through the symbolic power generated through the perpetuation of the dominant racial mythology of essential racial differences that are grounded in the body. Whites themselves can also be oppressed through this essentializing of racial difference as it circumscribes their own possibilities of identity formation. Cross-cultural engagements, like Whites learning to dance a traditionally African American dance like the Lindy Hop, illuminate the ways that Whites themselves are complicit in their belief in these differences.

Carnal sociology

I had to embark on a carnal sociology of the dance in order to understand racial domination. Carnal sociology requires that we develop the embodied practical knowledge that natives use to understand their world. Because practical knowledge can be acquired only by putting the self into the line of fire and subjecting oneself to the social forces under analysis, it cannot come from a detached perspective. Carnal sociology demands not only a new methodological entry into the world, but also a new mode of theorizing the body as both a tool of inquiry and a vector of knowledge (Wacquant, 2003). We must, as Wacquant argues, not only do a sociology *of* the body but also a sociology *from* the body, in order to make explicit the practical sense of everyday life and the everyday practices that define a specific social context from the inside out. (Wacquant's project of a carnal sociology engages the literature surrounding the sociology of the body. For a discussion of the sociology of the body, see Bendelow & Williams, 1998; Burkeitt, 1999; Butler, 1990, 1993, 1994; Csordas, 1995; Falk, 1994; Frank, 1995; Freund, 1998; Howson & Inglis, 2001; Schilling, 1993, 2001; Turner, 1984).

Carnal sociology differs from auto-ethnography in that auto-ethnography focuses exclusively on the researcher's personal experience in the field. Auto-ethnography focuses on the self, knowledge of the self, the dynamics of personal interest and the investment of one's own personal experience.⁵ Carnal sociology, in contrast, is not about the meaning of my personal participation. Rather, it uses my full immersion into a particular world of study in order to fully understand the phenomena under investigation from the inside out, a vantage point that is inaccessible to observation alone. In this way carnal sociology also differs from traditional participant-observation as immersion and conversion enable us to unearth the practical knowledge of the internal dynamics of the phenomena in question.⁶

Dance, like boxing, is an embodied, nonlinguistic cultural form that cannot be fully understood from the outside (see Wacquant, 1992, 1995a, 1995b, 1998, 2003). Dance is an art that is learned, understood, and expressed through the body. In order to acquire this knowledge, I could not simply watch and ask questions about the Lindy Hop. I had to reach a point where I could understand the art as a dancer; I had to come to understand the dance practically, through my own body. Learning to dance is the process of acquiring the competences of choreography, leading and following, improvisation to music, and expressing oneself aesthetically, all simultaneously in time and space. This retooling of the body was a demanding process of inculcation and training, whereby my awkward pre-dance body had to be reformed and cultivated into an educated dancing body (Wacquant, 2003, p. 116). Like riding a bike, conceptual mastery of dance is of limited use; it is only after the dance has been assimilated into the body through endless drills and repetitions that it becomes fully understood (Wacquant, 2003, p. 69, 118). Only through my own immersion and bodily labor, through years of practice, taking classes, and social dancing, could I have developed the skills and capacities, through conversion, needed to become a dancer.

Becoming a dancer is the process of developing a body consciousness: an ability to think bodily, perceiving and apprehending the world through the body. In the case of social dancing,

⁵ For discussions of autoethnography and its application for sociological analysis, see Bochner (2002), Ellis (2004), Gatson (2003), Holt (2003), Kenny (2000), Meneley and Young (2005), Reed-Danahay (1997), Spry (2001), Vidal-Ortiz (2004).

⁶ In this way a formal analysis of the rules of dancing, or the instructions of how to go about doing particular steps or patterns will not be sufficient for understanding the practice of the dance, nor will mere observation allow us to understand the anxiety and tension that the dancers undertake consciously or unconsciously, in the ways that race gets refracted through culture in learning how to dance.

this not only requires a knowledge of basic steps, patterns, or footwork, it also requires mastering the ability to control your body in time and space in relation to your partner's body and other dancers around you; the ability to lead and follow physical communication through pulls and pushes of hands, shoulders, and arms; and the ability to be in rhythm and on time. Mastery of all these distinct knowledges, which work simultaneously without hierarchy during any particular dance, is necessary to become a competent Lindy Hop dancer. In the process of coming to know myself as a dancer, I realized that the body is both subject and object in this transformation: the body is the subject of inculcation, as the raw material to be cultivated, and the embodied object and conduit of that acquired knowledge (Wacquant, 2003, p. 70). As a result, I struggled to modify my own bodily schema and develop a new relation to my body. Like every other dancer, my goal was to develop these bodily knowledges to the point where they became so embodied they appeared to be second nature. The trained dancer becomes, as Wacquant argues, a "spontaneous strategist," knowing, understanding, judging, and reacting all at once in any situation (Wacquant, 2003, p. 97). This cultivation of the corporeal schema of dance enabled me not only to be a dancer, but to see and comprehend the details and subtleties that remain invisible to those who have not acquired that practical knowledge.⁷ In the end, only a carnal sociology of and from the body could render the Lindy Hop fully meaningful. In the next section, I develop this carnal ethnography to show how racial domination works in Lindy Hop.

Deconstructing lindy hop: Ethnographic discussion

***The nighttime humidity had steamed up the windows of the studio, and the air was so dense that it was difficult to breathe. The combination of the summer heat wave and the lack of air conditioning made the room a sauna; I had already worked my way through two T-shirts and had now soaked through a third. That night on the North Side of Chicago there were more than three hundred predominately White male and female college students and young professionals ranging from their early twenties to their early forties, taking Lindy Hop dance classes. Arriving from work or after school, all these dancers were scattered throughout six makeshift dance studios that occupied the third story of a small elementary school. I stood amongst forty couples who packed our classroom to the point where we could barely move let alone dance.

Under the glaring fluorescent lights, the music of Louis Jordan's "Ain't Nobody Here but Us Chickens" rolled out through the loudspeakers in the back of the room. The hard-driving syncopated swinging sound of the snare and bass drums generated a heavy backbeat like a train in motion while the blaring horn sections of trumpets and trombones piped out above them filling out the song's texture as Jordan's rolling vocals carried the melody along. As the window panes began to rattle from the pulsating energy, the music felt infectious—the very sound compelled you to move.

⁷ This use of carnal sociology differs from Wacquant's *Body and Soul*, in that the main object of analysis is not about the literal phenomenon in question (the pugilistic habitus); rather than focus on the habitus of the dancer in learning and performing the dance, this study seeks to understand how the racial mythologies that become embedded and naturalized in our conceptual and mental schemata of the world and reproduced and materialized through the cultural practices of enacting the dance through our bodies. While the focus is on the racial mythologies that are naturalized, it still works within Wacquant's framework of how these work beneath the level of consciousness and discourse to create the orientations and dispositions of the dancers.

As the makeshift plywood that served as our dance floor rumbled from the weight of the dancers, my partner and I tried our best to master the choreography we were shown as we all danced along to the calls of our two young, White thirty-something instructors.

The dance begins with the man swinging his right arm past his right side as if ready to toss a bowling ball. As he does this, the woman begins to swivel her hips and move forwards towards him.

As they are connected only by one outreached arm apiece, his left and her right, they begin to circle around each other in clockwise motion, meeting halfway in a short embrace and then extending back out to arms length again. This circular motion where the dancers pass each other define the particular style of the dance as a continuous cycle of movement. Whereas Ballroom dances work with partners almost always fully connected, either through chest contact or both arms in an embrace, the Lindy Hop often works with nothing more than the connection of one outstretched hand. This basic step, also known as the Swing-Out, has the appearance of a giant rubber band as the partners appear to expand and contract in space.

After two Swing-Outs, the choreography calls for the partners to go through a series of movements in which they alternate taking turns or spins as they pass by each other. This sequence of choreography is referred to colloquially as “she goes/he goes.” Next, as he pulls her toward him, he steps out of her path of travel, raises her right arm, and turns her as she passes by. Having traded places, the man then pulls the woman toward him, yet this time he steps out of her path of movement and quickly turns himself around under her outstretched arm. Finally, they finish the routine with two more Swing-Outs, circling around each other and winding up back where they started in their original positions. This choreographed sequence is a common exercise in getting dancers to incorporate new steps along with practicing their basic steps. The alternating turn-taking cultivates not only individual steps and movements, but also connections between dance partners in terms of spacing, timing, and leading and following.

Here, when all the elements of the dance—the choreography, the leading and following, the timing, spacing, and the communication between partners through the pushing-pulling and kinesthetic signals of touch—fall into place the dance appears as if it were effortless or something that is an innate knowledge. In short, the synthesis of all these dance components into one coherent whole that can function subconsciously, so that the dancer can concern herself with more intricate dynamics of the dance such as improvisation or styling her movements, is the acquisition of the Lindy Hop habitus.⁸ Thus, it is not simply being in sync with the steps or the music alone, but the systematic effect of all of these elements coming together in time and space. In this moment, the dance has an ebullient quality in which the dance and the music are one and the same; the dancing mirrors the music and the music mirrors the dancing.***

An analytic of racial domination

A carnal sociology approach to dancing forced me to re-think the interconnection between racial identity and cultural practice; this generated two interrelated questions: How do White

⁸ I discuss the acquisition of the Lindy Hop habitus in detail in Hancock (2005). While the notion of how the dance habitus is acquired is a necessary component to understand how racial mythologies are internalized, it is beyond the scope of this article to discuss this aspect in detail.

bodies enact Whiteness and Blackness? How is it that those phenotypes may or may not correspond to what they enact or how they enact it? In order to answer these questions, it is necessary to consider not only the ways that race is written onto and enacted by the body, but to understand how we conceptualize racial identity and how those conceptualizations often reinscribe our essentialized racial commonsense. Commonsense racial categories are objectively defined phenotypes to which interests, aesthetics, tastes, and agency can be attributed. In this way, racial identity is not something one ever escapes, as if self-reflection somehow freed us from its presence in society as a social fact, or loosened the hold race plays on our shared social understanding of the world at a macro level.

This mode of analyzing the racial identity of the body through both its phenotype and its practice enabled me to rethink the contingent relationship between race, culture, and the body. This rethinking was not just a conceptual matter. Rather, I had to understand it through my body, by re-examining all I had learned in order to understand how these racial myths were linked to the process of learning cultural practices like dance. Reworking my knowledge of dance as a dancer made me and prompted a level of reflexivity and sensitivity to my own body and bodily awareness in a way that I had never had before in a way that would change me as a dancer. This practical knowledge enabled me to move past analyzing dance from the observational standpoint of reading dance like a “text,” by interpreting its meanings from the outside, and instead provide me with a way to understand how embodied practice of dance and its inculcation is a process of meaning making. Understanding those meanings always works out within larger structural determinations.⁹ Since all cultural forms are situated within material and symbolic conditions that frame and constrain those forms, their cultivation is always undertaken through a sensuous awareness of contexts seen and unseen, conscious and unconscious (Willis, 2001). Through this new awareness, I realized that I was holding myself, just as I had others, to the logic of the trial in trying to understand these racial dynamics. These carnal insights, gained through my own acquisition of the practical knowledge of dance, provided me with a new perspective through which to understand the dynamics of racial domination that circulated through the world of the Lindy Hop.

Whereas previous eras of White racial domination have been characterized by explicit physical or symbolic manifestations, in the post-civil rights period of colorblindness and multiculturalism, White racial domination works “without racists” in an implicit and often invisible form (Bonilla Silva, 2001, 2002). What makes the Lindy Hop such a fascinating object lesson is not the cultural form itself, but the dynamics involved in its cross-racial adoption and how racial domination is perpetuated not through racism or prejudice, but rather through the symbolic power and violence that goes misrecognized and unrecognized by its practitioners.

One dancer summed up a commonly held assumption within the Lindy Hop community as she expressed matter-of-factly to me her opinion on the difference between dancers racially:

They are just better dancers. Black people can just dance better than White people. I mean, look at Ryan and Steven [two of the best Lindy Hop dancers and instructors and principal revivalists of the dance]. They are the best dancers and they’re both Black. They do it better than Whites. That’s not a bad thing; that’s something they should be proud of.

⁹ For an analysis of dance as a “text” see Adsheed-Lansdale (1999), Desmond (1997), Fraleigh and Hanstein (1999), Foster (1995), and Morris (1996).

This sense of Black superiority in the ability to dance, within the larger context of multiculturalism, appears to be a flattering comment.

One late afternoon, a group of us assembled at a dancer's apartment to watch videos of Lindy Hop dancers and try to pick up some steps from the tapes. These video sessions were common occurrences early in the Lindy Hop revival, as people were ravenous to learn as much as they could as quickly as possible. As if it were scripted, when viewing video footage of the famous African American dance troupes from the 1930s and 1940s, one of the dancers would always make a general comment, as if speaking for everyone present, about the obviousness of racial difference and dancing: "Oh my God, if I could look like that it would be awesome. I mean, they look great doing it. Black people look so natural dancing; White people look so stiff." These comments of racial difference went unquestioned by the group; they seemed to represent an implicit shared assumption as the video clips kept playing without another word spoken.

By reworking my own dancing, I came to see how the mechanisms of inculcation and socialization filtered not only the dance, but racial ideologies into those bodies as well. I came to see through myself and other dancers around me that the style of the dance was not something extra to the dance, but constitutive of it. Here "Black" and "White" were racial mythologies that constantly and systematically shaped the ways that we thought about the dance, and therefore kept us from understanding how much these mythologies constrained or over-exaggerated our practice of the dance. Only by subjecting myself to a reworking of those very socializing processes could I have come to understand the ways that the racial ideologies of Blackness and Whiteness are transmitted, translated, and naturalized through the engagement with cultural practices.

By misrecognizing cultural practices as natural aptitudes, Whites enact Black dances the way they think they should be done "authentically," through the "collective expectations" of ways they execute the dance, which further embeds and essentializes these racial mythologies (Bourdieu, 2000b, pp. 141–142, 2000a, p. 61). While most Lindy Hop dancers felt constrained in their White identities, some also took the dance to an excess which generated a sense of minstrelsy, where a much more explicit sense of racial mythology comes into play.¹⁰ As Lindy Hop master Steven Mitchell confided in me when I asked him about the way he saw the dance being enacted by many Whites, he responded:

I'm trying to get them to understand that it's a dance. That's the problem—people have taken it so far out, it's not even dancing any more. It's just like this huge farce out there; it isn't a dance anymore, and that's what's killing it. It's like people think they are supposed to dance some way and you see it because people are thinking, 'Oh, so that's how they dance, and that's how they move.' But what people don't realize—they don't think about it—this is my career. Do you know how long I've been dancing? Do you know how much time I've spent on the dance floor? It's not like I was born with it.

As a result, through carnal sociology we can come to understand how cultural practices are filtered into the body through a racial prism.

As the process of inculcating the dance is slow and often imperceptible, the explicit racial character of these mythologies is never self-evident to the casual observer. Only by

¹⁰ For an excellent analysis of the history and images of minstrelsy see Gubar (1997), Lhamon (1998), Lott (1995), Mahar (1999) Roediger (1991), Rogin (1996), and Toll (1974).

gaining practical insight into the ways that racial categories serve as mechanisms of symbolic power and violence in the socialization of bodies was I able to dissect those mythologies. In learning this through my own embodied experience, I came to understand the racial politics that have defined cross-cultural engagement, specifically the White-Black dynamic as it has unfolded historically. By working back and forth the theory and reflexivity over both myself and the dance community within which I was situated, I came to understand there was a deep tradition of the symbolic power by which these cross-cultural engagements were enacted and simultaneously misrecognized and unrecognized as having nothing to do with race. Wacquant's analytic of racial domination provided a new framework for explaining cross-cultural interaction that moves past previous models of cultural appropriation that fall into logic of the trial.

Carnal ethnography

There are four mechanisms of socialization—choreography, social dance, improvisation, and style—by means of which such inculcation and embodiment occur. These four components of dance are marked off analytically to emphasize different aspects of the Lindy Hop. There is a semi-evolutionary process by which one learns. One acquires one component of the dance, internalizes it, and then moves on to another, starting with the basic steps and then focusing on improvising and styling movement. However, this is more a matter of teaching convention than of these components as successive stages of learning. These components are not isolated from one another; rather they are intertwined and all happening at once. For example, choreography focuses on the individual aspect of knowing the formal steps of the dance, leading and following convey the sociality of dance, and improvisation teaches dancers how to both be individually creative and balance that individualism within the social dance framework. Style itself is not a component separate from the dance but rather is constitutive of the very steps and movements themselves. Style brings dancers full circle to focus on themselves in relation to the dance as a whole.

In the formal learning process, each of these components is functionally “learned” the same way; instructors tell and demonstrate what to do and then dancers come to practice, internalize, and embody those movements. By looking at the labor necessary to drill that disposition and dance habitus into the body, through an analysis of the components of choreography, leading and following, improvisation, and style, we can make explicit the processes of bodily labor that make up the “natural” dancer, who appears to move spontaneously and effortlessly to the music. In examining these components, I look at both their embodied practice as well as how dancers verbally understand and articulate their acquisition of these components that make up the Lindy Hop dance habitus, in order to get at both their physical enactment and how that embodiment is understood. After realizing my own complicity, I started to scrutinize myself, becoming more reflexive about watching my own dancing and the dancing of others.

In the end, I learned to dance twice—once with an uncritical approach of learning formal rules and patterns, and the second through a carnal approach to understanding my body and its embodied dance habitus. This insight, while possibly appearing to be something one could undertake by observation or rule following alone, became the crucial turning point in understanding the dance from the inside out. In this way it is not simply the conscious identification of these racial mythologies that frees us from them, as if we could mentally discard them, but to understand how they must be re-worked through the very ways we move

and understand the world through our bodies.¹¹ Through undertaking my own journey in learning to dance, I began to discern what I and the other Lindy Hop dancers perpetually misunderstood. What appears to be the most natural and instinctual of human activities is in fact a highly cultivated and disciplined process of cultural inculcation. By demythologizing dance in relation to race and the body, I gained new insight into the intersection of race, culture, and the body. No one is a natural dancer; one becomes a good dancer only through acquired skill and training, not through inherent racial marking. In doing so, we move past previously discussed racial models by highlighting the contingency of all cultural practices and their enactment. There is no necessity to bodies dancing in any particular manner, rather only practices that get misrecognized and enacted as natural to some groups and not others through the symbolic power of the dominant racial mythology. Focusing on the embodiment of racial mythologies, rather than the structural or intention oriented approaches to race, suggests the need for an alternative analysis of how cross-cultural engagement is mediated and enacted.

Acquiring the corporeal schemas of dance provided me with a bodily awareness not only of the practical logic of the dance, but of interpreting bodily movements more generally. As I scrutinized myself and other dancers during years of training my body through mimicry, drills, and reflexive scrutiny of my movements and those of other dancers, I slowly came to realize how symbolic power and violence are embedded in the very ways that White society interprets, internalizes, and enacts African American cultural forms like the Lindy Hop.

As I continued to practice and cultivate my dancing in light of my new understanding, I began to see the process by which my body became that of a dancer. Inculcating the components of dance into one's body, especially a body that had no previous dance training, is an arduous process. By watching this process unfold over time and marking the stages and steps of accomplishment along the way, I began to see how much bodily labor was necessary to learn the dance. Using my own body as the case study, I experienced the limits of how much and how quickly one can accumulate this bodily knowledge and the amount of practice required before it appears natural, as if one can spontaneously and naturally dance gracefully and effortlessly. Only by working back and forth between my own learning curve and watching and asking others about how they felt about their own progress, could I see how this racial mythology dominated the way they gauged what they thought and had not thought about in terms of how well they would be able to learn how to dance.

Conclusion

Without a carnal approach, the Lindy Hop would have appeared as just another subculture of people blowing off steam in nightclubs and not as a microcosm of how race operates in contemporary American society. Through crossing back and forth from theory to fieldwork, I slowly came to see that what appears innocuous or neutral on the surface has enormous symbolic power in the reproduction of racial mythologies as they continue to go misrecognized and unrecognized in their real effects. While one can come to understand the racial dynamics of the Lindy Hop cognitively, my own lived experience of these dynamics opened up a new insight into the intersections of the body, culture, and race. Learning to dance enabled me to

¹¹ For a detailed analysis of cognition on racial categorization, see Brubaker, Loveman, and Stamatov (2004) and Loveman (1999a, 1999b). See also Wacquant (1997b), Brubaker and Cooper (2000), Bourdieu and Wacquant (1999), and Jenkins (1994). For studies of group formation through racialization, see among others, Omi and Winnant (1994), Roediger (1991), and Ignatiev (1995).

read the body symbolically in terms of how the dance is taught, and danced, and what these movements meant within the wider historical context of the White engagement with African American cultural forms. This new understanding provided insight into how the perpetuation of racial mythology and racial essentialism occurred without conscious awareness. In this way the carnal-analytic model exposes the symbolic power and violence of the dominant racial mythology and its effects without falling into the logic of the trial.

By drawing on the interconnection between cultural practices and racial mythologies, we can examine how White bodies learning to dance the historically African American Lindy Hop simultaneously inculcates both a practical knowledge of dance and racial mythologies get refracted into the dancers' bodies, through the schemata of cognitive, emotional, and bodily labor. As the dance movements and steps are learned, this learning is always wrapped up in racial myths of Blackness and Whiteness. By illuminating this racial mythology at work, we can understand how everyday cultural practices like the Lindy Hop are articulations of material and symbolic contexts that are not immediately present to us in their effects. While the carnal-analytic model does not provide the ultimate model for examining the intersections of race, culture and the body, it does provide new and fruitful racial insights into rethinking and questioning everyday cultural practices and cross-cultural engagement, taking us beyond the essentialism of cultural appropriation.

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