

Visiblizing the Silence: Critical Whiteness in Dance/Movement

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Citation:

White political and economic dominance persists throughout our world today largely fueled by white people's silent avoidance and glossing over of racial matters, allowing institutions and systems structured in racist ideology to continue privileging whiteness at the expense of non-white people. I propose the critical, honest exploration and deconstruction of *whiteness* through dance/movement practice and performance as a means for breaking that silence and confronting white guilt, sadness, and fear. My hope is that this process of investigation, embodiment, and visible vocalization of the experience of whiteness from within can help dislodge it from its quiet dominating position as the backdrop of "reality" and assist in the dismantling of the race system. This essay interweaves my own process of identity reconstruction as a white American dancer of West African and *fusion* dance forms with discourse on Critical Whiteness, from hybridity and improvisational identity scores to Post-colonialism in polyrhythmic Guinean dundun and dance performance. Self-examination of whiteness in dance further destabilizes the often unspoken hierarchy that continues to privilege forms and contexts associated with white people as well as essentialism in categorization of dance cultures.

Despite Colorblind ideology and the celebration of multiculturalism in many nations and communities today, the reality is that the socially real construction we call race is as pervasive as ever in a globalized socio-economic system that privileges whiteness as the standard against which all "other" stands out and suffers. While overt racial discrimination is increasingly frowned upon, white domination remains so deeply embedded within influential systems and institutions on such a grand scale and in such a manner that it is largely unapparent, particularly to white people. American feminist and anti-racist activist Peggy McIntosh writes, "To redesign social systems we first need to acknowledge their colossal unseen dimensions. The silences and denials surrounding privilege are the key

political tool here. They keep the thinking about equality or equity incomplete, protecting unearned advantage and conferred dominance by making these taboo subjects.”

Critical Whiteness Studies is a multi-disciplinary arena of academic inquiry that investigates the taboo of whiteness, a racial construct historically designed to perpetuate power and privileged leisure among a white elite. Critical Whiteness, in a sense, turns the camera on the typical subject, the white, Eurocentric medium through which “reality” has been fed to us all to varying degrees. As Nobel Prize and Pulitzer Prize-winning novelist Toni Morrison writes, “My project is an effort to avert the critical gaze from the racial object to the racial subject; from the described and imagined to the describers and imaginers; from the serving to the served.” Critical Whiteness Studies, or CWS, recognizes the relative transparency of white identities and lack of awareness, much less acknowledgment, among whites of the unearned privileges from which they benefit and which non-white people on the whole do not.

I am advocating the application of Critical Whiteness to Dance/movement performed and practiced as a means of visiblizing what so often remains unspoken- the silent avoidance on behalf of white folks which itself allows the race system, which works in their favor, to continue operating. Embodiment as a means for exposing whiteness utilizing white bodies remains a relatively untapped, fertile field for communicating kinesthetically what words don’t have the power of living, breathing consciousness to convey. Prior even to that communication in a presumably public or performative dancing context, critical ideas about whiteness must simmer with cognitive bodies. This process is prone to collective and personal discovery, painful recognition and confrontation, emotional outpour, with the hope, ultimately, for collective healing.

Robert Jensen writes, **“Whiteness is based in lies not only about others but lies about ourselves, and we can’t lay full claim to our humanity until we find our way out of the web of denial.”** That web of denial, expressed in the awkwardness, fear, guilt, avoidance and silence around whiteness and white dominance is clearly not only a matter of psychology. Even neuroscientists today are embracing the theory of embodied cognition, which acknowledges that no aspect of mind, even the most abstract reasoning, can be understood in isolation from the body. Matters of race are

particularly inseparable from the body, since the construct relies so heavily upon phenotypes in order to determine racial categories. It seems obvious that in order to work our way out of the web of denial that surrounds whiteness we have to engage in embodied and interactive methods. Clearly dance, movement art, and performance have potential to be potent and effective mediums for racial deconstruction and social metamorphosis.

It has been said that Hip Hop has done more to fight racism than any politician. If you associate Hip Hop with what you see on MTV in the name of hip hop, you are witness to another twist in the equation of capitalism with its profit-minded commodification of the latest subversions intersecting with racism, sexism, and homophobia. If you still see Hip Hop as a people's movement occurring in the clubs, streets, or wherever there's funky music playing, then you might credit the way it has brought people of all races and virtually all nations together to dance. It is the godfather of Hip Hop, Afrika Bambaataa, who is credited for bringing white people into acceptance within hip hop culture.

It is also Bambaataa who, upon unifying graffiti artists, MC's, b-boys and girls, and DJ's as one culture, added the fifth element, which is knowledge. What is knowledge in all of its expansiveness when one isn't knowledgeable of oneself? If we remain incognizant of the lens through which we perceive and organize the world around us, then what kind of messages are we propagating? Judging by the work Bambaataa has done in co-opting a street gang into a dance and music-oriented organization, in his anti-Apartheid work, and in mixing diverse cultures of music into one electro-funk danceable sound, I think it is this self-contextualizing and spiritual self-knowing that Bambaataa is advocating.

Another impressive example of the power of embodiment to affect change in powerful institutions is the use of toyi-toyi in South Africa to end the system of legalized racial segregation known as Apartheid. One activist is quoted online as saying, "The toyi-toyi was our weapon. We did not have the technology of warfare, the tear gas and tanks, but we had this weapon." The documentary "Amandla" exposes the ferociousness of truth, which intimidated the police force, by means of chanting and dance taken full force into the streets.

I'd venture to say that it is white people, on the whole, who fail to utilize dance/movement as an instrument for dismantling the white domination system, or even for investigating their own cultural and racial identities. I think that both agendas can take

place within many dance forms and contexts, utilizing creativity to innovate new manifestations that derive meaning for each of us. I myself am admittedly still in this process of determining what context I need to create in order to fulfill my life purpose as it relates to dance and my community. Concert dance is a context in which plenty of white people have access and are qualified, and are at home. Why is it that, despite so much talk about cultural diversity, identity, and social activism in dance these days, so few white dancers take up the task of digging in and excavating their own white identities for the cause of social justice? The following are my guesses as to why:

< Issues of culture or race don't seem particularly important if you are relatively oblivious to the current state of racism, being someone who is far less negatively affected by it than people seen as non-white. There is a sense of complacency.

< The intensity of what has been done in the name of race is overwhelming and horrific. Whiteness, underneath the glossy mask, as we all know, is hideously shameful, making many of us want to run from it. Many feel compelled to distance themselves from racism, whether temporally- as something that happened in the past- or spatially- as something that exists in *other* neighborhoods and nations.

< The current institutionalized state of racism leaves many individuals, as well as groups, baffled as to how they might change systems that are so seemingly monolithic.

< One of the seemingly worst things a white person could be accused of is being racist. If you are doing work in terms of race and referring to whiteness, people may determine that you are yourself a racist or white supremacist.

The reality is that every human being living in a paradigm so inundated by race systems is inherently racist, not only some white people, and not only white people. When we censor our words and expressions, striving to not be racist -when I assure you we all already are- the effect is not unlike putting a band-aid on your finger when we all are suffering from internal bleeding. I am taking that stance that in order to be anti-racist, you have to fearlessly talk about and explicitly expose what you see, feel, suspect, know, or have observed regarding the race system.

Several theorists have argued that writing and speaking in terms of race, as is practiced in Critical Whiteness, can reify its power as a concept, perpetuating the categorical and essentialist thinking we are trying to transcend. This seems to be the

general consensus among the masses, especially of white people, who avoid talking about racism altogether. Outspoken anti-racist activist and writer Tim Wise refers to this habit and colorblind policy that masks the continuation of racial inequity with notions of having transcended race as Post-racial Liberalism. He argues for deeper color-consciousness in both public and private practice as a more authentic and effective means of equalizing the disparities maintained between whites and people of color in the U.S. today.

It is recognized within the field of Critical Whiteness that “...color-blind racial ideology has combined with the transparency of white identity and white privilege to create a new set of racial understanding for white Americans. Within this new racial discourse, race no longer ‘matters’” and “....the prescription for dealing with racial issues is not to ‘see’ race and claim that ‘everyone is the same.’ In other words, race is defined as an illegitimate topic for conversation (Doane.)”

Of course, in the realm of art, the more illegitimate and taboo, the better. Since when are dance artists afraid to physically demonstrate what most people are unwilling to talk about? Why not allow our racialized bodies to utilize symbolism and speak metaphorically and vulnerably through movement?

This past semester, I had the privilege of collaborating with three other dancers to create a dance I call *Impermanent Identity Score*. The idea was to explore and embody our identities- from names we’ve been called, including ethnic and/or racial labels to how we identify ourselves on a spiritual, religious, or cosmological level. To account for the complexity, hybridity, shifting nature, or Buddhist notion of impermanence in terms of our identities, we improvised, based on a score and structure. The structure involved pairings of a speaker and mover, both improvising; a circle in which we ran the circumference, danced inside of, or read from outside; solo gestures related to our identities; and a choreographed phrase built out of our individual gestures. On performance night I threw in a plain white mask and white dress, which we passed around or picked up as we had the impulse, which for me represented whiteness as an identity we all have to or get to wear at one time or another. The score consisted of the words written that we spontaneously spoke, reading them from the pieces of paper upon which we’d done the initial writing exercises, listing names we’d been called and describing our cosmological beliefs.

Despite relatively few rehearsals, the dance turned out to be quite satisfying in the ironic ways that the spoken labels and transcendental notions landed against or with embodied gestures and movement, sometimes masked by or wearing whiteness. The improvisational element allowed for unexpected realizations and freshness in every run of the piece, while the score and structure somehow ensured profound and significant content. I provide this account as one preliminary example of how we might approach dancing Critical Whiteness, and while I offer this score to anyone interested in using it, I suspect that there are countless ways of visiblizing whiteness through movement.

I would like to interject at this point, however, to emphasize the importance for dancers and movers to do their homework: reading books and articles, listening to speeches, watching documentaries, engaging in dialogue, observing media portrayals, and contemplating these matters. Beyond the focus of critical whiteness, it would be potentially dangerous to over-look works written and executed in the name of anti-racism, cultural studies, and post-colonialism. Without becoming familiar with what's already been articulated, white folks in particular are prone to any number of nasty unconscious habits that, despite good intentions, could easily have a negative or opposing effect.

My own humbling introduction to the mass of information regarding white dominance arose from within a West African dance and percussion company I was dancing with. Although the company was is directed by an artist born and raised in Guinea, West Africa, the majority of the dancers and musicians in the group were white Americans who were quite oblivious to and ignorant about matters of racism, white privilege, and cultural appropriation. Despite our love and respect for the ingenious vitality of this music and dance, was it possible that we were perpetuating the power of white privilege in our naive performed embodiments of an African culture we so freely chose to over-identify with?

Although the race dialogues that ensued in this predominately white African dance company marked the beginning of my confrontations with an ambiguous identity and status as a white dancer of Africanist forms in a racist country, I continued to avoid the specific topic of whiteness and field of critical whiteness until very recently.

I resigned from the company for a time, opposed to the idea of misrepresenting Africa or whitewashing yet another art form, appropriated from a more meaningful context. I continued to practice various African dance styles in classes, as it seems I'm

unable to maintain a state of psycho-spiritual well-being without it. My own dancing, in certain contexts, became very awkward for a period, stifled by what is referred to as “white guilt” and disgust of my whiteness. I experienced an identity crisis, through which I am discovering my self and purpose in this body on a more profound and honest level. While the idea of becoming an awkward dancer or having an identity crisis may not sound appealing, I strongly urge others to embark on the journey of whiteness deconstruction not only for the higher social cause but in order to become more human.

The Buddhist saying, “**the only way out is through**,” that writer Brenda Dixon-Gottschild shares in her introduction to The Black Dancing Body is a crucial guiding philosophy for confronting racism. It assures us that there is no other option than to break the pattern of avoidance and embark on the grueling journey that, in this case, entails facing one’s whiteness in a world so grotesquely affected by white dominance. There’s a lot of irony in the use of racial categories as a way as a way of getting to know who we *really* are. I think it’s safe to say that white folks aren’t the first to utilize this method.

I recently began creating a dance piece that I initially envisioned as a highly choreographed Afro-fusion dance piece. Given that all of the dancers whom were interested and available were white, it seemed like an opportunity to more pointedly investigate our whiteness. Our approach began as what could be dubbed as postmodern. We began by journaling about incidents from our own lives in which our whiteness was a very vivid issue, which we proceeded to share with one another and discussed. Themes that emerged included the desire to take care of and love black children... and men, the desire to live among diversity, the romanticization of more “traditional” cultures, and distrust of white people. In our first rehearsal, while describing a rather intense interaction one of the dancers had experienced, she commented that it was as if the word “white” was written on her forehead.

As you may have guessed, the word “white” will be written on our foreheads when we perform this dance of whiteness. While non-white peoples and groups are consistently distinguished as Japanese *this*, Native–American *that*, black or Malaysian artist so-n-so, how often are white people presented as “European-American” or “white”? To point out this habit of universalizing white or of European descent as the “norm” in dance

performance, no matter what the content of the piece, I invite white choreographers to explicitly state their privileged white status when presenting work. This simple act of re-contextualizing our dancing will hopefully reframe it in such a way that we will actually notice what we have taken for granted as standard. Naming whiteness in dance will enable us to notice our unconscious biases that continue to value Eurocentric dance forms and contexts (such as concert dance) or place everything else in a category of otherness.

As we begin to uncover in whiteness the cause of dis-ease that plagues not only black, Latino, Asian, native, and Middle-Eastern populations, but all people- white people included, and embody these discoveries, silences will be broken. Those silent forces that feed on our fears, complacency, and shame to keep a horrific, unjust system in place can be rendered visible through dance and movement. The possibilities are endless. Mistakes are inevitable, and provide the experience necessary to proceed more consciously.

As Robert Jensen articulates, “....in our hearts we are broken by the injustice and division.” Let us have the courage of love to embark on this journey into whiteness, to expose it from the inside out, so we can really see what we are working with and progressively heal our fractured humanity.