Approaches to Ethnography

Analysis and Representation in Participant Observation

EDITED BY Colin Jerolmack
AND Shamus Khan

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Chapter 6

Embodiment

A Dispositional Approach to Racial and Cultural Analysis

BLACK HAWK HANCOCK

Perhaps we are able to see only that which we are prepared to see, and in our culture, the cost of insight is an uncertainty that threatens our already unstable sense of order and requires a constant questioning of accepted assumptions. (Ralph Ellison 1995: 31)

My book *American Allegory: Lindy Hop and the Racial Imagination* (Hancock 2013) examines the revival within white America of the Lindy Hop, the original Swing dance that emerged out of the ballrooms of Harlem in the late 1920s. It addresses the contradiction between the centrality of African American culture in American society and the simultaneous marginality of African American people. This essay reflects on my own ethnographic experience in order to explicate the relationship between the racial imagination and an embodied approach to ethnography. I reflect back on two key themes—minstrelsy and whitewashing—that emerged out of my commitment to doing embodied ethnography. Drawing on these themes, I demonstrate how using the body as a phenomenological tool opens up new ways to think about both racial classification and cultural practices. I conclude with a discussion of three other

examples of embodied ethnography, as well as some generative remarks on what embodied ethnography offers us as a methodological approach to the study of social life.

Embodied Ethnography and the Racial Imagination

Embodied ethnography requires that we develop practical knowledge to understand our world. Because practical knowledge can be acquired only by putting oneself in the line of fire and subjecting oneself to the social forces under analysis, it cannot come from a detached perspective. Embodied ethnography demands not only a new methodological entry into the world one is studying, but also a new mode of theorizing the body as both a tool of inquiry and a vector of knowledge.[1] This approach requires one to be both a practitioner of a particular art (trade, craft, occupation) and a sociologist, without necessarily being able to remove the one from the other (Hancock 2009).

Embodied ethnography differs from autoethnography in that the latter focuses exclusively on the researcher's personal experience in the field. Autoethnography focuses on the self, knowledge of the self, the dynamics of personal interest, and the investment of one's personal experience. Embodied ethnography, by contrast, is not about the meaning of personal participation. Rather, it uses 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 through observation alone (Fine and Hancock 2016). In this way, embodied ethnography also differs from traditional participant observation, as the processes

1. This approach follows Wacquant's reworking of Bourdieu. For an explanation of how Wacquant explicates his own radicalization of Bourdieu's "habitus" see my article "Taking Loïc Wacquant into the Field" (Hancock 2009). See also Wacquant 2015.

of immersion and conversion that the embodied approach affords enable us to unearth the practical knowledge—that is, the skill set, or *disposition*, of knowing how to do something—of the phenomenon in question, which often remains unspoken. In this way embodied ethnography resonates with what Pierre Bourdieu defines as "participant objectivation"—a methodological approach to comprehending a social world through its practices, while simultaneously maintaining one's reflexive knowledge and commitment to seeing the world as a sociologist (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 68).

Embodied ethnography also differs from Paul Stoller's (1997) "sensuous scholarship," despite their surface similarities. Sensuous scholarship shares one of the aims of carnal sociology in that they both seek to move beyond treating the body as a text to be deciphered and instead incorporate the sensing body—the smells, tastes, textures, and sensations of the agent—into scholarly practices, representations, and descriptions. However, sensuous scholarship retains an outsider perspective on the issue of embodiment. The methodological approach of sensuous scholarship offers no understanding of how people feel, no account of how emotions and senses shape everyday embodiment and comportment in relation to their existing conditions, and no descriptive resources to provide an explanation of how embodiment animates social conduct and structures social relations.

The case in question here, dance, is an embodied, nonlinguistic cultural form that cannot be fully understood from the outside. Dance is an art that is learned, understood, and expressed through the body. In order to acquire this dispositional knowledge, I could not simply watch and ask questions about the Lindy Hop. I had to reach a point where I could perform the art as a dancer. Therefore, 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, improvising 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 re-formed and cultivated into an educated fluid dancing body. As with 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. Only by embodying the dance could I become a dancer, but also, and more important, could I see and comprehend the details and subtleties that remain invisible to those who have not acquired that practical knowledge. Only through an embodied ethnographic approach could I have come to understand the anxiety and tension that Lindy Hop dancers undertake consciously or unconsciously and the ways that race gets refracted through culture in learning how to dance. Focusing on the embodiment of dance allowed me to see the ways embodiment becomes a tool for interpreting and understanding the world.

In order to address the issues of race, culture, and embodiment within the world of the Lindy Hop, 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 do cultural forms become both expressions of racial groups and mechanisms of social closure that separate and strengthen those very racial classifications to which those forms are ascribed? Finally, and most important, how does the world of Lindy Hop allegorically characterize the way that race is played out in American society?

As Ralph Ellison drew our attention to the question of American identity, he captured the historical complexities of the white engagement with African American culture, which has never been straightforward; in fact, this interaction has been a complex, contradictory, anxiety-riddled process of negotiation by which whites have simultaneously embraced and rejected, desired and disdained, African American culture within the constraints of the dominant racial order (Lott 1995; Rogin 1996; Toll 1974). This anxiety is not

always based on conscious awareness; rather, it mostly exists below the level of consciousness without direct comprehension of how people come to embody cultural forms and perform cultural practices (Bourdieu 2000). This enduring anxiety is at the very basis of racial formations, racial conflicts, and the history of black and white relations in American society.

The racial imagination, the dominant racial categories through which we understand the world, illuminates how cultural practices such as music and dance are understood only after being refracted through the racial categories that come to define them. Filtering our appreciation and interpretation through the racial imagination forces us to think through essentializing categories that conflate competence, culture, and race. An analysis of the racial imagination enables us to understand the underlying unquestioned racialized commonsense through which whiteness and blackness are interpreted (white men can't jump, blacks are naturally rhythmic, etc.). This orientation shapes not only the expectations and assumptions about people's competences and abilities based on race, but also the very ways that people are disposed to act based on those racial differences. As a result, the racial imagination becomes embodied and enacted through cultural practices and unreflexive dispositions, as is the case with dance and the Lindy Hop.

An exploration of the racial imagination reveals two dominant modes of embodiment—minstrelsy and whitewashing—in which culture, bodies, and race all intersect. Minstrelsy can be defined as white people intentionally performing the role of black people, drawing on historical stereotypes and mythologies of the black body as innately and essentially exotic, sexual, expressive, and rhythmic. This sense of blackness is constructed as exterior to whiteness, whereas the white body is marked by its rationality, restraint, and rigidity. By contrast, whitewashing, whether intentional or unintentional, is the erasure or omission of the racial identity associated with the history of a particular cultural practice or cultural form. By illuminating these particular modes of engagement as modes of

embodiment, we can come to see how racial domination is produced and operates not only through conscious intentions and actions, but also through the enactment of embodied cultural forms in everyday life, as black and white bodies perform, consciously and unconsciously, notions of blackness and whiteness.

Even in today's "multicultural" and "colorblind" society, this racial logic continues to define the interactions and cultural-racial politics of white society. As a result, white interaction with African American culture must be situated against the larger sociohistorical context of racial domination in order to break from the liberal myth that cultural appreciation serves to generate social equality. White attraction to, identification with, and enactment of African American cultural forms are often undertaken either in an explicit resistance to white societal norms and aesthetics (e.g., gangsta rap) or implicitly as a symbol of multicultural unity (e.g., the Lindy Hop). In either case, cross-cultural embodiment, in the extremes of minstrelsy and whitewashing, ultimately works to affirm and perpetuate racial domination, despite conscious intentions, through the simultaneous marginalization and domination of African American people. As a result, this cultural engagement and cultural embodiment not only oppresses African Americans, but also simultaneously (and ironically) dominates whites themselves as they remain trapped in their own essentialized whiteness. Had I relied on discursive narratives or on larger structural/cultural explanations, I would have missed the ways that race becomes embedded and embodied within us, defining the very racial logic, practices, and social relations that generate and reproduce racial domination in twenty-first-century American society.

Minstrelsy

Despite their billings as images of reality, these Negroes of fiction are counterfeits. They are projected aspects of an internal symbolic process through which, like a primitive tribesman dancing himself into the group frenzy necessary for battle, the White American prepares himself emotionally to perform a social role. (Ellison 1995: 27–28)

White engagement with African American culture generates minstrelsy, by which the desire to perform African American culture "authentically," or correctly, leads to a caricature of African Americans in style, mannerisms, or motion. While this new incarnation of minstrelsy has shed its blackface paint, it continues to be a racial ventriloquism that is at once a racial embrace and a racial distancing, enabling whites to work out their attraction to African American culture while simultaneously distancing themselves from blackness through an implicit degradation. This new form of minstrelsy, or what we may call "neo-minstrelsy," works through the racial imagination that has normalized meanings of blackness and whiteness, enabling whites to enact their understandings of African American dancing without self-conscious reflection on the symbolic meanings generated by their performances. As a result, neo-minstrelsy is able to continue its historical function of maintaining racial essentialism and racial domination not only in the staged performance of the dance, but in everyday social dancing, in the cultivation of the dance through teaching, and in the more general ways that whites conceptualize how African Americans act. The embodied ethnographic approach provided a visceral awareness of the ways that aesthetic/cultural practices mask the social and political mechanisms that structure racial dominance. In addition, through an embodied ethnographic account, I was able to bring to light the modalities of social interaction, often existing below the level of consciousness, that reveal the arbitrary and conventional nature of all social relations.

As a mode of engagement, minstrelsy is not something over and above the dance or something added to it; rather, it is constitutive of the dance's embodiment and enactment. By excavating the implicit understandings of blackness and whiteness that come through in the performance of the dance, we are able to examine these

embodiments in action. The following vignette is reconstructed from my field notes:

"Sing, Sing, Sing," the signature Benny Goodman dance number, came booming over the PA system, and almost instinctively all the dancers flocked to the center of the dance floor. They congregated in a "jam" circle, a ring of people forming a showcase space where dancers strut and perform their flashiest and most complicated tricks for the audience. One after another, couples burst into the center of the circle and tried to outduel each other for the status of best dancers. As the song is lightning fast, the couples had only a short time to dazzle and impress the onlookers. As I stood amid the crowd, taking in the spectacle of twists and turns, one particularly admired couple leaped into the circle and captured everyone's attention. They immediately began to execute extremely complicated moves. After a few partnered moves, the couple broke apart and performed individualized steps; the male dancer paraded around the female by strutting and waving his hands, while the female dancer started into the "crazy legs," where the woman wobbles her legs as if to appear out of control. The crowd went wild over this display, and instantly another couple jumped into the circle to outdo them and earn the applause for themselves. One after another, couples entered this self-constructed fishbowl of performance, seeking the attention and acclaim of the dance community; as couples attempted bolder and more ostentatious moves, the dance became more and more theatrical. The crowd's expectations rose with each improvisation. Yet the more ostentatious and burlesque the Lindy Hop becomes in these "jams," it only seems to garner more mutual enthusiasm, respect, and applause among the dancers.

Removing the burnt-cork greasepaint, which defined the black mask of minstrelsy, makes it harder to document these caricatured performances of what whites imagine African Americans to be like; minstrelsy is no longer so explicit. As a result, I was able

to understand, as an embodied ethnographer, that we must be hypersensitive to the mode of engagement that defines this new minstrelsy and to understand how it may go unnoticed by others. Whereas the stereotyped language and racialized speech of the minstrel stage shows, such as racialized songs and poems, provided easy access to documenting the minstrel performance, today's minstrelsy continues to signify racial difference without those explicit forms. While these cross-cultural engagements can appear merely literal, we can also read the visual vocabulary of these performances as enactments of stereotypes of African Americans as wild, primitive, and out of control. As these notions of blackness are worked out as vehicles for personal and group expression, they become over-the-top spectacles of racial performance undertaken within the controlled and localized community of the Lindy Hop scene, serving to reinscribe racial essentialism.

While this minstrelsy is enacted through imitation, it is also cultivated through teaching the dance. This was apparent to me many times when I was working as a performer.

When I worked for a Lindy Hop performance company, we were often hired to give performances and teach dance lessons to middle and high school students. One engagement took us to a wealthy all-white high school in the north suburbs of Chicago. The owner of the company had hired me to assist her in two short dance workshops for the school drama class. We first did a demonstration of the Lindy Hop, and then we were to teach the students a short lesson in partner moves and a few individual jazz steps. After showing them the basic step and a couple of turns, the company's owner moved on to the individual steps. She said to the class, "I want all the guys to pay attention to me. Girls, you can relax for a moment. Okay, now I want the guys to do a 'pimp walk.' Do you guys know what a pimp is? And do you know how a pimp walks? I'll show you." (The owner, who was a slender white female, hunched over and started to swing her right arm from side to side as she lazily strutted across

the room, leaning to one side in a mimic of the "pimp" stereotype.) "Now guys, I want you to do it like this; make sure that the girls see you strutting your stuff, so they check you out. Show them how cool you are. So try it, just pretend you're a pimp." She turned to the girls. "Now girls, when the guys do their thing, I want you to do what's called a fishtail." (She bent over and started to swivel her hips, walking backward in lunging steps.) "And girls, when you do this, I want you to really stick it out and give them something to look at. While the girls do that, I want the guys to pimp walk around them and check them out—really show your stuff, guys, and girls, I want you to check them out . . . get ready, I'll count you in with the music." The students were thrilled and took to the steps without missing a beat, as if they were veteran dancers.

As they acted out these parodies, the visual image of the hypersexualized pimp and the fishtailing of the women's posteriors served as titillating entertainment for the high school students. I had to wonder what myths of blackness were being reinscribed within the safe confines of this elite high school auditorium. As this dance workshop was unfolding before me—and I watched these youngsters enact the steps according to the visuals we had provided them—I wondered if they were making a connection in their minds to a racial other, absent from the room but implicitly there as they enacted these movements with gleeful abandon. Since the students so easily grasped the movements, I had to wonder if this visual imagery was already socialized into them, already buried in their subconscious as a perception of how black folks are supposed to move. The minstrelsy that circulates throughout the Lindy Hop was not just occurring in the elite spaces of the jam session. It was finding its way through all modes of enactment, even in the teaching of the dance. While these exaggerated and overdone stereotypes were being offered up by the instructor, their easy embrace suggested that these myths of blackness were already somewhat in circulation, merely needing someone to activate them.

When considering minstrelsy in relation to the Lindy Hop, we must examine the ways that the dance is inculcated with a series of racial mythologies implicit in its movements. The "twist-twist," the defining female movement of the Lindy Hop, is an all-encompassing bodily rotation that emphasizes the hips, thighs, pelvis, and feet. The female dancer rotates her hips back and forth in a twisting motion, which serves as both a dance step and a ready position for the next move. This twisting motion emanates a particular stylized and sexual dynamic by emphasizing the buttocks and hips in its gyrating display. Mastering the twist-twist is essential in order to develop a feeling for the dance and to capture its aesthetic. The twist-twist movement also allows individualization and stylization; no two women will twist exactly alike, as each tries to stamp her signature or personality on the defining movement. Yet, as with all art forms, the fundamentals are always the most elusive and difficult things to master, requiring constant practice and revision.

Late one afternoon in July, at the Herräng dance camp in Herräng, Sweden, I was taking an advanced Lindy Hop class from Angela Andrews, a black British woman who is one of the leaders and revivalists of the dance in England. We were working on the basics of Lindy Hop, including the twist-twist, when suddenly Angela started yelling, bringing the class to an abrupt halt: "Stop! Stop! Stop! Okay, all right. I didn't want to have to say this, but I have to. Ladies, what is this?" She demonstrated the follower's basic step in an overly dramatic motion, with her buttocks way out behind her as if she were about to fall over. "All right, I'll tell you. It's ugly. In your face, it's ugly! Be ladies! This is not ladylike. Okay, now I didn't want to say this, but look, I know a lot of you are trying to copy me and stick your bums out when you dance, but it's ugly; don't do it. Look, this is God-given. I am not trying to stick it out. Dance with your bum under you; don't stick it out! Be a lady when you dance. Don't try and make your body do something it can't do."

The class stood there stunned, uncertain what to make of this. What did she mean? "What is she saying?" one woman whispered to me, as I stood there, speechless. Had she just said what I thought she said? I was shocked; the women were embarrassed and confused. Wasn't this what they had been taught as long as they'd been doing the dance? Wasn't this how the step looked in the old black-and-white movies? Didn't this step require them to extend their buttocks out in a twisting motion? How or why would the women do anything else if this was what they were taught? Here we were in the backwoods of Sweden, learning Lindy Hop in a class with some of the best dancers from around the world, and everyone looked around at each other like they had never heard or even thought of this before. What exactly was the problem? Was it simply that they were sticking their butts out too far, or was there something more?

Angela was pointing out something so subtle, so implicit and unspoken, that they could not see it. Yet it was so offensive and significant to her that she had reached her boiling point. Ostensibly this was about mere body movements, not the movements' literal meaning. But what was really happening was that Angela was treading on taboo ground, articulating the unspoken racial tension of the Lindy Hop—the minstrelsy that pervades and dominates its revival. The ugliness that she pointed out came not just in body positioning, but in the minstrelsy that posture signified. It was the representation that had angered Angela, the imitation of black physiology according to how whites envision it. Its ugliness came not in white bodies dancing a black dance, but in the grotesque exaggeration of the body in motion. This was not about the superiority or the aesthetic of the white versus the black body; it was about dancing within the limits of your own body, not in an imitation of what the white racializing imagination perceives that a black female body must look like.

Later that week when I interviewed Angela, asking her if she saw this as a problem, she replied:

> Oh, I do think it's a problem. Nobody wants to talk about it; no one ever does, because when you do . . . But I had to say something. I mean, it really is offensive in this white perception of black physiology that they are trying to do but won't acknowledge. Look at the girls, they're trying to dance with their asses way out, in what they think is the way black people dance! But look, I don't stick it out. I've got a big bum, but I don't stick it out; it does that on its own. But for some of these girls, it looks so outrageous, so I had to confront them on that. I don't even think they realize on a conscious level how offensive that really is.

Here was the underlying problem of the Lindy Hop revival that was never articulated, never confronted, never even spoken, yet constantly present: this white obsession with black physiology, an unspoken and maybe even an unconscious mimesis in whites' performance of the dance that is illuminated here in Angela's words. It is here in this confrontation that the white racializing imagination is made visible, as it produces and cultivates minstrel performances that are symbolically racist—even if unknowingly. The performance of the dance, the way it was done, represents something that whites have normalized and accepted. Minstrelsy is subtly at work, and yet it more often than not escapes whites' consciousness, since that is not their intention. This contradiction was made apparent when I followed up with one of the women from Angela's class later that day. When I inquired about how she felt about what happened when Angela interrupted class, she responded:

> I really don't understand what she was so mad about. I don't think anybody meant anything by it. We were just trying to

> dance like her. I wasn't trying to stick my butt out. I mean, how are you supposed to learn how to dance with style if you don't model the teachers you are taking the classes from? They are the experts, right?

The minstrelsy being illuminated here is a performance that is socialized, not just last week, but from the very beginning, as it is woven into the fabric of our racial imagination and the culture we inherit. This was not a class of beginners; these were advanced dancers from around the world who had danced for years and traveled all the way to Sweden to attend one of the world's best Lindy Hop camps.

Even when whites weren't dancing, the racial engagement with African American culture was present. It was not just the dance alone that reproduced notions of racial essentialism; it was circulating through everyday culture and affected all the African American cultural forms that whites engaged in. The following anecdote reconstructed from my field notes proved useful to the extent that it was not just the Lindy Hop that was at issue here, but rather all forms of African American culture that whites engage:

Outside the building where the workshop was being held, I leaned against the wall and watched the dancers return from their lunch break. I was talking to Steven, an African American instructor, when two white dancers in their early twenties walked by. When they saw Steven, they greeted him with a dramatic "Whasssssup," the colloquial greeting recently made popular in a national Budweiser advertisement featuring several twenty-something African Americans. Steven laughed and greeted the two men as they passed him. Then he turned to me and said, "I understand it—and it's cool that they want to be a part of it—but it's just so much sometimes." These two young men were prime examples of neo-minstrelsy, staring us in the face. I asked Steven if the exchange had bothered him. He replied,

"This is my job. This is their party; this is not my party. But I do what I have to do because I'm a professional, and this is my job." I asked, "Is everything okay? You look a little shaken all of a sudden." He looked at me and said, "They kill it for me. No, I don't even want to go there, I don't even want to go there, I can't."

This sense that all African American cultural forms are enacted without people recognizing the significance of their actions was something brought to light in my interviews. A Lindy Hop master who had been one of the principal revivalists described his feelings about the sometimes awkward outcomes when whites participated in the dance:

> For most people it becomes artificial. You don't believe it at all, really. It's the same sometimes when you see people that dress up in their zoot suits and things; most people can't wear them, it just hurts when they come into the room—they can't even walk in them. I think you need a certain attitude to carry such a thing, and it's the same with the dance: you need a little bit of an attitude to carry off such a thing, to bring it to a certain level, and most people, they don't have that attitude or that inside feeling for it. It's only when you have that attitude that it can become part of you. If you look at it critically, at least to me, it's a little bit pathetic. It can be like a big masquerade, something like that—something artificial, I can't touch it—it's something false—it's a bit off, but I don't know if you can put your finger on it. It's a lot of big hats and costumes walking around, and there's no one inside them, really. But then you see that some people are able to do it, and it's normally the black people. It seems to be their thing, because for them it's so natural.

This sense of something happening in the dance, something that cannot be articulated, seemed to me to be the very issue of the way

the racial imagination generated these distorting modes of embodiment. While it exists, most often below the level of consciousness, it continues to shape and inform the ways that whites embody the dance.

As Ellison's remarks echo through the cross-cultural embrace of the Lindy Hop, the minstrel, the mask, the imitation, and the question of what identity is continue to confound our understandings and enactments of what race is. Only by embodying the dance myself and exploring the ways that race became internalized through cultural practices could I have come to focus on how whites embodied the dance in particular ways. This was not something that could be revealed through interviews; rather, it was by understanding the production of culture in action that I came to realize how and why race matters the way it does, in the "two-fold naturalization" of both racial categories and the racializing logic of the world around us. Race resides within our dispositions and orientations as well as in the world so as to appear transparent and natural (Bourdieu 2000: 187).

Whitewashing

Being "highly pigmented" as the sociologists say, it was our Negro "misfortune" to be caught up associatively in the negative side of this basic dualism of the white folk mind, and to be shackled to almost everything it would repress from conscience and consciousness. (Ellison 1995: 213–214)

As Ellison remarks, it is the symbolism of blackness and whiteness that shapes and influences the ways we interpret race, whether consciously or unconsciously. The conflation of blackness with negative traits and whiteness with positive traits leads to an either conscious or unconscious repression. One way this repression of blackness can occur is through the process of whitewashing. Whitewashing, whereby black cultural forms are severed

from their origins, is another mode of engagement that defines the white embrace of African American culture (Lott 1995). Whereas minstrelsy is a caricatured performance of an allegedly black cultural disposition, whitewashing is its antithesis, defined by its underexpression and inhibition by which whites maintain their distance from blackness (Gabriel 1998). While these poles of engagement have nothing in common in terms of their presentation, their effects are the same, in that they serve as mechanisms to reinscribe racial essentialism and racial domination. Through whitewashing, white society is able to indulge in its desire for and attraction to African American culture, while at the same time, through assimilation, it does not have to confront blackness and the consequences of its embrace.

As a way of embodying the Lindy Hop, whitewashing occurs through two forms of distancing: first, through the failure to actively acknowledge the historical origins of the dance in context and, second, through the inhibition of expression that characterizes the cultural logic of the dance. This dual process of whitewashing (historical-emotional) has nothing to do with the capacity of white people to perform or excel at the Lindy Hop. It has everything to do, rather, with the consequences of white engagement with African American cultural forms and with how this embodiment changes the cultural logic and aesthetic to fit the needs and tastes of white society. This assimilation, when taken to its fullest extent, removes all signs, traces, and articulations of blackness, resulting in a complete racial and cultural erasure of African Americans, as these cultural forms become normalized and canonized within white society. This whitewashing can be seen in the following description reconstructed from my field notes of the "Khakis Swing" ad by the Gap clothing company that ran during the spring and summer of 1998:

As horns began blowing the tune "Jump Jive and Wail," the Brian Setzer Orchestra's cover of the classic Louis Prima song, around

ten couples of white twenty-something dancers, all clad in khaki pants, began dancing in front of a stark, empty white background. As the music played, they jumped, twisted, spun, and performed acrobatic lifts and tricks, all caught up in the movement and pleasure of swing dancing. This flurry of passion lasted a brief fifteen seconds, and the Gap commercial ended with the lone words "Khakis Swing."

This group of attractive, fashionable people provoked a feeling of viewer participation—as if the audience could be there, too, dancing away with their friends. Yet nearly all Lindy Hoppers I spoke with who had seen the ad were disappointed and outraged that it didn't feature "real" Lindy Hoppers like themselves who could really dance, not just "models." Most dancers felt that the commercial distorted the dance for the public because it didn't portray the dancing "like we do it," or "authentically."

What none of the Lindy Hoppers called into question in their critique was the racial politics of the images presented; all the dancers were white, set against a white background, with white musicians performing the music. The "distortion" for them had nothing to do with race; it was not that this was the complete erasure of any connection with African American culture but that it did not portray "the dancing" properly. While missing the racial dynamic at play, these dancers could discern what the "proper" movements were as opposed to the choreography the ad showcased. These layers of whiteness (the dancers, the music, the setting itself—an empty space with whiteness as the background) overdetermined the image as a complete absence of context, which inadvertently mirrored the relationship between white society and African American culture. This stark acontextual representation becomes the epitome of the whitewashing of African American culture; without acknowledgment or recognition, African American cultural forms like the Lindy Hop have become the ahistorical backdrop for white pleasure and white consumption.

I interviewed Ryan Francois (a black British Lindy Hop master instructor, dancer, and choreographer who is considered one of the three best male Lindy Hop dancers in the world) on what he thought of the Gap ad. Ryan spoke candidly:

> What was the catalyst that actually made this a worldwide phenomenon? It was a commercial, a Gap commercial. The thing that is so powerful about that commercial is the fact that we got young, wholesome-looking, lily-white Americans, clean-cut right down to their haircuts, clean image, sweet and wholesome, acceptable to the white community. Slap! Bam! Instantly the white world is happy, we have a craze on our hands. Louis Prima and "Jump Jive and Wail" and this white guy pulls it out, Brian Setzer . . . It was so clean I thought of that ad as almost being Nazi; it was not seeing it in its approach, it was so "white people are beautiful and this is a clean thing that they do" that it was scary. If that made Swing extremely successful on a world scale—I mean, they show this in London, across the world—what does that say about them and what they consider an acceptable image about what they enjoy about the planet? It says to me that in an era where we're supposed to have dealt with these problems, we are still in a period where we're more comfortable with seeing this white Nazi image of white Gap commercial dancers. If you look at the top three teachers of this dance, they're black: me, Steven [Mitchell], and Frankie [Manning].

Ryan's comments were not the only ones I encountered that made race and representation the central issue. Another African American dancer and professional dance choreographer I interviewed expressed her concern over media representation and the Lindy Hop accordingly:

> It is hard not to be disheartened; you don't want to be paranoid and think, "Oh, God, white people are taking over

everything." But it seems so systematic with everything going on. You look at the Gap ad, and the movies, and the ways that black dancers don't get any publicity or airtime. I choreographed this commercial for Eddie Bauer that was all Lindy Hop, and I insisted that I wanted at least some black dancers in it. We put so much time in on that and it was barely ever shown. It had more black dancers than any other commercial out there that had Swing going on. I didn't think about it, really, until you asked, but I mean it makes more sense to me now.

It is these dominant representations of Lindy Hop that highlight the tension between the origins of the dance and its current representation circulating in a global context. With little or no visibility, the African American influences and historical connections with the dance become obscured. Whether intentional or not, this lack of representation leads to a sense that the Lindy Hop is exclusively a white cultural form.

It is not simply the media that whitewash African American culture through their representations. The Lindy Hop is also whitewashed in its enactment by Lindy Hop dancers themselves. The following anecdote taken from my field notes represents the performance of the dance at its height of popularity in Chicago. This was a rare performance for the Jazz Rhythms night at Dance Chicago, a five-week-long dance festival featuring a panorama of jazz dance styles and showcasing some of its best talent.

As the lights faded and the audience clamor tapered off into silence, I could feel my heart beat in my chest. My stomach churned with nausea as I waited for the music to begin and the curtain to rise. I heard the cheers of the swing kids in the balcony above us as they anticipated our friend's performance. Here in the crowd of the Athenaeum Theater at the Dance Chicago festival, I was waiting for Big City Swing, one of Chicago's Lindy Hop performance groups, to

perform a Big Apple (various jazz steps taken from the Lindy Hop, danced in a circle with a finale culminating in Lindy Hop partner dancing that is often undertaken at a breathtaking pace). Big Time Swing Time is a commercial dance troupe that sold Lindy Hop performances as entertainment to weddings, corporate parties, and social events. The troupe was performing tonight amid some of the best jazz dancers in the city. Expectations were high for all the Lindy Hop dancers, because while most dancers would have loved to be part of this troupe, it was by invitation and audition only, with only a handful of dancers asked to participate. Here was a prime opportunity for a group of white dancers to show that their engagement with the dance was not some act of minstrelsy, but rather its finest contemporary cultivation of the dance. I opened my program to the description of their performance:

> Big Time Swing Time "Saturday Night Fish Fry" by L. Jordan
>
> With the rediscovery of swing music and social dancing, Lindy Hoppers around the world have maintained strong ties to the dance. It was in the Savoy Ballroom in the '30s and '40s where African American dancers combined traditional African dancing and the Cake Walk of the slave era with the popular dances Ragtime and Charleston. To strut their stuff, the original Lindy Hop troupes would circle up to show off their best jazz steps in a dance called the Big Apple. This is our tribute to those great entertainers.

As Louis Jordan's "Saturday Night Fish Fry" started to play over the speakers, I watched the performance unfold in front of me. The dancers emerged in their bright candy-colored costumes and began to circle around the center of the stage, proceeding to run through a litany of dance steps from the '30s and '40s. Rather than overwhelming the crowd with dynamism and enthusiasm, their lifeless interpretation fell flat, as their tricks failed to muster any spectacle. While the choreography included many of the classic steps,

their performance was sluggish and hesitant as if running at half speed. The frenetic and reckless abandon that marks the Big Apple as a dance was missing. The dancers' steps and figures were recognizable, but their movements were staid, almost a clinical reproduction. My friend, seated next to me, turned to me and laughed, "What's next?" with an eye-rolling look of disappointment. I looked back at him, stunned. This was not a tribute that captured the spirit of the dance. Instead, it was something we wanted to forget. What made this performance any different from the mass-media treatments of the Lindy Hop, as seen in the Gap ad?

The underperformed and inhibited style often displayed in performance was not limited to the subculture of the Lindy Hop; it influenced national productions and live presentations of the dance itself. At its zenith, the Lindy Hop revival became such a popular dance craze that it made it onto the Broadway stage for *Swing! The Musical*. After its run on Broadway, which included Ryan Francois and his partner Jenny Thomas, the show toured without them in the cast. I reconstructed that evening from my field notes:

Tonight we went to see the musical *Swing!* downtown at the Oriental Theater in Chicago. The show is now touring after the craze has faded and the dance has receded back to a small subculture. While this felt like the endnote of the dance, many of us in the Lindy Hop community hoped that as the Broadway show made its way across the country enthusiasm for the Lindy Hop could be drummed up again. The show was so bad I couldn't imagine anyone being interested by it. Unfortunately for the dance, all the dancers on stage, including the two African Americans in the show, were trained ballet dancers. Classically trained dancers move like classically trained dancers, with their stiff upright posturing trying to do a street dance like the Lindy Hop. It was so stiff, so uninspired, so wrong; none of them looked like they were doing anything that closely resembled Lindy Hop. I can't believe that with all the labor the Lindy Hoppers have put into reviving the dance and cultivating it, this is the product that comes out. This is worse than what the very beginning Lindy Hopper could do. I wonder deep down how the audience would've reacted if they'd seen real Lindy Hoppers up there, who could dance the dance with the right movement and enthusiasm—I wonder what a traveling show like that, of this magnitude, could do for the dance?

Afterward I called Ryan Francois to discuss how the show turned out the way it did and what happened to the role he played in it. As he commented:

> Both the choreographer and the director wouldn't have known what a Big Apple is unless we told [them]—however, [the choreographer] represents the establishment of the Broadway community and of course she became the choreographer. This concern with making Lindy Hop palatable for white audiences not only shapes the way it's presented to audiences, but it also reflects the audiences who come to see those performances. And then you remove the one swing couple . . . and there you have it.

In another interview, Ryan commented on how this process of embodiment affected the whole of society:

> Whites come in and assimilate these cultures, break them down so they're much more presentable to white audiences. And pretty soon what you have is a version of the original style which is simplified to meet the needs of white audiences, who have money and culturally still go back to the idea that Glenn Miller is the King of Swing. It maintains the status quo that you don't have to be truly educated as to the reality of what that is—because the reality is that you have to move over to somebody else's culture to understand it.

Assimilating African American cultural forms into white communities by altering their aesthetic and style leads to a whitewashing of the dance from its original context.

This process of whitewashing goes on not only in the performance of the dance, but in everyday social dancing as well. In an interview, Steven Mitchell commented:

> People are not dancing together. They're going through the steps and motions but they are not dancing together. You can't find the pocket by yourself. Together you must find that pocket, that groove—just right in there. Dancing together—trying to do this so people dance together, that's what it's all about. That's why black people don't like it, because there is no connection in it—there's no spirit in it—there's nothing in it now. Mind you, it's better now than it was before. But what's missing in the dance is the love, the love and—I don't know—if love is enough, it's just because love means different things to different people. What's missing is the sensuality. There's no sex in the dance—I think we are afraid of using those kinds of metaphors. There's no passion; it's just been sucked out of it.

This notion of the sexuality of the dance, the blackness of the dance that has been removed is a result of the white mode of engagement that simultaneously desires the dance and yet holds back from its execution. Just as the racial imagination conceptualizes blackness as more sexual, it negotiates that boundary by denying the sexuality of the dance in whites' enactment of it. When asked if this could change, Steven replied:

> If you never felt the blues then it is hard to get people to feel the blues, it is hard to mime something you never felt. Part of the problem is that if you have never felt these things before, it is hard for me to convey to you and have you move to it. I'm not saying it's impossible. Why would I teach if I thought it was pointless? It just takes a long time to get people to get into expressing themselves in ways they are not used to at all. It is one of the biggest challenges, to open up. People are just so constrained and tight. It's like people are scared to express themselves. Once you start hesitating and being self-conscious, then you lose the feeling.

This sense of "feeling" linked to notions of expression is a key element in the way that the dance becomes underexpressed. As indicated earlier, it is not impossible for whites to feel the dance, but unfamiliarity with this type of dance leads to a hesitancy and self-consciousness that prevents dancers from fully engaging the dance.

Since so few images of African American culture or identity accompanied the contemporary formation of the Lindy Hop, I decided to ask the few African American Lindy Hop dancers how they thought this identity shaped the ways that people engaged in the dance. Two close friends and former students of mine, David Stevens and Michelle Boyd, sensed this feeling of racial erasure. One evening after dance class they told me that sometimes they made an effort to go out and dance, less for the pure enjoyment than for the political aspect of representation: "We feel like we need to go out and dance sometimes if for no other reason than just to remind people that there are black people who dance, who do it, so they don't forget that black people do it too, or that it was a black dance. I mean, if we didn't, there wouldn't be any black people out there."

The more the Lindy Hop is whitewashed, the more complete the racial erasure becomes. This ends in a perverse irony: the few African American Lindy Hop dancers learn from white instructors, who are teaching them an African American social dance. When I shared this thought with an African American dancer I met at the Herräng dance camp in Sweden, she agreed that it was one of the dangerous outcomes of white engagement with African American culture. But she offered a way out: "Man, if Puff Daddy made a video

and put a bunch of black dancers in it doing Lindy Hop, and he did it, too—if they saw Puff Daddy doing the Lindy Hop—this place would be overrun with black people. There would be so many of us here that you wouldn't know where to put us." If there were a visible or articulated link to African American culture, this could help prevent the dance from becoming erased from African American consciousness.

By examining the way that whitewashing underexpresses the dance, I saw how we can come to understand both the erasure of the African American cultural influence and history, and the mode of white engagement it fosters. As a result, I realized how notions of race create ambivalence and hesitation, whether subconsciously or consciously, about the ways that race operates within the world of the Lindy Hop. Through an embodied ethnographic approach I not only realized the ways that race informs how people perceive and understand each other culturally; I also came to see how race informs how dancers perceive and understand themselves and others as they dance the Lindy Hop.

Conclusion

By conceptualizing the emptiness of their own whiteness in relation to the natural richness of blackness, whites reinscribe racial essentialism in society, dehistoricize the dance as a cultural formation of a particular era, and conflate race and cultural competence. Thus, it is not only African Americans who are dominated through white cross-cultural engagement; whites themselves are dominated by these racial cosmologies as they are locked within their own essentialized racial identity that prevents them from fully understanding and embodying the dance. Exposing these mechanisms enables us to understand that these are not natural or inherent outcomes, but rather contingent social constructions, opening up possibilities for alternative modes of embodiment.

Without an embodied ethnographic approach, the Lindy Hop may 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. By crossing back and forth from theory to fieldwork, I slowly came to see that what seems innocuous or neutral on the surface has enormous symbolic power when the real effects of racial mythologies continue to go misrecognized. While one can try to understand the racial dynamics of the Lindy Hop cognitively, my own lived experience of these dynamics opened up new insight into the intersections of the body, culture, and race. Learning to dance enabled me to read the body symbolically, and to comprehend what the development of this bodily disposition means within the wider historical context of the white embodiment of African American cultural forms. The result was a novel understanding of how the perpetuation of racial mythology and racial essentialism occurred *without conscious awareness*.

An embodied approach to ethnography allows us to unpack the ways that larger social forces and cultural discourses inscribe themselves on the body, engendering durable habits of thought and action—*dispositions*—that can be so taken for granted that actors may not even be aware of them. In order to reveal these dispositions and understand how they guide social behavior, we must go beyond interviews or situational observations—we must acquire these dispositions ourselves, as I did by learning the Lindy Hop. While I have focused on race and dance in this chapter, the dispositional approach to ethnography has been used to generate new insights across a variety of domains.

For instance, it was only by becoming a forest firefighter that Desmond (2007) was able to debunk his fellow firefighters' claim that they had chosen the job because of its thrills. Rather, Desmond shows that the job chose them—their rural, working-class background conditioned their bodies and minds to be ready and willing to perform gritty, backbreaking labor. Putting one's body on the fire line also requires self-restraint rather than rash action. Wacquant

(2004) seeks to show how one becomes a boxer, or specifically how one comes to embody the "pugilistic habitus," which goes into forging not only the body but also the character of the boxer. His work offers a window onto the ways that the embodiment of boxing, as an activity of ongoing training, cultivates a work ethic that structures the regimes and routines of daily life for men living in the deindustrialized ghetto of South Side Chicago. Mears's (2011) work explores the world of modeling, focusing on the ways that fashion insiders create aesthetic value. It was only by drawing on her own experiences as a model that Mears was able to draw out how the cultural production of racial and gender inequalities occurs in practice. Mears exposes how "the look" that talent scouts desire is *not* a physical quality of models waiting to be "discovered" but rather a social classification that tastemakers can arbitrarily bestow on models they may have decided to promote for other reasons (e.g., their social connections).

The dispositional approach can give the ethnographer a powerful tool for linking micro and macro. It enjoins us to take seriously the participant dimension of participant observation, and it provides a way of conceptualizing and mapping precisely how social structure gets "inside" actors, which is arguably the central task of sociology.

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