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# Activating Whiteness: Racializing the Ordinary in US American Postmodern Dance

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Artistic spaces are activated by the bodies that inhabit them.[1] In the context of United States American dance history, these spaces are shaped by the enduring traces of the choreographers' and performers' race. For decades, dance historians and theorists have demonstrated how modern dance became racially polarized in the United States. Numerous scholarly texts, including Brenda Dixon Gottschild's seminal *Digging the Africanist Presence in American Performance: Dance and Other Contexts* ([1996] 1998) and Susan Manning's influential *Modern Dance, Negro Dance: Race in Motion* (2004), have described the categorical segregation of dancing bodies throughout the development of American dance forms in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries through the mobilization and justification of racist stereotypes. These stereotypes depicted black dancers as extraordinary in their "natural" abilities as performers, yet deficient in Euro-American dance techniques. As Gottschild, Manning, and others have pointed out, this common characterization is rooted in performances of blackface minstrelsy, which supported anti-black racism and anti-abolitionist sentiment by portraying black people as subhuman, insensate, and dangerous.[2] The choreographic traces of minstrelsy are materially and affectively present throughout American dance history: from the popular stages of the nineteenth century, through the on-screen productions of the Hollywood film industry, to the formation of elite and overwhelmingly white arenas of classical, neoclassical, modern, and postmodern dance over and against Negro and black dance. In each of these settings, black dancers and choreographers were often praised for their spectacular and "extraordinary" qualities, particularly their athleticism and sense of rhythm. Although these qualities are often considered admirable attributes for dancers, when they are culturally adhered to blackness they are as implicitly restrictive as they are explicitly laudatory.

Ultimately, this racialized depiction contributed to the stylistic, cultural, and systemic exclusion of black artists from the (white) mainstream of US American dance.[3] This divide between, as Manning puts it, modern dance and Negro dance as a historical foundation of racial exclusion in American dance performance and praxis, accounts for decades of artistic segregation from the early twentieth century to the present day. But while this influential historical perspective accounts for the racialized division between disciplined, trained bodies and extraordinary, untrained bodies, the segregation of these categories does not fully account for the overwhelming whiteness of postmodern dance in America, which largely rejected technical and virtuosic performance. Picking up where Manning left off, this essay explores how the priorities of modern dance shifted away from technical ability just as black dancers and choreographers (such as Dunham and Alvin Ailey) began to be

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recognized as technicians. I suggest that the aesthetics of US American postmodern dance preserved and perpetuated the whiteness of high modernism by twisting the trope of racial exclusion from a focus on trained bodies to a focus on ordinary bodies. The ideological, corporeal, and affective formations of ordinariness afforded by the unmarked whiteness of postmodern artists in the United States in the 1960s and 1970s fundamentally excluded implicitly racialized "extraordinary" and "spectacular" bodies from their movement(s). Although the exclusion of people of color from the mainstream of postmodernism was likely not the intention of the white artists that populated this arena, the notable whiteness of this artistic movement nevertheless indicates the unconscious cultural and choreographic absorption of state racism normalized by the biopolitical regulation of bodies.

The racial segregation of American postmodernism is not a new topic in dance studies, but it is one that compels further consideration. In *Dances that Describe Themselves: The Improvised Choreography of Richard Bull* (2002), Susan Leigh Foster argues that although numerous postmodern artists delved into their work "as an opportunity to contest and overthrow prevailing expectations about dance's meaning," their aesthetic choices "remained inflected with the power dynamics that had privileged white artists for centuries" (2002, 43). In *Judson Dance Theater: Performative Traces* (2006), Ramsay Burt agrees with Foster, but nevertheless strains to describe the segregation of postmodernism as somewhat incidental. Noting the exceptions of Gus Solomons Jr. (who has alluded to involvement in Robert Dunn's workshops) and Gottschild (who performed in Carolee Schneemann's *Meat Joy* (1964)), Burt asserts that African-American dancers avoided the downtown avant-garde simply because it did not have much to offer them. This explanation tacitly places responsibility on those in the margins for not participating in the activities of the center, while offering an alibi to those in the center for their exclusionary orientations. Burt locates the transgressions of racial boundaries in the collaborations among dancers, writers, and musicians including Fred Herko, James Waring, Amiri Baraka (then LeRoi Jones), and Cecil Taylor, but concludes that the artists of Judson Dance Theater were not making connections "between avant-gardism and the politics of race, nor recognizing the need to oppose mechanisms that maintained boundaries in terms of race" (Burt 2006, 130).

Although Burt's historicization teaches us how the racial divisions between artists influenced the orientations of those that either adhered to or contested these boundaries, his argument does not account for the ways in which the Judson performances actively perpetuated the power dynamics described by Foster. These performances enacted a mode of segregation within the artistic and intellectual spaces of American postmodernism that upheld the supremacy of whiteness by reiterating its presumptive ontological facticity; whiteness was unseen, unremarkable, and, above all, ordinary. However, whiteness is not strictly ontological, but phenomenological: shaped by embedded histories of Euro-American colonialism. Following Sara Ahmed, I argue that the space for dance within American postmodernism was shaped by the white bodies that inhabited it, and was thus "oriented 'around' whiteness, insofar as whiteness [was] not seen" within its habitus (2007, 157). As an orienting force and unseen characteristic, whiteness remained unquestioned, and therefore protected, by these choreographic explorations.

The following analyses of two dances that have become representative of American postmodernism, Yvonne Rainer's *Trio A* (1966) and Trisha Brown's *Locus* (1975), mobilize practice-based research[4] and analyses of video documentation to demonstrate how ordinary bodies shape racially exclusive spaces and, in so doing, activate the biopolitical mechanisms of normalization that their choreography allegedly contests. In other words, while these works destabilize the processes through which state sanctioned performances of gender become normalized, they also reinforce the regulation of racialized bodies and spaces. Even as a subject of interest and interrogation, ordinariness shapes the explorations of artistic practices and performances that do not necessarily register as exclusive within spaces oriented around whiteness. By analyzing Rainer and Brown's dances with an awareness of their biopolitical and sociocultural habitus, however, we can tease out the racializing effects



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of the ordinary within the work. I have chosen to focus on *Trio A* and *Locus* because they are considered iconic; as such, they are often reconstructed in the name of preserving the legacies of the choreographers that made them and the artistic movements that they represent. Despite (or perhaps because of) our contemporary interest in reperforming these celebrated dances, we must also ask what bodies they remember, what histories they hail, and what sociopolitical dynamics they revivify through performance.

## The Racial Biopolitics of Radical Ordinariness

The concept of the ordinary body examined herein has been produced through the intersections of dance history and critical theory. Historically, the artists involved with Judson Dance Theater, which held its inaugural "Concert of Dance" in 1962, were renowned for their interest in shedding technique and virtuosity from their orientations to and practices of dance and dance composition. Sally Banes's well-known writings on this era of postmodernism document the political and social interests and implications of the Judson artists' groundbreaking compositional methods ([1977] 1987, [1993] 1995). As Banes asserts, and as Foster indicates in the previously cited quote, the shared priority of dismantling conventional expectations and practices of dance performance positioned these artists as radical movers and thinkers. Although the group formed in classes with Robert Dunn at the Merce Cunningham Dance Studio and studied the compositional methods developed by John Cage, the Judson artists became known for challenging the hierarchical premises of performance by abstaining from dancerly movements and ushering pedestrian and task-based actions into their choreography.[5] Like many of their Judson colleagues, Rainer and Brown turned away from the techniques and methods that they studied and toward a non-virtuosic style of movement that could be performed by anybody (that is, any body), anywhere.

In their creative attempts to rid their bodies and their work of the physical and ideological traces of other choreographers and codified techniques, Rainer and Brown employed a vocabulary of ordinary movement to interrogate the split between performance and everyday life: to ask, essentially, what makes a performance a performance. In so doing, they developed an aesthetic of ordinariness that trafficked in accessibility and ease despite its meticulous execution. The core principles of this choreographic mission are expressed in Yvonne Rainer's "No Manifesto," which is quoted so frequently that many dance historians know it by heart. "No to spectacle . . . no to virtuosity . . . no to moving and being moved" (Rainer quoted in Banes [1977] 1987, 43). *Trio A*, which I will discuss in detail shortly, was Rainer's attempt to make an extended dance phrase that also said "no" to the ordinances structuring dance performance, and so it is comprised of movements that could ostensibly be performed by dancers and nondancers alike. Meanwhile, Trisha Brown staged pieces in museums, studios, and city streets that used walking, running, and standing at rest as their primary movement vocabulary. Brown's desire to discover a style of dancing devoid of the corporeal residues of classical and modern techniques also inspired her shift back to more dancerly choreographies in the 1970s, as exemplified by *Locus*.

Rainer and Brown's critical focus on ordinariness corresponded with the sociopolitical orientations of their work as they sought to deconstruct and redefine the roles of female performers and choreographers. Indeed, it is through the exposure of the labor and exactitude of ordinariness that their work overlaps with a central concern of feminist and queer theory: the sociocultural construction of normativity. More recent work in critical theories of race, gender, and sexuality enables us to look back at Rainer and Brown's political interventions with a more nuanced consideration of the power dynamics at play. Phenomenological and post-structuralist theorists have interrogated the idea of normalcy to demonstrate how the subject learns to desire a life that is considered normal for their assigned gender and presumed sexuality; this desire, in turn, orients the subject toward particular horizons and thus shapes their development.[6] Feminist theorists of intersectionality have taught us that normativity is scripted by complex assemblages of power structures that shape the



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subject's orientation to the idea of an ordinary life.[7] Furthermore, postcolonial theorists have interrogated the conceptual category of the ordinary as a function of colonial enterprise that privileges white, Euro-American bodies, histories, and ideologies by enabling claims to universality. For example, in her foundational essay, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" Gayatri Spivak argues that universalism and internationalism have dominated politics and epistemologies that occlude the exploitation of "third world" peoples. "It is impossible for French intellectuals," she writes, "to imagine the power and desire that would inhabit the unnamed subject of the Other of Europe" (Spivak quoted in Butler 2000, 36).[8] These contemporary theories help us understand how postmodern dance has functioned performatively, over time, within a broader sociopolitical and historical field; moreover, they compel attention to choreographies of ordinariness within the context of biopolitical regimes of power that employ the normalization of racialized and gendered differences as a mechanism of state regulation.

The concept of biopower was initially developed by Michel Foucault across several texts, beginning with *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1* ([1978] 1990) but perhaps defined most clearly in *"Society Must Be Defended": Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975–1976* (2003). In a lecture delivered on March 17, 1976, Foucault describes biopower as "a matter of taking control of life and the biological processes of man-as-species" (2003, 246–247). Whereas sovereignty "took life and let live," biopower is "the power of regularization" that acts not on the human body but on the human species: it "consists in making live and letting die" (247). As a function of biopolitics, choreographic explorations of ordinary bodies and spaces that unsettle gendered conventions have the capacity to simultaneously reify the normalizing force of ordinariness that regulates racial hierarchies. As Ann Laura Stoler points out, Michel Foucault's lectures on biopower forge connections between modern racism and the biopolitical state (1995, 80). At the point where normalization "circulates between the processes of disciplining and regularization," racism emerges as a mechanism of power that "establishes a break (*césure*) inside the biological continuum of human beings by defining a hierarchy of races" (84). Through this formulation, race becomes a category of being adjudicated through the biopolitical technology of the state. In Rey Chow's understanding, biopower constitutes Foucault's approach to the "ascendency of whiteness." The break of "race," in other words, establishes not only the distinction between races, but the persistent hierarchies that both structure and support the supremacy of whiteness (2002, 3).

If the supremacy of whiteness is constituted through biopolitical formulations of normalization, it is necessarily regulated through the ordinary activities of everyday life. Recognizing the spaces and actions of the ordinary as technologies of biopower underscores the relationship between the ordinary and the racism of modern, normalizing states. As Lauren Berlant argues, the desire to achieve ordinariness ("the good life," as both Berlant [2011] and Ahmed [2010] phrase it) directs or orients the subject toward horizons and wished-for futurities that inform their choices and shape their everyday lives; and it is only ever this desire that directs us, Berlant emphasizes, because ordinariness is necessarily unachievable. She explains:

> The conditions of ordinary life . . . are conditions of the attrition or the wearing out of the subject, and the irony that the labor of reproducing life in the contemporary world is also the activity of being worn out by it has specific implications for thinking about the ordinariness of suffering [and] the violence of normativity . . . that enable a concept of the *later* to suspend questions about the cruelty of the *now*. (Berlant 2011, 28; italics in original)

As Berlant indicates, the desire to achieve an ordinary life activates the lived conditions of ordinariness, directing the subject toward the future so that s/he will ignore the suffering of the present. Thus, ordinary life becomes a mode of normalization. Through the subject's desire for ordinariness, biopower seeps unseen and unconsciously from the dominant structures of state regulation into the subtle details of everyday life.[9]



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Rainer and Brown had been making dances for decades before Berlant began theorizing the affective biopolitics of ordinariness; indeed, the choreographers' interest in deconstructing what had become ordinary in the realm of performance anticipated a broader intellectual interest in deconstructing the relationship between ordinary life and biopolitical regimes of power. Nevertheless, studying the lasting effects of their work can also help us understand how these regimes persist over time to influence both dance performance and sociocultural performativity. Although the Judson choreographers that stripped dancing down to its most minimal and ordinary forms ultimately exposed the construction of their individual experiences of ordinariness with particular attention to the politics of gender, they did not consider how their deconstruction of the ordinariness that they encountered as white, female performers simultaneously described or delimited the horizons that shaped the lives of others. How did critical investigations of ordinariness also reinforce the sociocultural exclusions of the ordinary?

## Performing Ordinariness, Disseminating Whiteness

Rainer and Brown's preoccupation with ordinary bodies, movements, and spaces, in conjunction with their interest in deconstructing the ideologies and practices of performance through the medium itself, demonstrate their feminist slant on the post-structuralist inclinations of their era. Their work in this vein was and continues to be interpreted as nothing short of radical. In subverting the boundaries of performance, they also found ways of subverting the stereotypes of the female body in performance. In *Trio A*, for example, Rainer challenged herself to create a piece that did not adhere to the gendered norms of dance performance: the dance has no narrative and no emotional arc; all areas of the stage are used equally, effectively democratizing the performance space (albeit a performance space demarcated by the segregation of artistic spaces); the performance is organized as a series of tasks that do not accumulate; the performer does not have a character or persona; the performer never returns the viewer's gaze. Feminist theorists often fixate on this last point as the most radical gesture of the performance, for in refusing to return the presumably male gaze of the audience (à la Laura Mulvey), the performer also refuses to accept a passive position within a patriarchal structure of power.[10] One might also interpret Rainer's emphasis on the bare, genuine quality with which the performer executes the tasks of the dance as equally radical. Through this larger objective of the piece, the dancer learns just how deeply sedimented their movement habits are, for performing just the task, the whole task, and nothing but the task is one of the hardest things for a body sculpted by dance techniques and social norms to do. *Trio A* is a lesson in phenomenology that teaches dancers what their bodies have habituated by demanding that they unlearn their habits.

Numerous dancers who have encountered *Trio A* throughout their careers have commented on the difficulty of shedding personal and dancerly predilections to execute its ordinary movement as it was intended to be performed. Megan Wright, a dancer with the Stephen Petronio Company, has commented that "the nature of the movement revealed to [her] a number of habits that [she] would have rather not had to confront" (2016–2018). Pat Catterson, who is one of five dancers permitted to teach *Trio A*, writes that when she first learned and performed the dance she found that "its combining of body events was not easy, nor was its sequence easy to remember" (2009, 5) In fact, for Catterson the dance "runs counter to the dancerly instinct. One wants to make phrases out of passages of movement and head here or there. One wants to emphasize or favor this over that, to give more expression or to pause and frame one movement over another" (5). According to both dancers, career-long, habitual patterns became noticeable only when the choreography demanded that they be eliminated. An action as simple as bending over from the waist might reveal a practiced physical inclination. In this sense, the cultivated ordinariness of dance practices came into sharp contradiction with the ordinary aesthetics of *Trio A*'s tasks.[11]

When I learned *Trio A* from Catterson in 2013, I learned that doing the dance required undoing my physical patterns. The dance asks that you fulfill a movement task in its entirely, with the full



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devotion of your consciousness and corporeality. Its length is therefore determined by the time it takes the individual dancer to fulfill its series of tasks, not by an outside indicator of time. No task can be emphasized over any other, and all tasks have to be given the same attention and emphasis. This approach requires the absence of rhythmical or physical phrasing. It also requires attending to the "transition" steps as fully as the larger movements, which a dancer might be prone to accent. Some of the tasks include dancerly actions, but they are to be performed without dancerly inflections. For example, in *Trio A,* high leg kicks that most dancers would identify within the ballet lexicon as *grand battements* are not to be performed with an accent on the apex of the arc, as they are traditionally done to draw attention to the height of the leg. And whereas dancers are often trained to perform the weightlessness of their arms, in *Trio A* the arms' rhythms and shapes are determined by their weight. In learning *Trio A*, I learned how my body had incorporated the rhythms of various dance techniques as its own. Even as a modern dancer, I found that my relationship with weight, direction, and time was completely disoriented by the objectives of the dance. Every time I was confronted with another habit that needed to be unlearned, I was reminded of how many physical constructions had become part of my experience of ordinariness—not only in performance, but also in the everyday movements folded into the choreography of the dance. The dance therefore exposed how my body had phenomenologically developed a sense of ordinariness through the deliberate mechanisms of dance training. The performance of the dance exposed the disjuncture between what is presumed to be ordinary in performance and what might be considered a more authentic or individual experience of ordinariness.

Because *Trio A* was originally performed by Steve Paxton, David Gordon, and Yvonne Rainer as a trio (titled *The Mind is a Muscle, Part 1*), it might be interpreted as a dance with the potential to undo both masculine and feminine performances of the normative to reveal a universal sense of the ordinary within the dancing body. However, even as a radical political act of undoing one's gender, the performance of ordinariness in *Trio A* is also dependent on the passive absenting of race. Masquerading in the unmarked cloak of whiteness, Rainer's performance of an individual and authentic ordinariness is simultaneously dependent on another ordinary trope of concert dance: the white body is not racialized as such onstage. Instead, Rainer's whiteness enables her individual ordinary action to stand in as a universal ordinary potential. The presumed universality of the white subject enables white bodies to circulate unremarkably yet influentially within the context of performance, moving from a position of privilege in which their race does not precede or define their presence onstage. To describe the place of *Trio A* within this trend, however, it is perhaps most apt to cite a contrast with Rainer's later work. In an interview with Gabrielle Finnane, Rainer shares the following motivation for her 1990 film, *Privilege*:

> In this so-called postcolonial era we whites are beginning to listen to voices from the margins, to voices which comprise identities formed under conditions of domination. Finding appropriate speech for those voices that did not form *my* experience as a white middle-class woman was one of the biggest challenges in writing the script for *Privilege.* (Rainer 1992; italics in original)

Here, Rainer seemingly acknowledges the difficulty of moving beyond her own subjectivity to represent multiple perspectives and experiences in her film. Employing this quotation to look back on Rainer's earlier career, however, we might underscore the fact that Rainer admittedly confronts this challenge for the first time in writing *Privilege.* Her previous work did not seek to move from a position other than her own experience. Regardless of whether Rainer recognized her own subjective position, in performance her dancing body was widely perceived as universal. Moreover, reenactments of *Trio A* remember the tacit universalism of Rainer's body as historically present even in instances when the contemporary performer is not white. Although the ordinariness of *Trio A* was specific to Rainer's individual phenomenology, within the artistic and aesthetic spaces activated by American postmodernism her ordinariness was abstracted into universalism.

The ordinary body, however, is not universal; it is phenomenologically bound to its surrounding space. The ordinary body activates an ordinary space oriented around whiteness; inversely, the unseen whiteness of this space determines which bodies appear ordinary within it. Although Trisha Brown's *Locus* is often perceived as another example of universalizing abstraction, like *Trio A* its source material was dependent on one woman's subjective sense of ordinariness. In the process of making *Locus*, Trisha Brown drew extensively from her own history and lived experience, merging the creation of a choreographic score with the intimacy of personal narrative and sense of place. It is somewhat paradoxically, as Amanda Graham writes, "both a step toward neutrality and a recognition that neutrality does not exist" (2016, 33). To make *Locus*, Brown assigned twenty-seven numbers, each correlated with the letters of the alphabet (plus one number for the space between words), to different points of an illustrated cube. She then wrote out the beginnings of a personal biography excerpted from a performance program, placed herself in the middle of this imagined cube, and created a dance in which she gestured or directed her movement toward the point of the cube indicated by the letter or space in the words and sentences of her biography. In Brown's own words, this process produced "pure movement," which she defines as movement that "has no other connotations . . . provided that the context [is] neutral" (Brown quoted in Mohr 2018, 144). Although the cube ostensibly represented a neutral context, the movements that produced it were precipitated by Brown's personal history. In this sense, the written text scripted the body's movements in space per the choreographic score—an apt analogy for a phenomenological orientation to space, as Brown's positions, movements, and directions were created in correspondence with her biography. Even neutral spaces are shaped by the bodies and histories that create them.

Although *Locus* employs a more dancerly vocabulary than Brown's early work, the matter-of-factness of the movement carries forward the notion of the ordinary body through its focus on weight and momentum. Like *Trio A*, the dance is performed in silence, and the tempo and pacing of the piece appear dependent on the proportions and rhythms of the performer's body in the absence of external phrasing and accents. The moments of *Locus* that appear the most pedestrian are those that invite the projection of personal meaning or narrative. In the midst of the mathematical precision of angled arms and legs held in an exacting relationship with space, there are also quiet swirls, curves, and crumples that stand out as idiosyncratic. In one moment, the dancer appears to wipe condensation off a window directly in front of her face. In another, she appears to measure the space that surrounds her, even while her own body produces the measurements. In yet another, she turns her wrists with a tiny flourish that exudes playfulness. Yet even while the dancer performs these seemingly personal touches of the choreography, she does not visibly respond to the ornamentations of her body. Instead, she remains focused on the task ahead, ceding expression to execution. This is because, like *Trio A*, *Locus* is continually oriented toward the objectives of its choreography. If there are suggestions of personal expression, they give way to the clear completion of the task at hand. As in *Trio A*, the tasks outlined by the choreography do not accumulate into a narrative but are intended to produce neutrality through the relationship between the body and space. Yet, as I have suggested previously, the perception of the neutral doer is dependent on the presumed universality of whiteness. Although *Locus* is a personal response to intimate circumstances, it is only legible as neutral as long as it remains racially unmarked.

Stressing this relationship between the dancer/choreographer's personal position and the space activated through performance, Graham analyzes the dance as a creative solution to the spatial problem of living and working in a New York City loft. She explains that the dance was "a practical invention, indicative of Brown's particular set of architectural, economic, and social conditions" (2016, 39). Brown's reimagining of the cube stitched the personal and the abstract together within the material realities of lived and choreographic space. The dance thus recreated the space of her loft/studio, her home. Yet the performance of *Locus* enacts the creation of a cube that can only be visualized through the movements of the dancing body. As Graham explains, "Brown's cube was, quite



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literally, handmade, in that it was activated by touch, its bounds made visible through the gestures of dancing bodies" (38). The notion that the white cube of *Locus* was activated by touch reveals both the feminist and racial orientations of the dance. Shaped by the bodies that inhabit it, the cube carries the physical trace of the performers' race through the enduring invisibility of whiteness.

Following Sara Ahmed's logic, if the "world" of *Locus* is one crafted by physical bodies, then the "world" of *Locus* is exclusive to bodies that seem ordinary within it. "If the world is made white," Ahmed writes, "then the body-at-home is one that can inhabit whiteness" (2007, 153). Furthermore, the bodies that crafted *Locus* had already been produced within a particular performance tradition, a habitus constructed by and oriented around the white world of postmodern dance. Drawing upon the work of Frantz Fanon, Ahmed presses further to assert that a world made by white bodies is one that is "shaped by histories of colonialism" (153). As an inherited history carried by the bodies of its performers, the whiteness of Euro-American colonialism becomes the point from which the choreography of *Locus* unfolds, and the dance becomes a process through which whiteness is reproduced.

The connections between *Locus*'s choreography and the corporeal traces of colonialism extend from the macro-level of Ahmed's phenomenological theory to the micro-level of the dance's details. In her recent study of Brown's work, Susan Rosenberg argues that the cube of *Locus* functioned as a form of dance notation. She writes: "The cube delineates an abstract 'pure' space, organized by geometric principles, as the basis for movement emanating from a geometric or bodily center and spatial extension defined by the body's proportions" (2017, 160). Rosenberg cites Susan Foster's definition of dance notation to support her characterization of the white cube as such, but omits the most significant aspect of Foster's argument, which aligns such systems of notation with the ideologies and practices of colonialism.[12] In so doing, Rosenberg recognizes Brown's use of the white cube as historically tied to the perpetuation of pure space and spatial extension but fails to connect these choreographic principles to the ideologies of Euro-American colonialism that structure white supremacy. If Brown's white cube is a system of notation, then it is also historically tied to the extension of pure space and the dissemination of whiteness. Through the chain-link wrought by Western dance's colonial logic and practices of segregation, the pure space of the white cube implicitly structures the performance space as one that is necessarily devoid of brown and black bodies.

## Reperforming, and Failing to Reperform, Ordinariness

The exclusion of people of color from the pure, neutral space activated by the performance of *Locus* is documented not only in the photographs of dance history, but also in the lived experience of those that have learned and performed the dance. The predominant whiteness of US American postmodern dance has created a false binary between white and nonwhite dancers and choreographers. The latter's work is frequently interpreted as choreographies of the margins created in response to the ideologies of the dominant culture. While this oppositional schema allows space for and acknowledgement of the significance of these artists' contributions, it also inherently strengthens the centrality of whiteness within the dance field. The white cube, as a central example of postmodern choreographies, implicitly positions artists of color as politically, socially, and economically marked bodies that persist on the margins of modernity, even as they move within its stark geometries. As critical race theorists including bell hooks (1997) and Ruth Frankenberg (2001) have argued, whiteness can only masquerade as unmarked amongst white subjects; to people of color, whiteness is never invisible. The visibility or invisibility of whiteness is dependent on who casts the identifying gaze. The whiteness of US American postmodernism is thus recognized more readily by dancers and choreographers of color who confront the implicit racialization of performance spaces regardless of whether that confrontation is visible to their audience. The following examples foreground the tension between the incapacity for dancers of color to appear ordinary



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and neutral while underscoring the failure to make others aware of how race functions as a structuring force within these settings. The responses of dancers of color that approach works like *Trio A* and *Locus* therefore suggest the conundrum of both making and failing to make the workings of race visible within predominantly white spaces and choreographies.

In 2016, Dianne Madden was invited by the Bridge Project to teach *Locus* to an array of artists in the San Francisco Bay Area. According to Hope Mohr, a former Trisha Brown dancer and the director of the Project, this initiative was "the first time that the Trisha Brown Dance Company (TBDC) had allowed one of Brown's dances to be transmitted beyond the company for the explicit purpose of inspiring new works of art by artists who hailed from disciplines other than dance" (2018, 143). One of the dance artists invited to learn and create a choreographic response to *Locus*, Gerald Casel, is a queer, Filipino-American man. In his written response to *Locus*, he expresses the impossibility of performing in Brown's style:

> Formal constraints have the capacity to invigorate creativity, however, they do not function equally for all bodies. More precisely, there is no such thing as pure movement for dancers of color.... One of the assumptions that postmodern formalism arouses is that *any* body has the potential to be read as neutral—that there is such a thing as a universally unmarked body. As a dancer and choreographer of color, my body cannot be perceived as pure. My brown body cannot be read the same way as a white body, particularly in a white cube. (Casel 2016)

In this passage, Casel expresses the inherent conflict of dancing a work structured not only on the abstract whiteness of the space, but the ordinariness of its movement. The presumption of ordinariness, he seems to be saying, is a lie. *Any* body does not have the potential to be read as neutral, and so not *every* body has the same access to what is presumed to be ordinary. Casel's experience dancing *Locus* directly connects with the central principle of Berlant's theorization of the ordinary, which is crucially defined by its futurity and futility. This connection underscores my suggestion that choreography that seeks to critique certain constructions of the normative often fails to disassemble the biopolitical structure of ordinariness that governs everyday life. This failure is not passive; its perpetuation of ordinary bodies and spaces actively reifies the sociocultural regulations of state racism.

*Locus*'s ability to rechoreograph the binaries between (pure) white bodies/spaces and (impure) nonwhite bodies/spaces is premised not only on the historical sanctity of white womanhood, but on the more immediate exclusion of brown and black bodies from white artistic spaces. For artist Xandra Ibarra, who also participated in the Bridge Project's responses to *Locus*, this choreographic binary, premised on pure movement, extended through colonial histories toward questions of primitivism. Ibarra's desire to "move against mapping and measurement in Brown's work" led her "to create abject movements and sounds that reflected [her] position as racialized subhuman other" (Ibarra quoted in Mohr 2018, 145). Through the creation of an "Alphabet Song," sung by exhausting each note so that the sound produced had a "monstrous" quality that could be associated with primitivity, Ibarra connected the use of language in *Locus* to the colonial legacies of linguistically based definitions of the human (145).[13] This process "helped [her] to address language as code or grammar of Western imperialism" (145). Like Casel, Ibarra's response to *Locus* highlights the impossibility for people of color to exist as pure movers in the context of a neutral space. Yet Ibarra's attention to the "mapping" of Brown's choreography further develops a historical landscape that connects the exclusions of US American postmodernism to the violent histories that provided the foundation for its fascination with the construction, performance, and perpetuation of ordinariness. Ibarra's choice to insist upon the presumption of her primitive, subhuman status as a racialized other draws a sharp contrast to the choreographic devices, including language as a code of Western imperialism, that, through the activation of pure space, uphold the supremacy of whiteness.



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The central concerns of Ibarra and Casel's responses are taken up by Hope Mohr in her reflections on the curatorial process of the 2016 Bridge Project. Although Mohr initially took a "hands-off approach to questions of cultural identity," she ultimately learned to understand her "neutrality as complacency" (2018, 150). She closes her reflections on *Locus* with a series of useful questions surrounding the issue of reconstructing and reperforming works that perpetuate neutrality as a space and style oriented toward whiteness. She asks: "How can curators make dialogue about cultural identity essential not only in the context of presenting artists of color, but also for white artists, so that whiteness is no longer the default cultural perspective?" (150). While this question presents some optimism for future curatorial projects more sensitive to the racialization of artistic spaces, it does not fully account for the historical, cultural, and biopolitical contexts that continue to produce racial exclusions and essentialisms within the contemporary dance field. Although American postmodernism's racialization of ordinariness does not explicitly define or reinforce the difference between ordinary and extraordinary bodies, the segregations of American modernism had already laid the groundwork for this distinction to be perceived implicitly. Black bodies, athletic bodies, natural bodies, primitive bodies, were always already perceived as extraordinary. Blackness is historically conflated not only with impurity, but also with spectacularity. So when Yvonne Rainer said "no" to spectacle, she also implicitly said "no" to spectacularized bodies, outlining a space of possibility that tacitly presumed a white dancing body. The focus on the ordinary movement of ordinary bodies and spaces in pieces such as *Trio A* and *Locus*, therefore, implicitly choreographed a mode of segregation within American postmodernism that calcified the conflation between blackness and extraordinariness—literally, outside of the ordinary through the sedimentation of whiteness.

These histories cannot be undone by future curatorial projects, but they may indeed be critiqued. However, the question of if and how to reconstruct, reperform, or reenact choreographies that reproduce racial exclusivity remains relevant. The aesthetic choices of the Judson artists continue to shape the performances of these now historic works as well as the spaces in which they are revived. Tara Aisha Willis has observed that the ghosts of the "neutral doer" and "liberated, democratized body" linger within the discourses and performances stirred within Judson Memorial Church, the iconic space of experimental dance that "holds a history largely populated by white bodies" (2016, 4). Furthermore, I have argued that the racial constructions and exclusivities of these works influence the bodies and spaces that reperform them, regardless of their material setting. The persistent and pervasive desire to reconstruct historical material like *Trio A* and *Locus* presents a project that extends endlessly toward the future, for as long as time is perceived as a linear progression, history will need to be carried forward through the productions and reproductions of present. This open, temporal landscape of reperformance corresponds with the biopolitical power of the ordinary. Indeed, Berlant defines the ordinary as a function of biopolitics through its temporal orientation; ordinariness is strategically deferred beyond the present tense. The desire that drives reperformance creates a temporal trajectory that parallels the subject's striving toward the ordinary. Yet if the ordinary is, as I have shown, a racializing technology of biopower, we must also understand dance reperformance as a project with the same political potential to perpetuate divisions between bodies, spaces, histories, and futures. The continuous co-constitution of American postmodernism's whiteness and aesthetics remains cause for concern, as performances of ordinary, unremarkable bodies persist in re-forming racialized spaces of segregation without being remarked upon.

## Notes

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2. Gottschild is wary of the Eurocentric descriptions of minstrelsy that place "white perspectives and motives at the center of the discourse," and instead emphasizes the "Africanist presence, absence, and distortion that are central to the minstrel trope" ([1996] 1998, 89). As Manning explains, whereas Eric Lott's ([1993] 2013) description of blackface minstrelsy accounts for "a double move of identification and appropriation that enabled the performers to construct their whiteness," in the years surrounding World War II, spectators "altered their perceptions and preconceptions of bodies in motion—of what made one body 'black' and another 'white'" (Manning 2004, xv, xvii). This essay continues along the path laid out by Manning by attending to how people of color confront spaces that structurally and performatively reaffirm whiteness.

3. Whereas white choreographers had the privilege of either drawing from or disavowing their classical training, black dancers and dance makers struggled to be recognized as technically accomplished. Indeed, the development and practice of technique are historically allied with whiteness through the hierarchies of Euro-American concert dance and aesthetics. For more information on the racial politics of technique, see: Meghan Quinlan (2017), Anthea Kraut (2015), and Marta Savigliano (2009).

For example, Joanna Dee Das (2017) describes how Dunham struggled to have her dances, dancers, and dancing acknowledged as a product of technique and training. As Das explains, "the exclusive focus on Dunham as a black dancer minimized her innovations in the field more broadly as well as her desire to develop a technique that would be widely applicable to all dancers" (70). Dunham fought not only to have her style recognized as a technique, but also to have her technique perceived as beneficial to black and white dancers alike.

4. I employ "practice-based research," as a research methodology that draws from my artistic practice as a dancer. Here, I am referring to my analysis of *Trio A*, which relies on my experience learning the dance from Pat Catterson and embodying, rather than just viewing, the subtleties of its demands.

5. As former students of Anna Halprin, Rainer and Brown were particularly interested in incorporating improvisation into their choreographic processes. Burt, Foster, and others have argued: postmodern investigations of improvisatory methods mobilized the supremacy of whiteness to appropriate numerous cultural forms, particularly practices of Zen Buddhism. For more on the numerous appropriations of improvisation, see: Rebecca Schneider (2005).

6. Notably, Sally Banes has employed Martin Heidegger's "The Origin of the Work of Art" to deconstruct the ambiguities of *Trio A*. She employs the apt quote: "At bottom, the ordinary is not ordinary; it is extra-ordinary, uncanny" (Heidegger quoted in Banes ([1977] 1987, 50). Ramsay Burt points out that through her collaborations with Robert Morris, Rainer became familiar with the phenomenological theories of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, whose influential *Phenomenology of Perception* was published in 1962.

7. The term "intersectionality" was originally coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw ([1989] 1995) but stems from the concept of "simultaneity" as proposed by the Combahee River Collective in their 1977 Statement. Intersectionality has been mobilized and developed by numerous feminist thinkers, notably Patricia Hill Collins ([1990] 2000), to interrogate the interplay and interactions between markers of identity such as race, gender, sexuality, and class. More recently, feminist theorists such as Jasbir K. Puar (2005) have promoted addressing questions of identity and corporeality in terms of assemblages. "Assemblages," she writes "allow us to attune to intensities, emotions, energies, affectivities, textures as they inhabit events, spatiality, and corporealities. Intersectionality privileges naming, visuality, epistemology, representation, and meaning, while assemblage underscores feeling, tactility, ontology, affect, and information" (128).

8. Homi Bhabha has also emphasized "the cultural location of enunciation of universality; . . . the very claim of universality is bound to various syntactic stagings within culture which make it impossible to separate the formal from the cultural features of any universalist claim" (Bhabha quoted in Butler 2000, 37). Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o voices his suspicion of "the uses of the word and the concept of the universal" and challenges the binary division between the universal and the local (1993, 25). He asserts that the West generalizes its "experience of history as the universal experience of the world" so that "what is Western becomes universal and what is Third World becomes local" (25).



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9. As Kathleen Stewart poetically writes, "the ordinary can happen before the mind can think" (2007, 63).

> The ordinary throws itself together out of forms, flows, powers, pleasures, encounters, distractions, drudgery, denials, practical solutions, shape-shifting forms of violence, daydreams, and opportunities lost or found.
>
> Or it falters, fails.
>
> Either way we feel its pull. (29)
>
> Before the mind can think, or perhaps through the bodies and spaces activated by movement, the ordinary pulls in the directions outlined by the biopolitical infrastructures of state regulations, including racism.

10. Mulvey argues that film "reflects, reveals, and even plays on the straight, socially established interpretation of sexual difference which controls images, erotic ways of looking and spectacle" ([1975] 2003, 44). In this essay, Mulvey uses the term "the male gaze" to describe the masculinization of the position of spectatorship and how pleasure in viewing is divided between active/male and passive/female roles. After this essay was heavily criticized (Gamman and Marshment 1988), Mulvey offered a reconsideration of this seminal essay and acknowledged that the "difficulty of sexual difference in the cinema that is missing in the undifferentiated spectator of 'Visual Pleasure'" (1989, 30).

11. For alternative theoretical perspectives on cultivated bodily practices in relation to social spaces, see Mauss's ([1935] 1973) writing on "techniques of the body" and Bourdieu's ([1977] 1979) discussion of movement and habitus developed through sociality and hierarchies of class and gender.

12. See Foster (2011).

13. As David Kazanjian has argued, "It is in this normative sense that the term ['articulation'] becomes an important statement in the discursive formations of colonialism, with 'civilized man' increasingly described as being able to articulate language clearly, and 'uncivilized man' marked as inarticulate" (2003, 8).

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