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Steppin' out of Whiteness

■ Black Hawk Hancock

DePaul University, Chicago, USA

ABSTRACT ■ Current paradigms of identity, especially those found in Whiteness Studies, do not sufficiently explain the complex interaction and intersection of race, culture, and identity. Drawing on two years of extended fieldwork in the Steppin' dance scene in Chicago, I extend Bourdieu's theory of practice, particularly the role of the body in culture, to the study of race and identity. This article presents an alternative model for explaining racial identity, grounded in the competencies and embodied knowledges that one enacts in practice. This novel approach opens up new anti-essentialist possibilities for theorizing race and an anti-racist politics based in cultural labor.

KEY WORDS ■ body, Bourdieu, culture, identity, practice, race, Whiteness

Macro-analyses often lose sight of the fact that racial structures and racial categories are not self-evident, immutable, and completely independent, but rather must be instantiated and reproduced in practice by racialized actors (Wacquant, 1997). Developing and extending Bourdieu's theory of practice to the realm of racial studies, I argue that race is not something that one *is* as a static identity or predetermined category by physiology or biology, but rather a set of competences and embodied knowledges that one *enacts* in practices grounded in particular social and historical contexts.¹ I utilize the *macro-social* notion of race as a category of analysis in order to discuss the everyday world from the perspective of agents, including myself, embedded in a particular taken-for-granted racialized social world. However, I break

with race as a structural/classificatory category of analysis when undertaking a sociological analysis and therein deploy race as a category of *practice*, as the processes of signification, categorization, and racialization by which racial identities are formed, negotiated, and challenged, when reflexively working through ethnographic material in relation to theory, method, and epistemology.²

This article chronicles my involvement in the Steppin' scene, the African American social dance³ culture in Chicago, as an in-depth way to analyse race, culture, and identity.

Specifically, I discuss my experience of becoming a member of this community as a dancer. This experience created a sense of incongruity of how my bodily knowledge of dance did not meet the expectations of the way I looked racially. The community marked me as a White dancer who had entered into an all-Black dance culture in racially segregated Chicago; this contrast between the way I was racially marked by the community and my ability to dance this traditionally African-American dance and immerse myself as a regular in that community created a contradiction and confusion over the nature of my identity. This article contributes to constructing an alternative model of racial identity grounded in bodily labor and practice. By deliberately moving back and forth between a social understanding and a specific sociological understanding of race based in practice, I demonstrate the power that everyday social understandings of race have in explaining our everyday world, even when these categories are undermined or contradicted by the physiological bodies onto which they are mapped.

Because race and culture are fused as one in the popular imagination, the notion of practice as inculcated and socialized into the body is crucial to understanding alternatives to our racialized commonsense. Current models of race and identity, especially those found in Whiteness Studies, do not sufficiently explain the process of racialization; therefore, we need to theorize an alternative model for explaining race and identity.⁴ Extending Bourdieu's central concepts of practice and the body to theorize how racial identity is predetermined not by physiology or biology, but rather by competences and embodied knowledges that one enacts in practice through cultural forms,⁵ enables us to understand the significance of social dance within African-American communities. A theory of embodied practice illuminates not only how group distinctions are formed through cultural practices, but how those practices serve as the foundation of group identity and are naturalized through their embodiment and cultivation (Bourdieu, 1990a, 2000a, 2000b). Because the body is not just a *site* of meaning, but an embodied *history* of meaning and social relations, it is here in the enactment of practice that we can understand how cultural forms, race, and bodies intersect and are mutually constitutive. This alternative theory of

race mandates a return to the body not in the traditional sense of race based on skin color, where race is considered the most stable and obvious, but in terms of bodily knowledge and practice that make the body malleable and transgressive.⁶ Within this framework, the body remains the place where culture is contained through socialization and inculcation, but culture is no longer misrecognized as a naturally occurring essence that is spontaneously performed and instead is seen as one of the many constructed and contingent links among the components of race as a category of practice.

This article also contributes to an anti-essentialist and anti-racist politics by grounding a racial politics in cultural labor that challenges the meaning of our institutionalized racial categories and essentialized racial differences, as they are sociologically articulated, reproduced, and contested in the everyday practice of race. Changing the ground of racial politics from one of physiology and racial marking to one of cultural labor enables us to break with the racial essentialism of social understandings of race as a category of analysis and forge an alternative orientation built around race as a category of practice.

Steppin' is a Chicago thing

This article is part of a much larger project that examines the dance world of the Lindy Hop, which underwent a renaissance in the late 1990s, becoming a popular White mainstream sensation, and its contemporary parallel in the African-American social dance world of Steppin' in the city of Chicago. The two dances, both outgrowths of the same original Lindy Hop, are being danced in the same city, yet in worlds completely separated by race, one almost exclusively White and the other Black. The former is the hyper-visible world of the Lindy Hop, accompanied by marketing Gap khakis and Coca-Cola, while the other is almost completely invisible to the mainstream media. While mainstream White America was celebrating the revival of the Lindy Hop on the North Side of Chicago, across town on the South Side – unseen due to the segregated nature that defines the city – thrived the world of Steppin', where the tradition of social partner dance continued completely under the radar of White America.

The Lindy Hop is the original Swing dance born in the ballrooms, clubs, and rent parties of the African-American communities of Harlem in the late 1920s and early 1930s. As a cultural form, the Lindy Hop combined slave dances with jazz and tap steps.⁷ It also drew on popular dances of the day like the Charleston and other partnered figures from European ballroom dances. The dance emerged out of the Harlem Renaissance and the Lindy Hop served as one of its crystallizing statements, a defiant exemplar of athleticism, creativity and racial identity – a frenetic expression of the times

that paralleled the fast-paced intensity of swing music to which it was danced.⁸

With the rise of bebop music in the 1950s and the death of the big bands that played dance music, the Lindy Hop was no longer the dominant social dance of the day; the faster tempos and extensive solos necessitated a different mode of dancing. With the rise of rock-n-roll and disco dancing in mainstream White America, partner dancing faded in popularity as people began dancing individually and separately from each other. As a result, the Lindy Hop, and partner dancing more generally, faded from popularity in mainstream White society. Nevertheless, partner dancing continued on in African-American communities where the dance transformed and mutated over the years, into the form of dance we see today in Steppin',⁹ a dance that is slower and smoother in style and less syncopated than its original form of the Lindy Hop, to fit the contemporary rhythm and attitude of Rhythm and Blues music that thrives in Chicago's African-American communities.¹⁰

Steppin' has existed in Chicago for decades, and dancers are African Americans who range in age from their mid-20s to their 70s. In Chicago, Steppin' can be seen in clubs in African-American neighborhoods. Despite the revival of the Lindy Hop, the Steppin' scene has remained underground in relation to the White mass media. It made its sole big-screen appearance in the 1997 film *Love Jones*, made by Columbia College Chicago graduate Theodore Witcher, starring Lorenz Tate and Nia Long. DJ Herb Kent, a legendary Steppin' DJ and personality on the local radio station V103, says that Steppin' did not explode with Swing because 'it's just too Black' (Rhino Records, 2001 [CD]). The African-American cultural forms that tend to be appropriated by White communities are either extreme examples of culture like 'Gangsta Rap', which are marked as transgressive to White society, or they lend themselves to be easily whitewashed¹¹ and commodified by their accessibility, like rock-n-roll or Swing. Steppin' is too mainstream within the African-American community to fit the binary of either an explicit renegade African-American identity or a cultural form that can be easily folded into mainstream White society. As one writer described it, 'Steppin' is right in the rhythm of the African-American lifestyle, with the grit and the polish all in one solid package' (Fountain, 2001: 5).

Because of its aesthetic and because it is practiced solely within African-American neighborhoods, Steppin' exists apart from White culture and has remained insular to the African-American community, due in a large part to the extreme segregation of Chicago, with no crossover or appropriation. Without the cross-promotion or cross-marketing to the media, there has been no youth movement or identification with this African-American cultural form like that seen in hip hop. In similar vein to what Robin Kelley has argued in relation to other African-American cultural forms, I argue that Steppin' is

a cultural practice that validates the African-American community and provides expressions of self, 'a distinctive sense of African American humanity in cultural spaces separated and differentiated from the dominant culture, spaces in which the dominant culture's scorn, devaluation, and rejection are replaced by affirmative expressions of self' (Kelley, 1996: 33). Steppin' in its autonomy from White society and mass-mediated trends sustains an alternative African-American world, one seldom frequented by Whites.

Immersion

The larger project draws inspiration from the work of the great African-American cultural critic Ralph Ellison who over 30 years ago pointed out the deep interrelationship between race and culture in American society. This article poses an Ellisonian question: How does the interconnection between race, culture, and identity, as seen through cross-cultural participation, force us to look beyond simplistic binaries of racial identity? This article explores this question through my immersion in the world of Steppin'. My involvement and immersion in the Steppin' community came after having spent four years of intensive dance training in the White Lindy Hop scene: taking dance classes; practicing; social dancing three to five nights a week; and traveling the country to participate in intensive dance workshops. In addition, as I progressed as a dancer in the Lindy Hop world, I went on to teach and perform the dance professionally. My dance partner, Julie, was a professionally trained ballet, jazz, and modern dancer. She had been Lindy Hop dancing for several years at the time and we had also been teaching and performing the dance professionally together for the last two years. In addition, we also studied other forms of dance such as ballroom, hip hop, and Argentine Tango. Our expertise in the Lindy Hop, and our social dance skills more generally, provided us with the dance skills and bodily knowledge which predisposed us to be able to adapt our bodies to different styles of dance and music and therefore make the transition into the Steppin' community with relative ease as dancers.

Through word of mouth with African-American friends not involved in the Lindy Hop community and through African-American newspapers and websites, I started doing research on the Steppin' scene. My partner and I started going out to Steppin' clubs, parties, and dances all over the south and west sides of the city of Chicago. After learning where the best dancers, DJs, and clubs were, as well as the best nights of the week to go out, eventually we were out dancing regularly from three to five nights a week. This article is based on those two years in the Steppin' scene as a regular participant. I draw on extensive fieldnotes I took during this time as well as informal conversations I had with dancers, promoters, and DJs.

Like any subculture, the Steppin' scene has its own styles and codes. The Steppin' style – with its updated contemporary version of the roaring '20s style of bold chalk striped suits and derby hats for the men, and flapper inspired dresses and pant-suits for the women, commonly referred to as the 'Ragtime 2000 look' – was an aesthetic that immediately drew me in (Rhino Records, 2001). As our investment in the Steppin' scene grew, we started going to African-American shopping centers on the South Side and looking for styles that were popular in the clubs we were frequenting. The style of clothing and the dance itself were different modes of distinction and helped us assimilate into this world. I bought trousers, alligator shoes, silk shirts in bright styles and colors and patterns, while Julie purchased the styles that were fashionable for the women. This change in our dress style signified more than an acquaintance with fashion; it was something we needed to master, like the dance, in order to fully assimilate into and demonstrate a complete grasp of the world we were now involved in. In this new environment, we had to learn the codes and norms by listening and watching to establish trust and respect. Being outsiders made respect much harder to come by and made us that much more attentive. We often felt that we had to prove we were good dancers so that people would recognize us as something other than mere 'spectators' or appropriators of African-American culture.

The ability to adapt to the world of Steppin' was not difficult as a trained dancer. The competence and skills necessary to adapt one's dancing to the style of Steppin' are those possessed by a number of expert Lindy Hop dancers. As much by chance as by desire to learn Steppin' and explore other dance worlds, we were the first from the Lindy Hop community in Chicago to immerse ourselves as regulars in this world. It was not our dancing abilities alone that made us unique. It was also our willingness as outsiders to participate according to the normative orientations and rules of this dance community, and our willingness to break the dominant patterns of segregation by traveling to all African-American neighborhoods that made us stand out in this community. The result of being the only White people in an all-Black space generated a number of responses to the incongruity the community perceived in that we were simultaneously marked as racial outsiders, and yet through our dancing we were marked as insiders within the world of Steppin'.

A question of identity

This study examines the Ellisonian question of identity by looking at the ways that we violated the everyday racialized commonsense of race, culture, and identity. First, through our extensive Lindy Hop dance training we were

violating the norms because we could dance in ways that were unexpected – here our physical skills in relation to our racially marked bodies were out of place. Second, our willingness to adapt our aesthetics in terms of dance and dress style to meet the norms of the community violated the idea that Whites rarely desire or adapt to non-White norms or codes. Third, our desire to participate and travel to the clubs and parties in the Steppin' community violated the assumption that Whites fear Black neighborhoods and need to feel secure in their own environment. These violations of racial commonsense generated a series of responses that are worth investigating to understand how the racial imagination works not just in White society, but in African-American communities as well.

Steppin' is learned like all other cultural forms of dance, not only socially through friends and family, but through structured dance classes and workshops held on a regular basis in African-American communities. This infrastructure within the Steppin' community offsets stereotypical racial ideas that Whites have to learn to dance in classrooms, whereas dancing just comes naturally to African Americans. Given the receptions and responses to our dancing, the dominant racial mythology about these distinctions played out just as powerfully in the minds of African Americans as it did in mainstream White society. This analysis enables us to understand that African Americans, like the dominant White society, subscribe to the same ideologies of race, culture, and identity that reinscribe and uphold societies structured in racial dominance (Hall, 1996b).

When entering the Steppin' scene as a White person, the question of race is inevitable. We quickly learned what it was like to be the only White people in a room. The tables were turned: White people almost never feel like a minority. My experience going to the Steppers' clubs was similar to what Dubois called 'double consciousness'. But my situation was Dubois' idea reversed; here were White people (my dance partner and me) who were self-conscious of feeling racially marked as a minority and out of place in an African-American world. Since we were the only White people in the club, it was obvious that people noticed us. The significance, symbolically or literally, of being White in African-American parts of town, doing an African-American dance, in an all-African-American club, surrounded exclusively by African Americans, must be looked at through this prism of race and reflexivity, especially in the context of a Whiteness that dominates the racial organization of American society.¹² One male dancer, who I came to know rather well, stated this incongruity bluntly:

I have to tell you this, and you probably already know this, but you stick out – it's not the pants or the hat or the shoes – but you definitely stick out – and it's certainly not the way you dance, but you stick out – I'll tell you that.¹³

While some of the dancers I met told me that other Whites had come to Steppers' events before, in the course of our two years spent Steppin' we encountered only four other White people, and only one of them was dancing.

The marked visibility of White people in this environment created an ideal, ironic opportunity to examine Whiteness outside of its usual invisible racial status.¹⁴ In most cases racial identity is transparent to Whites, because they never have to leave the White-dominated world (Hartigan, 1999). Whereas Whiteness may serve to explain macro-levels of structural domination, here in the world of Steppin' it is not Whiteness that is hegemonic; rather, Blackness is dominant.¹⁵ Here African-American fashion, language, style, and norms of social interaction define the local landscape. This is not to say that Whiteness is irrelevant; rather, here it is displaced from its centrality of power and marked as visible and non-normative. Here in these specific spaces where African-American codes are dominant, Whiteness and White people are marginalized as the racial other.

Our entrance into the Steppin' scene was by choice. This double consciousness of identity occurs only by choice for Whites in the US, because they are rarely, if ever, in situations where they are the racial minority. Because White people are a rarity in the Steppin' scene, we were met with immediate apprehension and suspicion. The case of Whites going to an all-African-American club by choice made us an oddity; since Whites never *have* to feel all eyes on them as the only White people in the room, why would they come there? Our entrance into this world was visibly obvious and socially precarious as we were the only White people there, and not knowing anyone or anything about the social norms of these clubs, we were unsure of what to expect. We self-consciously chose to be reflexive about our situation: we reflected on our own nervousness, hesitation, and intimidation to determine how this changed the formation of our thinking and our racial practices. This reflexivity reveals a great deal about the structural relations between racial groups: because Whites as the dominant group have the luxury and privilege of never having to be racially self-conscious, it is no surprise that Whites do not consider race to be an issue. Or, if they do consider it an issue, it is a minority problem that minorities have to deal with and overcome, or a problem that should be downplayed so it will go away.

The world of Steppin'

August 2001. Julie and I finally decide to go out Steppin'. We went with two other White friends down to Mr G's, a banquet hall on 87th Street on Chicago's South Side. The four of us took a 15-minute ride down the

interstate and parked on the main street a block away from the club. 'Uh, you guys think this is safe?' my male friend asked. Several African-American men, dressed in bright-colored suits and hats, were milling around outside the club's entrance. Some were leaning against the wall, some were smoking, and all were engaged in spirited conversation.

We maneuvered through the crowd and made our way into the lobby of the building. The narrow entryway connected two large banquet halls that were regularly rented out for parties. The music was loud and pulsing. Two men standing in the lobby, between us and the dance room, looked like the hosts for the party. They turned to greet us, and I said, 'Hey, what's going on?' Looking a little puzzled, one of them asked, 'What party are you here for?' The sight of four young White people showing up on a Saturday night was most likely not a regularity; I assumed he thought we were lost. He was a large African-American man in his early 40s wearing a red suit, a black raw silk shirt, and red leather shoes. Later, we learned that many of the parties have a color-coded theme, and that night it was red. The majority of the room looked like a sea of red, and there we were, not only White, but obviously clueless about the night's color scheme, as none of us was wearing red. We were all dressed like we were going out to Lindy Hop, the men in dark suits and the women in dark pants, skirts, and colorful blouses, but clearly out of sync with the aesthetic of this community. I asked the man at the door, 'Do you have Steppin' going on here?' 'Sure. You're here for Steppin'?' he asked incredulously. 'Yeah, that's what we're here for.' Amused, he said, 'Well, all right then, come on in.' We entered through a pair of double doors into the massive banquet room.

The tables were scattered with advertisements, or 'pluggers', for future events promoted by various groups. Although many Steppers' events are parties thrown by particular Steppin' groups, they're open to the public and other promoters are allowed to pass out pluggers for their events. People were walking around selling mixed CDs and tapes of Steppers' music. I turned back to my friends. 'Let's try to get a table in the back; it looks really crowded up here.' My friend answered, 'Yeah, in the back, I think that's best – way in the back.' We made our way through the packed room, zig-zagging between tables. Self-consciously I felt as if half the crowd appeared to be looking at us out of the corners of their eyes, while the other half must not have noticed us yet. But they would: since we were the only Whites folks there, we were hard to miss as it had to appear that we were clearly out of place, and without knowing the dress scheme we were even more conspicuous, I imagined that we looked like lost tourists.¹⁶ We made our way back to a table and hesitantly took seats facing the dance floor.

Steppin' is an expressive cultural practice. This is crucial to understanding African-American communities, because they were often forced to cultivate

their social world within the constraints imposed upon them by White society. Social spaces and embodied expressive cultural practices are intertwined. These spaces are places apart from, and designed to be free from, the dominant White society, which marginalized and oppressed African Americans.¹⁷ These situations provided a counter-space to exercise cultural freedoms and expressions. In these spaces, a sense of community is constructed through an alternative set of values and social relationships than those of White society. These social spaces created sites where the exploited working body was reclaimed for self and for community. These were spaces for constructing alternative identities from back-breaking wage work, low income, and pervasive racism, to take back one's body for more authentic freedoms that can be enjoyed only on non-work time.

The Black body is celebrated here as an instrument of pleasure rather than an instrument of labor, by using these practices as a form of recovery and recuperation (Kelley, 1996). By understanding the material context within which cultural practices are cultivated, we can understand how identity and practice are linked to material conditions of existence. Stuart Hall echoes Kelly's sentiments in his discussion of the Black Diaspora: 'Think of how these cultures have used the body – as if it was, and it often was, the only cultural capital we had. We have worked on ourselves as the canvases of representation' (Hall, 1996c: 470). African-American reliance on the body as a means of expression has a long history tied to racism and economic impoverishment. As a result of the dearth of resources afforded them, African Americans developed culture out of what was available; they utilized the body in place of other resources as a way to eke out pleasure and identity. As a result, African Americans developed rich physical manifestations of cultural identity in bodily activities such as dance and sport for the creation and sustenance of individual and group identities against domination and social erasure (Hall, 1996a, 1996c). This strategy gave African Americans a voice and allowed them to represent themselves and their community in a very different way from the dominant White society. Dances such as the Lindy Hop and Steppin' became forms of counter-politics against segregation and exploitation, by redefining the African-American body as desirable, beautiful, dynamic, and creative (Gilroy, 1993; Gottschild, 2003; Kelley, 1996).

Recognizing the importance of the body as a medium of expression in African-American social dance is key to understanding the significance of embodied cultural practices for defining African-American identity in America. Therefore, it is necessary to map out the dynamics of the world of Steppin' in terms of its style of dance, attitude toward the dance, venues for the dance, music, and style of dress to understand the crucial role they play in defining the meaning of this world for its participants.¹⁸ In addition it was imperative for us to understand these dynamics, not just from the

outside, but undertaking the cultural labor of learning, understanding, and abiding by the norms and codes of this world to maximize the chances of being able to earn the trust, respect, and membership of this community. I will now turn to map out these dynamics in detail to fully understand the process of our acceptance.

Steppin' is a fluid style of Swing dancing. This dance form has an easy grace – dancers glide across the floor and their steps seem effortless, as opposed to the strenuous athleticism of the Lindy Hop. The Steppers' dance moves are less intricate and more streamlined than those done in the Lindy Hop. In addition, the Lindy Hop is often syncopated and asymmetrical, whereas Steppin' is fluid and symmetrical. Steppin' is less fast-paced than the Lindy Hop, and it is not as rigorous on the body. Compared to the controlled chaotic aesthetic of the Lindy Hop, Steppin' is cool, contained, and never out of control. While Steppin' is certainly influenced by swing, tap, and hip hop, it is done within the musical framework of the R&B, soul, and smooth-contemporary hip hop genres that accompany it.

'Let's go to work' is a phrase often overheard at the clubs, used by the DJ or by someone walking around the dance floor talking to the dancers. This statement relays encouragement, approval, and group solidarity to inspire the dancers to work harder and be more creative. This self-conscious statement of 'labor' initiates a call-and-response with the audience and furthers a collective expressive behavior.¹⁹ It is ironic that Steppers use the word 'work', which evokes the idea of labor, when everything about the Steppin' scene is supposed to appear effortless and far removed from the labor of the workday. Often clubs will have 'After Work Sets' beginning at 5pm, when people can come to escape and unwind right after they get off work. The distinction between this sophisticated aesthetic and everyday labor is supported by the fact that Steppers are not even supposed to show signs of sweat, no matter how hard they dance. The men carry handkerchiefs in their back pockets, to promptly wipe their brow should they begin to perspire. On the sidelines, men and women often use fans or wave pluggers, printed promotional materials, to cool themselves off. Urging people to 'go to work' also encourages individual expression, to do your own thing and strive for individualism within the group – not apart from the group, but to contribute one's own labor to the community.

Steppin', like other subcultures, has an inner crowd that travels to certain clubs on certain nights. This ensures both a certain level of dancing and a certain type of person in their community. Because Steppers are working- and middle-class people and see themselves as anti-thug and anti-'gangsta', their weekend events are almost always private parties. This is not to say that there is no possibility for crossover, but Steppers' events attempt to prohibit gang activity through strictly enforced dress codes, normative

orientations manifested in manners and dispositions, and privately rented dance venues.

Steppin' music is dance music. It's the *groove* that Steppers want, and that overrides the racial identity of the artist: if it's a good tune for dancing, it's played. Usually the music is by African-American artists, although occasionally a White artist, such as Phil Collins, will make the cut with what many consider a 'classic' Steppers' song, 'In the Air Tonight'. Steppers' DJs have also played Hall and Oates and other artists from England's blue-eyed soul movement. Most often the music is divided into contemporary artists such as Dave Hollister, Aaliyah, Angie Stone, Mary J. Blige, and older R&B 'Dusties' (referred to as such because they're songs so old they collect dust) such as The Whispers, and Harold Melvin and the Blue Notes. Occasionally, DJs also play pop tunes and mellow hip hop such as Dr Dre and Snoop Dogg.

Steppers have their own style of dress, known in the community as 'Steppers' sharp'. Historically, fashion in the African-American community has been a way of shedding the degradation of work and collapsing the status distinction between themselves and their oppressors; dressing up offered a medium to construct a collective identity based on something other than wage work, presenting a public challenge to the dominant stereotypes of the Black body and reinforcing a sense of dignity that was perpetually being assaulted (Gilroy, 1993; Kelley, 1996; White, 1999). In Steppin' the men's long suit coats, baggy trousers, hats, and ties in splashy colors echo the refined and polished style of the Roaring '20s, but with a contemporary African-American twist (Rhino Records, 2001). A woman's Steppin' attire consists of at least two-inch heels to accentuate her legs and a dress in a color to match her partner's outfit, fitted around the hips and with just the right amount of length and flare to add dazzle to her turns. Leopard skins, silks, pencil heels, and hip-high slits all accentuate her body. Some couples wear matching or color-coordinated outfits. The women never wear hats, but their hair is styled to complement the Steppin' attire and attitude. On big event nights, it's easy to see that the majority of the women have spent time in beauty salons earlier in the day.

Steppers are not always dressed so formally. On the more casual nights at clubs, they come straight from work in suits or in dress-casual, in sweaters or open-collared shirts and blouses. Although these nights are more informal, there's still an eye toward fashion. This aesthetic is reinforced on all advertising pluggers: 'No gym shoes, no athletic gear, no jeans, and no denim'. The strict dress code reflects a desire to keep the crowd more upscale and maintain a rigorous set of norms.

Out Steppin' we usually have a couple of drinks. Despite being good social dancers, we're always a little nervous, and the alcohol loosens us up and

cuts our inhibition to dance. Because we have not really technically trained in this style and are learning the choreography and style as we dance, we're always a little reserved – going out on the floor is always daunting at first. As a rule, in trying to follow the cultural norms of the Steppin' community, we do not perform any traditional Lindy Hop moves like the swing out, circle, or Charleston variations that would be conspicuously different from the Steppers' style. Instead, we try to adapt our Lindy Hop skills into the Steppin' framework, which is almost identical. One way we ease the tension – which has more to do with our own self-consciousness than anything anyone ever does or says – is to play guessing games about what people are thinking about us before we head to the dance floor.

Julie says self-mockingly, 'Okay, the White folks have had a few drinks, now what are they going to do?' And when we move to the dance floor, we imagine the comments: 'Okay, here comes White folks; let's see how foolish they look or let's see some minstrelsy on their part. They're going to come up in here in an African-American club and try and dance our dance in front of us?' Gathering the courage, I take Julie's hand to escort her to the floor since we had come there to dance, not just people-watch.

At first, our anxiety overrides everything else, and our movements are hesitant and inhibited. We struggle to make it through the song; we can't quite seem to click. Before the next song starts, we're unsure if we should attempt another or quit while we're ahead, but we love dancing together and this is a great dance floor. 'Should we sit down?' Julie asks. 'No, we just got out here, we have to keep going, just one more, okay?' We continue to dance and try to relax, to get the groove we see around us. Suddenly, I notice the DJ pointing at me and smiling. I lean into Julie's ear. 'Hey, the DJ just smiled and pointed at me. I guess it's cool.' This sign of recognition eases us, and we start to unwind and get into the flow. When the song ends, Julie asks, 'Okay, should we sit down now?' 'We may never get up the nerve to come back onto the dance floor, so let's just keep going. Just one more.' The next song is a good one, with more of a hip hop beat, and we both get into it. I look over my shoulder at some of the other men and try to mimic them. I try a spin, then a move I see another guy do. Julie does her best to follow me even though I'm not doing a great job. Too busy trying to copy someone else makes me slightly late in my leading. But we're beginning to find the right groove. It starts to feel really good as we relax and fall into the flow of the music.

We see the couple dancing next to us look over. They're probably in their late 50s. She is dressed all in red with a few black accents, he's decked out in a black suit with a red shirt. They smile, and she leans over, 'Y'all look good. Keep on dancing!' With this encouragement, we loosen up even more. We no longer feel self-conscious of what we're doing and just get into the groove of the music. Whether this acknowledgement is about making us

feel comfortable in the club or is a statement about the quality of our dancing is not clear. Nevertheless, this acceptance begins our foray into this new dance world.

Social practice, dance, and the body

Applying Bourdieu's concept of practices to African-American social dance requires that we move away from analyses that have focused on pathological or functional explanations and instead focus on 'expressive practices', which help to constitute the culture of everyday life.²⁰ By looking at dance as an expressive practice of the body, we can understand the dynamism and creativity of the cultural forms that generate rich narratives, pleasures, and aesthetics. Expressive practices such as dance are a crucial and integral part of African-American culture and identity, because they emerge as responses to everyday life in the forms of resistance, evasion, and survival within the hegemonic Whiteness of society (Gilroy, 1993; Kelley, 1996; Rose, 1994). These practices serve as forms of identification and generate a sense of community through a common vernacular that links the community together and gives voice to certain ideas, beliefs, and aspirations.

Because dance is an embodied practice, the body is central to cultural meaning, not only because it serves as the medium of enactment, but because the body is the locus and embodiment of those very practices. For Bourdieu, bodies are raw material marked on and worked on, rather than predetermined biological facts. The body effectively serves as a 'memory pad' by which the most serious and essential knowledges we have of the world are rooted (Bourdieu, 2000b). As Bourdieu theorizes, these knowledges are not states of mind or consciousness but 'a state of the body' that defines the very identity of that body (Bourdieu, 1990a: 68). The body is where our physical, mental, symbolic, and lived experience, in other words, culture, is reproduced and manifested. It is in and through the body that our knowledge and understanding of the world exists. The body does not 'represent' its knowledge because the body itself formed through its socialization, where both the materiality of the body and thought are constituted. Bourdieu argues, 'Nothing seems more ineffable, more incommunicable, more inimitable, than the values given body, made body by the transubstantiation achieved by the hidden persuasion of an implicit pedagogy' (Bourdieu, 1977: 94). It is in and through the body that social classifications and values are inscribed in the body. As these arbitrary socially constructed distinctions become normalized and institutionalized and 'turned into a permanent disposition', they become misrecognized as inherent in those bodies (Bourdieu, 1990a: 72). As racialized bodies become fused with the cultural practices that they enact, this:

reinforces the belief in the prevailing system of classification by making it appear to be grounded in reality. Which it is since it helps produce that reality and since incorporated social relations present themselves with every appearance of nature and not only in the eyes of those whose interests are served by the prevailing system of classification. When properties and movements of the body are socially qualified, the most fundamental social choices are naturalized and the body, with its properties and its movements, is constituted as an analogical operator establishing all kinds of practical equivalences among the different divisions of the social world. (Bourdieu, 1990a: 71)

These classifications and values mark and inculcate the body in specific contexts through their enactment in practice. The embodiment and reproduction of these practices reproduces the system of classification through which those bodies are classified. Therefore, through their normalization in specific localized situations, bodies and the practices that they enact appear as if they were 'natural' or innate rather than social constructions; for both observers and practitioners of those practices, what is socially learned is 'internalized as second nature and so forgotten as history' (Bourdieu, 1990a: 56).

Extending Bourdieu's concepts to an analysis of race enables us to break from the misrecognized naturalness or essentialized notions of bodies, practices, and race, as well as theories grounded in the plasticity of performativity, and instead understand racial identity as defined through embodied cultural practices in specific local embedded contexts. This alternative theorization will enable us to construct a new model of racial identity and racial politics grounded in bodily labor and practice.²¹

Since the body in practice mediates race and identity, when a 'mismatch' between the body and the practices it enacts occurs, the naturalness and inherentness of racial identity is disrupted and broken (Bourdieu, 2000a: 159). This mismatch shatters our expectations and breaks our commonsense anticipation of normal behavior for that racial group. When the physical body, say my White body, does not agree with the cultural practices, in this case African-American practices, an incongruity forms between the visible body and the enacted practice. This mismatch makes explicit the way that racial identity is not established a priori, but rather is relationally defined in practiced everyday life. This exposure is symbolically powerful, because it illuminates the stability and the investment of the commonsense racial order and the circular racial logic in the inherent and naturalized grounding of race in the physiological differentiated body enacting those cultural practices that inherently define it. Bourdieu argues that all 'racisms':

perpetuate themselves because they are bound to the body in the form of dispositions and also because the relation of domination of which they are

the product perpetuates itself in objectivity, continuously reinforcing the propensity to accept it, which . . . is no less strong among the dominated than the dominant. (Bourdieu, 2000a: 181)

The entrenchment of the dominant racial order is perpetuated and reproduced because legitimation of the established racial order occurs almost automatically in the everyday reality of the social world (Bourdieu, 2000a). The practice of racial identity does not make race an optional identity or something open to immediate transcendence, as if race can be simply uprooted from its basis in racial domination. Viewing the practice of identity through cultural forms, not as natural or essential practice, opens up the possibility for a new understanding of race. Because of the visceral grounded nature of culture in the body, dance is a seminal place to investigate the connections between the body, culture, and racial identity.

Since the body is malleable raw material cultivated and formed through practices, it is open to being 'retooled' as it is socialized and cultivated into new practices. This bodily retooling requires what Wacquant calls 'body work', which is not a matter of conscious choice or obtaining intellectual information passed on through logical reasoning, but arduously acquired through inculcation, bodily labor, and training (Wacquant, 1995b: 72). Viewing dance as an inculcated and embodied practical knowledge acquired through training and labor offers a situation in which we can de-naturalize the body and illuminate its socially constructed and socially classified identity. When bodies engage in cross-cultural or cross-racial practices, the way they are performed and the racial ideologies, aesthetics, and knowledges that define those cultural forms are manifested through the body in their enactment (Bourdieu, 1990a). In the case of dance, what we are concerned with is not, after all, a representation as a symbolic text to be read, but embedded and embodied knowledge in practice exhibited in particular social contexts.

East of the Ryan, October 2002. We made our way down one of the aisles to the dance floor attracting obvious stares. We were the only White folks in the entire club and it was our first visit. Our self-consciousness made us feel as if everyone couldn't wait for us to make asses of ourselves. That or maybe some act of over-dramatized minstrelsy or a Whitewashed version of Steppin'. We tried to stay out of the regulars' space on the dance floor, making our way to the right side of the dance floor toward the front of the room. The music was an up-tempo contemporary hip hop song; we started dancing and really got into it.

Our dancing felt good that night. We were moving well together, moving in the music, interpreting and working off each other, feeling as if we were right in the pocket of the music. But suddenly I heard a woman yelling

behind us. At first we were a little worried; we were not sure if the voice was directed at us, but it was loud and emotional. We turned slightly to see a woman in her early 40s several tables back from the dance floor, standing up, clapping, and yelling over the music, 'You go on!' This exclamation, much in the call-and-response ethic of the phrase 'Let's go to work', was a call of encouragement for dancers to dance their best. As she kept clapping, we suddenly realized that she was gesturing to us; she was acknowledging us as participants in the community rather than as exceptions to it.

This acknowledgement and encouragement boosted our confidence and spurred us to dance harder and execute some of the most complex and intricate moves we knew. As I turned Julie around me, I noticed now that we were the center of attention and the entire corner of the room was now watching us dance. As we kept dancing, we heard more shouts of encouragement: 'Get down' and 'Yeah! That's right.'²² Later, as we turned to leave the dance floor, there was a whole crowd of people looking at us, smiling and clapping – some looked half-amazed and some half-incredulous, as if they had never seen White people dance before, or at least certainly not Steppin' the way we were dancing. Obviously we were not demonstrating the expected social behavior of Whites that dominates our racial categories when we think of White people dancing.

As we passed through the aisle on the way back to our seats, the once seemingly indifferent crowd was now gregarious. People were looking us in the face and smiling. One woman put her hand up for a high five, while several men gave me reassuring head nods. When we finally reached our seats, the people around us, who before did not seem to notice us, immediately turned and started talking to Julie and me. I wondered, Why the change? Why the applause? What did they think about us? Almost instantly, in the mere minutes of dancing to several songs, we seemed to have gone from total outsiders to people who were welcomed and respected as regulars. I had come to realize one simple point: they were not responding to the novelty of our skin color; they were responding to us as dancers.

The sight of me and my partner Steppin' in all-African-American clubs destabilizes some African-Americans' commonsense notions of Black and White identity. Everyone sometimes misrecognizes the connection among cultural practices, the body, and racial identity. Just as the Black body has been constructed as naturally rhythmic and musical, the White body is seen as its opposite: devoid of rhythm and soul. In this situation, what they expect to see from Whites dancing and what they actually see are radically different. When we are Steppin', we do it in a way that is not normally associated with White racial identity or the way White people are traditionally supposed to perform this African-American dance. The incongruity between the racialized body and the performance does not make sense for

most people. When these do not match up, dissonance is created. We are doing something that Whites normally do not do or do not know how to do. When we do not 'perform' our race correctly, explanations must be given to make sense of these transgressions. Because the physical body is always seen as the underlying basis of racial identity, any deviation or ambiguity concerning the body must be quickly resolved and explained away.

Our presence on the scene both as White people and as skilled dancers with a specific bodily knowledge created a tension regarding our identity. Our presence was viewed either strictly through our skin color – understanding race through the dominant social categories – or through the style and bodily knowledge of our dancing – understanding us through our practice.²³ In the former view the other dancers used the common racial categories of analysis to describe us, whereas in the latter view these categories no longer mattered, as they defined us through our ability to dance. Here I emphasize not what we thought or felt about what we were doing, but how people responded to us. While these two modes of racial understanding, and the different ways these understandings are manifested in each category, are sociologically significant for analysing and understanding racial identity, in order to understand this alternative way that racial identity can be transformed through cultural practices, we need to look specifically at the various ways that people responded to the apparent incongruity of us dancing.

Race as a category of analysis

Steppers responded to us through race as a category of analysis in three different ways. First, they marked us as a different type of White people. Second, they believed that we must have African-American heritage, and third, they acknowledged us as racially different yet accepted us as regulars.

The first type of response was that we were not 'regular White folks' or we were a 'different kind of White people'. This became a general theme in many conversations I had. As one of the first persons I ever encountered at a Steppin' club put it:

Man, you got balls to come up in here. How did y'all hear about this place? Seriously man, you got some nerve. I mean coming up in here, what were you thinking? You must be all right. My name is David. I wanted to introduce myself. I figure if you've got the nerve to come in here, you must be somebody with something going on. You are definitely not regular White folks if you just decided to show up here.

Another acquaintance said:

You two [me and my dance partner] are definitely not regular White folks. For you two to come in here and just start dancing with everybody like it's no big thing, that takes some serious nerve. You don't seem nervous at all – you must be some real down-ass White folks. That is all I can say.

This sense of violating Chicago's codes of segregation and subjecting ourselves to being the only Whites in the club challenged their normative orientations of what White people traditionally did. As a result, they needed to augment the traditional racial categories, in this case 'different' or 'not regular' Whites.

Others remarked that coming to all-African-American clubs means that we must have 'been around'. This expression seemed to refer to our comfort at being around large numbers of African-Americans or our ease in being the only Whites in an all-Black club. This was stated by Marcus, an acquaintance I knew on the scene, who one evening told me, 'You've got a little bit of gangsta in you to come here. There isn't anybody who is going to mess with you up in here. I can tell that. You're not regular White folks, I'll tell you that.' When I asked several regulars if other Whites had ever come to any Steppin' events, they mentioned 'tourists that would just come to watch us dance, but never did themselves'. Because we violated these patterns of segregation and did not appear intimidated by our marginalized status, they were forced to augment their category of White identity to explain our presence and actions. In this way they could keep the dominant social category of White to explain what we looked like, but change the definition to include non-traditionally White characteristics.

A second more extreme version of this use of social categories of race is that some people took us out of one. Getting to know us as regulars, people at the venues we most frequently attended began to re-racialize us. As Andre, one regular dancer said, 'Okay. Now level with me; you got Black in you, don't you?' I replied that as far as I knew, I was just White. His response was a firm refusal that there was no 'Black' in me: 'No, fuck that. You've got Black in you. That's a fact. Because you're definitely not White; you got Black in you, the way you dance. You may look White, but you're definitely not White!' This process of re-racialization, redefining us from White to Black, re-inscribes the traditional social categories of race – only now places us in a different category.

Another acquaintance, James, confided one time:

I don't understand it, but you're White, because White people don't dance like that. They just don't. I don't mean to sound racist, but you know White people just I mean, they just don't have the soul.

Yet another couple one evening turned around from the table in front of us and said:

We've been watching you two dance all night. You're some down-ass White folks. So where did you learn to dance like that? You dance better than most everybody out there. And those are Black folks. I can't explain it, but man you two can dance.

Most notable in this process of re-racialization was a conversation with one dancer, Thomas, with whom we became good friends. One evening Thomas invited us to join him at his table:

Thomas: You're my nigga. That's my nigga there [speaking to his group of friends and pointing to me].

BH: Hey, uh, Thomas, let's not go there.

Thomas: But it is not like that. When I call you my nigga, that means that we're tight, that we're friends. It doesn't mean the same thing as when White people say it. So I can say it because you're straight, man. You are definitely not White. You're my nigga now. You're one of us now.

Here, race as a category of understanding is still central. In these cases, the need to explain this tension between physical appearance and bodily knowledge cannot be done easily with the dominant social categories of race. Because the dominant social categories of race have such a deep hold over the way we conceptualize racial identity, these examples of re-racialization show the constraints within which people must categorize. Because our presence and dance ability was problematic for the Steppin' community, they needed to re-racialize us as Black to make sense of our dancing and accept us into their world.

A third way that people responded to us through social categories of race was to acknowledge our racial difference, but at the same time downplay it in order to make us feel more comfortable in the Steppin' environment. One evening we were at a Steppin' party where we saw our friend Larry, who we had come to know on the scene. He approached our table to say hello. Larry said that he would introduce us to Sam, the house DJ and a local radio personality, and walked us up to the DJ stand. Sam welcomed us to the club. As we walked back to our table, Larry put his arm around me, saying:

You're family now. Ain't nobody going mess with you up in here – now you're family – remember that. You know me and now you know Sam. You don't have to worry about any problems. You feel free to come here any time we have a set. No need to feel uncomfortable or anything like that, okay?

On another evening, a promoter who was passing out pluggers to an upcoming event stopped by our table and said:

Hi. I just wanted to let you know that you two are welcome at any of the events we have. I've seen you at a couple of other events. So please don't hesitate in coming to ours as well; you two are always welcome.

People wanted to reassure us that while we might feel awkward as the only White people in these contexts, we did not need to feel this way. Through these reassurances we were recognized as regular participants on the scene. This dual marking was at the same time an acceptance into the community and yet a reminder that re-inscribed our racial difference through traditional social categories of race.

Since our looks did not match our actions, this created tension and confusion. Since African Americans feel that most Whites never undertake this kind of behavior, the rarity of White bodies venturing out alone into all-African-American communities and practicing African-American culture destabilizes traditional social notions of White racial identity and forces them to make sense of our presence and our dancing in some way. Some did so by expanding their definition of what it meant to be White, others re-racialized us, while still others acknowledged our racial difference yet also welcomed us as regulars within the community. All of these responses used race as a social category to define us and treated race as static, inherent, and essentialized differences that are absolute and definitive.

Race as a category of practice

To master an embodied expressive practice like Steppin' requires a significant amount of bodily labor and years of training that are neither easy nor arbitrary. Steppin' is more than just dance knowledge and skill; it involves aesthetic, cultural values and tastes.²⁴ As Bourdieu would point out, our comportment was not demonstrated through conversation or what was spoken, but was revealed in practice by bodily knowledges and dispositions beyond the reach of language's self-censorship or political correctness (Bourdieu, 1990a). This was not just about knowing the dance Steppin'; participating as regulars in the community, adopting the aesthetic and normative codes, and crossing racially segregated spaces all contributed to the ways that people responded to us. When the stereotypical expectations of the White body are violated – where the race as a social category is transgressed through bodily knowledge – a different type of response also occurred. Through understanding us through our practice of Steppin', we were met with responses of confusion, recognition, and community acceptance. This practice became more important than our racial category in defining our identity.

When I spoke to people at Steppin' events, the first question that they

would straightforwardly ask – usually with a hint of suspicion – was, what were we doing there in the first place? One acquaintance candidly told me, ‘You know, folks I’m sure are wondering why you are here. I mean, White folks don’t just show up out of nowhere to dance.’ Or as one eventual acquaintance put it:

I bet most people probably think you’re a cop. Why else would some White dude be here? Look around, how many White folks do you see in here? When a White guy comes in, it’s usually for some other reason and not for fun. I’m sure lots of folks here think that. But folks figure it out once they see you dance. They definitely don’t think you’re a cop then; they know why you’re here.

While at first people responded to us in terms of our racial category, once they saw us through the practice of dance, their responses became based on this practice.

Upon seeing us dance, the first and most immediate reaction people have is one of shock. The sight of White people dancing this way disturbs their normal conceptualization of White as a racial category; more shocking to them than the sight of Whites at their clubs is the competence that we display dancing. My partner and I were always met with the questions of ‘Where did you two learn to dance like that?’ ‘Who taught you?’ ‘Where did you get those moves?’ As Bourdieu emphasizes through his theorization of the body, here the body is communicating something more important than a racially marked surface: a competence of cultural practice that cannot be faked. Because embodied knowledges cannot be explicitly articulated, they reveal more than can be controlled consciously. While Whites may be out of place in this milieu, what is even more surprising is their ability to perform this African-American cultural form, and it is through this practice of dance that our identity was defined.

After the initial shock wears off, a second more important distinction is made by the patrons of the clubs which we were dancing in that forms our identity – that of competence. One of the first times we were dancing at 3G’s, a club on the South Side of Chicago, an area that is largely African American due to the hyper-segregation that defines the geography of the city, a promoter approached us on the dance floor. He apologized and said:

I don’t mean to be rude and interrupt your dance, but I’m leaving and I have got to give these [promotional materials for an upcoming event] to you, y’all dance so damn good. You have got to come to this. There is going to be a great DJ and we need dancers like you to be there.

Another example of this expression of competence and recognition came when Julie and I attended a private party held by one of the many Steppin’ promotional groups. The first time we came off the floor, a large man

walked right up to us and said, 'Hey my man, you two are cool – you can definitely hang.' In an apparent gesture of male comradery, he reached out and slapped my hand for a handshake as he looked over and smiled and nodded to my dance partner. He nodded his head again and with a little laugh repeated to me, 'You can definitely hang. I can tell you that.' Still others have made casual remarks such as, 'Yeah. All right, y'all step!' or 'Y'all step y'all asses off' as we have left the dance floor or when striking up conversation with us at the bar. Finally, one particularly memorable comment was made by a bouncer who followed us outside the club one night as we left. While I thought we might have left something behind or somehow done something wrong, he leaned out the door and called to us, 'Hey, y'all done good in there. Come on back anytime.'

In this way, a more radical conceptualization of race has nothing to do with skin color, but rather with people's practices, which are more important than their visible social category of race. If we were just two other African-American dancers in the club, we certainly would not get the same level of attention, because the social understanding of race would be transparent: Black bodies dancing well is completely congruous with our embedded racial schemes. People might still respect and appreciate our dancing skills, but the surprise and shock that results from the incongruity of White bodies and the seamless practice of Steppin' would disappear. Here we are doing this African-American cultural practice, not in the refuge of the North Side of the city, an area that is predominately White in contrast to the South Side, but in an all-African-American venue. People's racial expectations are further complicated because this performance of dance is competent and thus earns appreciation and respect from that community.

This sense of respect comes not through our patronage of paying cover charges and buying drinks but as a result of our dancing; what is recognized in the way we dance is the cultural labor and dedication that we have undertaken to master an important cultural form within the African-American communities of Chicago. As we became more and more aware of the way that people were responding to us, we grew more and more self-conscious. As we entered a new club for the first time one night, my dance partner said to me:

Why don't we go dance right away – before we get drinks, before we do anything else – just so we don't have to go through the whole process of everyone looking at us and wondering what we're doing here. That way we can just get it out of the way and relax.

As a result, we made an effort to establish our presence as dancers as soon as possible to avoid people responding to us suspiciously through the traditional racial categorizations.

One way this form of respect has been consistently demonstrated is that

promoters always make sure we have the latest information on their parties and are up-to-date on the inner-circle knowledge, such as the best or trendiest spots to dance or when and where the best parties are being held. One promoter approached us at a dance at the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers, of which one of the Steppers was a member, and introduced himself. 'You and your lady dance real good. Here's a plugger for our next set. We would like you to come. My name's Steve. What's yours?' At another event, another promoter said, 'I'm throwing a set next week and I want you to come to it. We do a real nice job. You'll like it.' In the recognition of our dancing, there is a sense of mutual respect that drives much of this acknowledgement; respect for the dance is respect for the people, and this brings respect back to us in return. In the case of Steppin', we obviously could not learn to dance like this in a vacuum or abide by the normative and aesthetic codes of the community, which was all acknowledged and articulated through the way other Steppers responded to our dancing.

After a while, people were inviting us to their private parties. One woman we had seen as a regular on Tuesday nights at the club 3G's invited us to her birthday party downtown at a non-Steppin' club. The week before the party we saw her out, and she reminded us: 'Y'all are comin' to my party, right? At Chromium? I remember I gave you a plugger last time – it's going to be a real good time. You should definitely come out.' As we became regulars, this sense of respect normalized us in the community, and bouncers and event greeters would acknowledge us on the way in or out with a 'Hey, you're back, all right' or 'Hey, thanks for stopping in. See you next time.' While these comments are trivial in the sense that many patrons are greeted and thanked when entering and exiting the clubs, our normalization was instantiated through our very unexceptional status as regulars on the scene.

The construction of race is predicated on its practice; race must be enacted and constantly reproduced (Bourdieu, 1990a, 1990b, 2000a, 2000b; Butler, 1993, 1994, 1997; Goffman, 1959, 1967; Wacquant, 2003). It is here through the normalization of fixing performance with the body that race becomes essentialized (Fanon, 1991; Hall, 1996d). We posed the problem that the physiology or explicit racial marking of the body as skin color must be remapped as the traditional racial identities of African American and White are transgressed through bodily knowledge and practice. Identity based in practice enables us to examine the difference between the racialized cultural form and the racialized body of the actor in practice. When racialized bodies and the practice of racialized cultural forms are no longer congruous, race as a social category of analysis is no longer useful in defining identity. Therefore, we must turn to understand the centrality of practice in defining the significance of racial identity.

Re-racializing the material body

When people see us dance, it confuses their expectations of how 'White' racially marked bodies are supposed to 'do' African-American culture. One cannot merely 'pick up' Steppin' by watching or reading about it. Steppin' is not a commodity that one can purchase, like a CD or an article of clothing; it requires bodily knowledge, time, and practice. Embodied knowledges, because of the labor required for their mastery, reveal a depth of experience that is not immediately available for self-fashioning. One must invest a significant amount of time and bodily labor into Steppin' in order to learn it. This embodied expressive practice requires cultivation and years of training that are neither easy nor arbitrary. The practice of Steppin' is more than just dance knowledge and skill; it involves ethical, aesthetic, and cultural dispositions of values and tastes Bourdieu (1990a, 1990b).

Racial commonsense is so powerful that we continue to read the body on the surface, with its tangible visibility of 'color', as a way to try and ground the reality of race. It is almost impossible to imagine ourselves outside of this visual mapping; this racial marking is part of our racial epistemology and almost inseparable from who we are. We have a practical commonsense trust in the objectivity of observation and accept these visual cues as truth when it conforms to our expectations, to the degree that we assume that these bodily fictions are naturally part of the flesh of the body. Where visible racial marking serves as the primary basis for classifying identity, this certainly can just as easily be undermined.

The case of the White Steppers, when understood through the model of embodied cultural practice, provides a way to understand how the body can be re-racialized. Because of the failure of explicit skin color models to map racial differences, a new theory of race that is based on the body in terms of labor and practice is necessary.

The body, seen through Bourdieu's framework, is both symbolic and material and does not serve 'one' purpose. The body as symbolic raw material shows how bodies are marked on and worked on; they are never predetermined biological facts. The body is groomed, dressed, and sculpted by social labor and social processes, which invest it with meanings and values.²⁵ These processes socialize the body into a signifier of social meanings. Practices of the body in everyday life serve as a site where collective identity is created, asserted, and negotiated. The body as symbolic material is malleable and can be metaphorically African American or White. Putting the White body in styles that are White and putting the African-American body in styles that are African American conforms to our racial commonsense. But when we change this order and put a White body in a style that is African American, as in the Steppers example, or in hip hop, with the case of Eminem,²⁶ we no longer treat that body within the usual

categories and expectations of the commonsense logic of race. In these cases, the White body is not 'playing' or pretending, but is African American through its competence in the practice. These are rare exceptions, in which White people are able to transcend the logic and aesthetic of Whiteness and cultivate alternative values and aesthetics. In these cases, there is more than just an appreciation of African-American culture and tastes enjoyed from a distance; there is a cultivated and embodied relationship with these practices. It is the cultural labor that allows one to move beyond playing African American to actually embodying these cultural practices and enacting them according to the logic of the specific local community they are situated within. The shift of focus from racial skin color to practice is a shift from the superficial and trivial to something deeper – culture and knowledge. The visual indicators of race evade the crucial question of racial formation and instead rely on the absolute and static notions of race as essential and marked by skin color.

The practice model of race breaks down our commonsense understandings of race and our deterministic and essentialist ideas of racial groups and essences that are supposedly inherent in bodies. In addition, practice undermines the grounds for racial difference based on arguments of authenticity, naturalness, and biology. The practice model allows us to illuminate the mechanisms by which racial markings occur and are naturalized. By understanding the mechanisms that naturalize difference, we as analysts and social actors are able to gain a point of leverage to break the essentialism of race and differentiate between Whiteness and White people, Blackness and Black people.

The bodily practice model does not mean that theorizing racialized identities should focus only on individuals and local situations; in no way does the individual example of the White Steppers change the structural relationships of race in the larger society. The White bodies are still 'White', but this does not prevent their integration into the Steppers' world. The African-American Steppers, by re-racializing the White dancers, have transcended the boundaries of racial difference. But this 'racechange' is fleeting (Gubar, 1997). These transgressions have little social structural impact on Whiteness and African Americanness as governing racial mythologies or on the organization of these social structures, and does not change the fact that when the White Steppers leave the club, they are perceived as White by society at large, as the dominant commonsensical racial schemes come back into play. The ability to inculcate these practices within any individual body does not necessarily imply that these practices are acts of resistance, or guarantee any political effectiveness (Lovell, 2003: 14). However, this sociological understanding of race as a category of practice destabilizes our doxic racial schemes and normalized racial boundaries and opens up possibilities for a sense of individual and collective agency that *can* be political and used

to challenge and struggle against the authority of our assumed racial foundations that structure societies in racial dominance.²⁷ Just because the body is 'White' does not mean one must subscribe to or perpetuate the logic of Whiteness.

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Notes

- 1 Several scholars have used Bourdieu's notion of cultural capital in the theorization of boundaries between groups and how they are constructed through inclusion and exclusion. (See Hall, 1993; Lamont, 1994, 1999, 2002; Lamont and Fournier, 1993; Lamont and Lareau, 1988; Lareau and Horvat, 1999.)
- 2 For a detailed analysis of race as a category of analysis and race as a category of practice, see Loveman (1999a, 1999b). See also Bourdieu (1990b, 1991), Bourdieu and Wacquant (1999), Brubaker and Cooper (2000), Jenkins (1994) and Wacquant (1997). For studies of group formation through racialization, see, among others, Bonilla Silva (1997), Fields (1990), Ignatiev (1995), Omi and Winant (1986) and Roediger (1991).
- 3 I define social dance as any form of partner dancing in which leading and following serve as the basis of the dance.
- 4 See, for example, Frankenberg (1993, 1997), Ignatiev and Garvey (1996), Lipsitz (1998), Roediger (1991, 1994, 2002), Waters (1990) and Winant (1997). All make important contributions to discussing Whiteness and White identity in terms of race as a category of analysis, through historical and political factors that constitute group formation, rather than understanding the micro-social understandings of individual identity of individual actors engaged in cultural practices.
- 5 See this tradition exemplified in Auyero (2000), Lamont (1994) and Wacquant (1995a, 1995b, 1998, 2003).
- 6 See, for example, Baker (1998), Davis (1991), Lopez (1998) and Yu (2001), for overviews of this historical basis of racial categorization on skin color.

- 7 For historical discussions of African-American dance, see Batchelor (1997), Emery (1989) and Stearns and Stearns (1994).
- 8 For excellent discussions of the Harlem Renaissance and its significance within the African-American community, see Cooke and Horn (2002), Erenberg (1981), Gottschild (2002), Huggins (1973), Lewis (1979) and Locke (1999).
- 9 Steppin' as a form of social dancing must not be confused with the African-American Step dancing of African-American fraternities and sororities, which was featured in Spike Lee's movie *School Daze*, a performance-oriented dance where individual dancers perform choreographed moves in a line or group (Fine, 2003).
- 10 There have been other offshoots from the Lindy Hop, such as West Coast Swing and the Hustle, that were picked up in the White community.
- 11 I define whitewashing as the process by which cultural forms are de-racialized and assimilated into White society. See Gubar (1997), Lott (1995) and Roediger (2002).
- 12 I define Whiteness, following Bonilla-Silva (1997, 2001, 2003), Frankenberg (1993), Hartigan (1999), Lott (1995), Roediger (1991, 2002) and in particular, as the invisible, normative, unspoken – commonsense – assumptions about the normalized operation of the racial organization of society by which White values, ideas, aesthetics, preferences, and privileges are made to appear natural and the basis of the social order.
- 13 In *Black Picket Fences*, Mary Patillo-McCoy (2000) discusses how working and middle-class African Americans often engage in 'code switching' between formal American English and vernacular African-American English as a way of establishing community. Garner and Rubin (1986; cited in her footnote) found in their sample of Black lawyers that nearly all use Black English in more comfortable and familiar surroundings. Similarly to Patillo-McCoy, I attempt to reconstruct the pronunciation of the vernacular language with which people talked to us. In addition to more accurately representing the people we met and interviewed, their use of Black English when speaking to us also reflects our status as insiders as they spoke to us as they did with others in the Steppin' scene.
- 14 Whiteness Studies sometimes deploys such a distinction between social and sociological understandings of race in its analysis and at other times conflates these notions. One of the recent advances in Whiteness Studies has been the theorizing of the heterogeneity and complexity of the relationship between Blackness and African-American people, but as John Hartigan (1999) has pointed out, Whiteness Studies has failed to do the same for Whiteness and Whites, because this same distinction serves to muddle the clarity of Whiteness as a system of racial domination.
- 15 Gilroy (1997) argues that hip hop represents the Blackest of African-American expressions. Given the overwhelming influx of non-African

Americans into the hip hop community as artists and participants since Gilroy published that statement seven years ago, that label could now be applied to Steppin'.

- 16 This resonates with Suttles' experiences in *The Social Order of the Slum* (1970), in which he discusses his interactions with people in the neighborhood. At first he thought people were prejudiced or inhospitable, but he then came to realize that he was simply out of place. His mere physical presence there was very unexpected (1970: 47–51).
- 17 For this tradition of resistive practices, see hooks (1992a, 1992b, 1994), Kelley (1996), Lipsitz (1998), Mercer (1994) and Rose (1994).
- 18 This ethnographic methodology draws upon Paul Willis' *The Ethnographic Imagination* (2000), in which he argues that it is critical for the ethnographer to be there in order to understand the non-verbal meanings of dress, style, bodily dispositions, ways of walking, talking, gesture, and posture that are the basis of meaning-making in everyday life while simultaneously framing these meanings within a larger analytical framework.
- 19 For discussions of African-American practices structured through the call and response dynamic, see Caponi (1999), Gottschild (1996, 2003) and Malone (1996).
- 20 See, for example, Caponi (1999), Gilroy (1993), Hall (1996c), Kelley (1996) and Malone (1996) for discussions of expressive practices and African-American culture.
- 21 This work builds on and significantly departs from the work of Ignatiev and Garvey (1996) and Roediger (1991, 1994, 2002) for their respective traditions of Neo-abolitionist and Race Traitor politics.
- 22 Again I draw upon Willis' ethnographic method of emphasizing the importance of the connection between language and the material world to illuminate why these expressions carry such weight in this context (Willis, 2001).
- 23 Viewing race through the lens of practice does not mean that race is erased or that it no longer has any social meaning; rather through the competence of culture practices race as a category becomes unimportant in defining identity.
- 24 For a discussion of this idea of the cultivation of the body, see Bourdieu (1990a, 2000b). For a discussion of the Black body and its cultivation in cultural styles, see Hall (1996c) and Mercer (1994).
- 25 See Boyd (2003), Bozza (2003), Briggs and Colby (1999), Daws (2001), Roediger (2002) and Ross (1996) for discussions.
- 26 See Boyd (2003), Briggs and Colby (1999), Bozza (2003), Daws (2001), Roediger (2002) and Ross (1996) for discussions.
- 27 For examples of politics grounded in performance, see Butler (1993, 1994), Gubar (1997) and Lott (1995).

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■ **BLACK HAWK HANCOCK** received his PhD in Sociology from the University of Wisconsin-Madison and is currently a Visiting Assistant Professor at DePaul University. He is completing a book on the cultural and racial politics of the social world of dance entitled *American Allegory: Lindy Hop and the Racial Imagination*. Address: Department of Sociology, 990 W. Fullerton Ave., Chicago IL, 60614, USA. [email: bhancock@depaul.edu] ■