Fractured whiteness: On the sensory and temporal conditions of Russian femininity

Maria Lönn

Situated in the overlapping fields of critical whiteness studies, feminist and decolonial phenomenology, and sensory studies, this PhD thesis consists of a reorientation of questions of race and racism: from a focus on non-white others to a project which denaturalizes whiteness and its hegemony by focusing on the body and the senses. Even though whiteness operates as a master signifier for the most privileged racial position in the contemporary Western world, it is far from universal and coherent, but rather spatially and temporally contingent as multiple shapes of whiteness are linked to specific geographic locations. Gender, sexuality, race, and class are co-conspirators of sorts in human and racial intelligibility, as some humans are interpreted as less than human. There are thus certain forms of whiteness that are understood to be something other than white, that threaten the very status of whiteness and its exceptionalism. The horizon of racial comprehensibility becomes interrupted when such white bodies do not behave in ways that coincide with locally specific expectations of “white” behaviors and expressions. In order for white subjectivity to maintain its position of racial superiority, I suggest that it must be attributed with certain ideas, characteristics or practices. Following this suggestion, I show that whiteness is closely related to a certain normative temporality and racialized modernity, linked to particular ideas of the body, and especially to ways of distancing oneself from the body. In other words, in order for white subjectivity to be perceived as white as well as modern, it needs to be in line with a Cartesian mind/body split and, in a sense, reject the body in favor of the mind.
One of my core arguments in this thesis concerns how whiteness is always more deeply implicated in the modern self and in the world than how it manifests itself on the level of ideology or representation. In short, whiteness is informed by somatic sensations, by for example how ideas of the modern and the un-modern, the civilized and the un-civilized materialize as feeling and as sensation through touch or smell. How we utilize such sense modalities are tightly interwoven with everyday practices that form bodily habits and perception. The focus of the thesis is, therefore, on the multi-sensory nature of embodied “white” experience. In order for white Russian women to embody white subjectivity, I argue, they need to distance themselves from corporeal elements that remind them of having a body. To pass, as white, they need to embody a peculiarly disembodied racialized temporality.

This very understanding of whiteness as something that takes shape through the body and the senses, by (perhaps paradoxically) rejecting the body, has emerged through a study of white Russian femininity, informed by a sensory ethnographic method developed both in Russia and in Sweden. This sensory ethnographic study involved 23 urban white Russian women living in Stockholm, Saint Petersburg and Moscow, born between 1970 and 1990, all of whom were active in some capacity in the world of fashion: as fashion bloggers, designers, fashion journalists, and stylists. The focus of the thesis is not fashion as such. Rather, to seek informants with a clear interest in fashion was motivated by how fashion at heart is concerned with particular ways of sensing and embodying time. Fashion is oriented toward the future and to questions of newness, at the expense of the outdated and the old in ways that clearly define what is in time, or on time, and also what has fallen out of fashion and hence out of time. Fashion, then, becomes a way to grasp the embodied and phenomenological dimension of temporality, modernity, but also race and whiteness, given that modernity is understood as an intensely colonial and racialized construct.

With a focus on white Russian femininity, and by encountering and interviewing Russian women in Stockholm, Saint Petersburg, and Moscow, the aim of the thesis is to explore the bodily, sensory, and temporal conditions of white femininity. The lived depth of our experiences of the world are never merely visual, but comes into existence through all our sensory modalities. The sense of vision overflows its own boundaries and merges with other sensory phenomena, such as touch and smell, as a way of articulating human hierarchies and differences. Whiteness and its connection to temporality needs to be investigated not only by a focus on vision
and the visible, but through a richer repertoire of sensory experiences. Based on how both temporality and modernity take bodily shape through the senses, my research questions are:

- Which notions of body, modernity and temporality are associated with Russian white femininity?
- How are these notions negotiated and embodied?
- What is the role of the multisensory, lived body for how Russian women articulate a modern, white femininity?

It is important to point out that the participants in my study rarely modulated or motivated their gestures, activities or practices by saying “this is how I do whiteness”. The making of whiteness, like the making of gender, rarely takes shape through conscious thought or explicit statements. My way of accessing the modern body-controlled femininity and its whiteness has been through an intimate level of bodily habits, or more specifically through forms of bodily habituation of norms and body schemas.

The thesis consists of three introductory chapters (introduction, theory, and method), five empirical chapters, and one concluding chapter. The chapter “Doing white femininity through sensory habits” provides a theoretical orientation for the thesis. Here, I highlight how race and racism cannot and should not only be understood in terms of discourse, cultural construction or representation within a poststructuralist framework, but also needs to be conceptualized through bodily motor habits in movements and gestures, mediated by a racial perception. On this deeper level of bodily habituation and perception, bodies are directed and regulated in ways that are but partly conscious and in control by the subject.

I use Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology to unpack some of these questions, in close conjunction with critical phenomenology of race and gender by for example Frantz Fanon, Gail Weiss and Iris Marion Young. I thus engage with the development and critique of Merleau-Ponty by feminist and critical race theorists, and how his phenomenology fails to address how different bodies take shape differently, depending on for example gender and race. I turn in particular to Fanon and his way of thinking bodily schemas as a temporal layering in the body in ways that are inherently racialized and racist. Paying attention to the body helps to highlight how we can adopt a critical, conscious attitude towards racist discourses, yet making race and embodying racism at a more immediate level of bodily gestures. In this chapter, I discuss how whiteness is articulated through
acquired bodily habits which aim to control the body. The chapter also includes the basis for reading whiteness as an intercorporeal habit of sorts, something that moves between and creates bodies, and as something that is entirely dependent on a sensory relationality between subjects and objects.

The second chapter, “Sensory ethnography,” spells out the methodological strategies of the project. The chapter sets out by addressing sensory ethnography and situatedness as a decolonial alternative to the seemingly disembodied, rational, and colorblind scientific gaze. One example of such a sensory counter-method is, with Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, to give in to a way of looking and reading based on curiosity, surprise, and wonder. Another central methodological strategy is a form of haptic reading, a reading which starts somewhere else than with the eyes and ways of seeing, and rather works through modalities of touch. To understand the complex connections between Russian white femininity, temporality, the body, and the senses, the thesis is based on a sensory ethnography which works with and through a particular kind of participatory sensation (rather than participatory observation).

The chapter also includes a discussion of how the senses are far from universal, but rather culturally informed. Although sensory perception is experienced as natural, it is a skill that must be practiced, in relation to which a subject can be more or less competent at activating different senses, depending on cultural habits. In this sense, sensory perception and sensory experience is much like the body itself, a cultural formation which is highly contextual in nature. The senses have ideological, political and aesthetic dimensions and functions and are thereby cultivated differently along the lines of, for example, beauty and taste. For my project, this sensory cultural specificity becomes a way of exploring the embodied politics of location between cities and contexts. The chapter is also the place for introducing the informants more at length, along with reflections on my encounters with them and what it is like to work in a field that lives, breathes and changes.

In the first empirical chapter “Temporal others, whiteness and (un)modern bodies” I analyze how whiteness can be understood in terms of hierarchies of modernities (socialist and capitalist modernity) within a hierarchy of whiteness. In Stockholm, which is the focus of this chapter, the participants experience themselves as connected to a marked imaginary geography (Russia), which in Sweden is associated with a form of time lag and ideas of “lagging behind”. In relation to this time lag, the informants bear witness to how they are associated
with expressions connected to the body—to a sexualized discourse, to mail-order brides and an “over-the-top” form of femininity and/or domestication—which within a Swedish gender imaginary structures them as, what I call, temporal others. This imaginary excessive (and sometimes artificial) Russian femininity can be understood as being “too much body”, and as connected to how Russia gets situated “behind” ideas of Swedish exceptionalism. Russian women here come to function as a primitive lower class of sorts, a geographically marked white trash in ways that collide with assumptions of modern agency and transcendence, tied to an immature immanence that operates beyond white exceptionalism. The temporal other here serves as a political and cultural trope, which gives body to processes of exclusion and inclusion. Russian women in Sweden can hence be said to have a double binding to the body, both in that they are women and also in that they are considered to be “more” bodily in comparison to supposedly unmarked white Swedish women.

When moving on to the next chapter, “Multiple whiteness and other temporal others”, the flexibility of white Russian femininity becomes evident. Interpreted as a temporal other in Sweden, white Russian femininity rather holds (perhaps not surprisingly) a racially privileged position in Russia. In this chapter, multiple versions of whiteness are discussed through two different locations: Saint Petersburg and Moscow. The chapter allows us walk in Moscow and notice how the city holds several modernities that operate at different speeds, which in turn are embodied differently by different people. How do the participants imagine their Moscow, or their Saint Petersburg? Who or what gets to belong to their images and imagination of the city and of themselves, and who or what is excluded?

One central theme of the chapter concerns how individuality functions as a modern as well as white attribute or quality which becomes manifest through the visible and through the gaze. This in turn makes it difficult for some bodies to “pass” in relation to such scrutinization, bodies that thus become marked in terms of race. Geographical locations also become markers of time differences, a temporal differentiation which articulates human difference. Such processes of differentiation and othering include people from the Russian provinces as well as from post-Soviet countries, such as Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, which come to function as Russia’s allochronism (to use Johannes Fabian’s term) and the temporal others of the informants. Similar to the context in Sweden, the privileged white subject position is based on the subject’s presumed ability to autonomy and
self-governance, moderation and “good taste”, which displaces ideas of sexualization and domestication.

In the chapter that follows, “White body schemas and shameful body images”, I suggest that immanent and otherwise untimely qualities are both marked and revealed by bodies and bodily habits. Depending on the participants’ movements between different locations, their bodies become marked with meanings, which force them to negotiate and modify their bodily habits along with their identities. Many of the white middleclass women who moved to Sweden from Russia were surprised when they experienced that they had lost their privilege tied to one geographical place and social situation when switching to another. From passing as respectable white women in Russia, they found themselves in a completely new racial landscape in Sweden. They experienced a new, and for them, alienating and devalued version of their own whiteness. This loss was not only identifiable to others trough the visible, but as importantly through the audible and the kinesthetic; through for example their accents and ways of carrying and moving their bodies. These disorientating experiences of losing a privileged, unmarked position created a fracture in their white self-image. One consequence of this shift was that the previously “unmarked” white body schema now became noticeable. The unmarked whiteness in terms of appearance, but also their former supposedly “neutral” way of talking and walking, hence became cracked. In order to recreate a meaningful white identity and sense of white comfort, the informants felt the need to develop new bodily habits that corresponded to local ideas of being unmarked. As a result of this loss of white privilege and familiarity, many of the informants expressed surprise, anger or even shame.

The informants’ relation to clothing and fashion made possible a discussion of how white body controlled femininity is facilitated by interaction with objects. In the chapter “Bodily techniques of femininity and modern objects”, I address how the participants in order to stabilize a desirable white femininity extend and discipline their bodies with the help of different objects. I explore how whiteness—here in terms of white femininity—never acts as an isolated entity, but rather is joined and made possible through objects. To stabilize a desirable white femininity, one which is strikingly disembodied, the participants discipline as well as extend their bodies with various objects (make-up, girdles, and materials that let the body breathe rather than break a sweat) in hope that these will mask or cover up the ways in which the body makes itself known. Objects are productive in so far as they “do” something with the body, which in my study resulted in a
sort of duplicate hierarchy of objects. On the one hand, there was a hierarchy that included how objects were ranked in relation to their different symbolic values, geographic and temporal logics, as well as in relation to class and race in terms of who used the object. By virtue of a colonial temporal logic, in relation to which time is homogeneous and linear, certain clothing materials were related to progressiveness and civilization, which was assumed to be traceable in the fabrics.

On the other hand, there was a hierarchy of touch and how the fabrics felt against the body. As a medium for expressions and experiences of social values and hierarchies, touch and tactile senses and skills are integral to social life. The tactile encounter between the self and the fabric was centered around sensations that were affectively charged. A discomforting sensation (such as static electricity from an artificial fabric with the tendency to smell of sweat) was understood as marking the body most clearly, fracturing the idea of a disembodied or body controlled whiteness. The participants wanted to sense what they perceived as modern, have access to sensual delights from soft fabrics as a source of bodily pleasure and satisfaction. The sensory dimensions of how a garment feels and smells acquire knowledge through the skin: polyester for example was given a classed, gendered and temporal label, and as such also stimulated a classed, gendered and temporal sensation. With the help of racialized, sensory, and temporal rationalities, the participants chose fabrics such as linen and silk that not only carry connotations of the “right time zone”, but also avoid specific bodily sensations, such as smell (which could remind them of the smelly temporal other or the fact that humans still are animals). Fabrics were used to center a local, white, middleclass sensation that did not activate the body’s outbreak of sweat, and thus helped the participants to present a fantasy about being bodiless—an important element for white subjectivity which wishes to be associated with mind.

In the final empirical chapter “Purity, smell and modernity”, I discuss how purity, cleanliness, and odor control offers a vision for modernity and hence for whiteness itself. The discourse of that which is unclean, as well as its opposite—purity—acts as a normative principle and temporal imperative, always in relation to a process of civilization and to reason. Smell, I argue, functions as a bodily expression which serves to identify certain bodies as being out of time, hence fostering the construction of certain social categories. Historically, the working classes (and, I would add, non-Europeans) have been associated with the ‘lower senses’ such as taste, touch and smell, whereas the upper classes, represented by white male
Europeans, are associated with vision. This sensory hierarchy is not only gendered, but also racialized.

The devaluation of smell and touch must also be read along the lines of temporality and is linked to the revision of the senses which took place during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Evolutionary theories, propounded by figures such as Darwin and Kant, supported the elevation of sight by decreeing vision to be the pre-eminent sense of reason and civilization. According to Darwin, and later Freud, smell belonged to an early phase of human development and therefore also represents the society’s childhood, which had to give way to sight when the human species began to walk upright and increase the field of vision. Modern humans who emphasized the importance of smell were therefore judged to be either savages, degenerate proletariat or perverts and belonged to a primitive part of human life.

The participants made different attempts to articulate a desirable scent of the modern, far from every whiff of bodily odor. The women from the Russian provinces and old Soviet countries like Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan were accused of lacking such bodily control. Since information about the world is navigated through our senses, the senses are highly entangled with political and cultural factors. Smell – or more specifically ideas of odor – function accordingly as a way to organize and establish social hierarchical boundaries, and has therefore been used to both construct and stigmatize certain social groups. The sensory body hence constitutes avenues for cultural values which has made it possible for people to do (un)conscious distinctions regarding, in this case, geographical, classed and gendered differences.

“Fractured whiteness” is the final chapter of the thesis in which I summarize, discuss, and develop central themes emanating from my project. One of these themes concerns how white ideology has triumphed with an assumed natural, pure, or somehow unmarked being in the world. However, white femininity and white bodies require practices to maintain this imaginary position: for example, by using materials that do not cause uncomfortable sensations, learn movements that signal femininity and modernity, or remove the body from its natural odor. White femininity thus occupies a complex position and a paradox. It is expected to occupy both the universal, empty white position held to be racially unmarked, civilized and pure, while at the same time use means of improving the body to maintain this idealized status. Though white femininity cannot be reduced to the corporeal, it is a paradoxically disembodied project which is realized through the
I discuss how individuality, autonomy and self-governance function as important characteristics of modern white femininity, which can be said to be in line with a notion that white subjectivity in general takes shape by suppressing its dependence on others. I also further the discussion of how white femininity makes particularly clear how whiteness is never just tied to one’s own body, but is intimately entangled with other bodies. The informants are both seeing others and being seen, touching and being touched, they are both subject and object. In this sense, my focus on white femininity articulates a specific form of relational embodiment: an intercorporeal whiteness. An intercorporeal way of understanding white femininity opens up a possibility to read race through alternative forms of divisions between subjects and objects. Subject/object relationships serve as means of understanding how white subjectivity, in the encounter with the other (which guarantees white subjectivity), uses the other as an object to become a subject itself. In the thesis, I show how these limits are impossible to maintain, since they always, like the limits of the body, are permeable. The informants can be rewarded with the status of a white subject in one context (Russia), but lose it in another (Sweden), thus turned into an object. How the informants travel between such different positions of subject and object is conditioned by localization. The experiences of the bodily self are influenced by the experience and perception of other people around them.

One important contributions of the thesis is a corporeal and sensory understanding of race and racism. This view was facilitated in particular by the bodily habits and movements of the participants located in Saint Petersburg or Moscow. They sometimes responded to racialized bodies in their Russian cities through a series of racist gestures, which were an intimate part of their body schemas and habits. These actions did not necessarily correspond to their own self-perceptions and how they interpreted themselves. They could in terms of self-presentation claim that they were not racist, but in their bodily habits act otherwise. This is an insight that clearly shows how racism is something that only partially operates on a conscious level. In other words, critical conscious thinking is not enough to combat racism, since such a focus on thinking itself overshadows how race and racism is deeply embodied and inscribed in actions, practices, perceptions and material existences. If we one-sidedly focus on conscious and openly manifest forms of racism, we miss how ideas of race are embodied and embedded in our way of being. This type of knowledge is particularly important in times of all the
more violent racism and nationalism, which makes the need of knowing and understanding race, racialization, and racism in partly new ways rather acute. Then again, people are not necessarily determined by racist bodily habits and perception. The very instability in bodily movements and schemas holds a potential for change, for unlearning and relearning gestures and movements.

Last but not least, I suggest that whiteness needs to be understood as something always already broken or fractured, something that always holds or incorporates that which it avoids, even expels. By studying Russian white femininity, I have tried to show that whiteness always contains breaks and fractures, and perhaps in particular the kind of whiteness which aspires to be pure, coherent, unmixed and unmarked. To put into words a different understanding of race and whiteness in terms of temporal rupture, but also as an intensely corporeal and sensory layering and sedimentation, I borrow from Audre Lorde’s (1984: 100) *Sister Outsider*: “The white fathers told us, I think therefore I am. The black goddess within each of us—the poet—whispers in our dreams, I feel, therefore I can be free”.