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Eugenics and Physical Culture Performance in the Progressive Era

Watch Whiteness Workout

Shannon L. Walsh

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Dedicated to Scott, Josephine, and Elliot.

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Introduction: Exorcising a Forgotten Physical Culture

Our ideology is simple: Weakness is a sickness which rapidly degenerates the quality of body and mind.... It means purging the willfully weak people out of your life. It means the burning away of everything and everyone which does not benefit you. Therefore, we at Vengeance, battle weakness here and at home, pledging to help you do the same.... The elite all do certain things in common. *“only the inferior strive for equality.”* ... Instead of becoming victims to life’s circumstances, join the rebellion against the world’s complacency and sloth. Take the Profane Oath to do battle against that force which degrades humankind into the disgusting, diseased, incapable, grey masses that you see before yourself. We leave no revenge up to the slavery of a god that does not exist. (Vengeance Strength Kvlt)

The mission statement of the Vengeance Strength Kvlt gym in Nashville, TN, embracing a long history of eugenic rhetoric, does not explicitly mention race, but instead relies on an extreme ideology of individualism (burn away everything that does not benefit you), social Darwinism (only the fit survive), radicalism (don’t let them victimize you), and atheism (God does not exist). Additionally, it dispenses with utopian narratives (“you too can be happier if you are more fit”) and positions itself as against all other forms of physical fitness, including the form it is most like, CrossFit, even though it borrows heavily from the CrossFit aesthetic. The implied violence here is not directed *at* any one

person or group, but instead takes the form of a masochistic maneuver to purge the self, and therefore society, of weakness.

Despite its vague references and neutral language, the iconography on the Web site and news stories position Vengeance Strength Kvlts as, at the very least, aligned with the alt-right. As I read through the “About” page visions of Charlottesville flash across the screen of my memory. When protesters from Showing Up for Racial Injustice Nashville confronted gym founder Sky Lemying about his ties to Operation Werewolf and Wolves of Vinland (WOV), groups tied to white supremacy, he responded, “This business doesn’t have ties to our personal lives. I think the controversial claims made against the WOV ultimately come from a place of ignorance, fear and bigotry. Vengeance is comprised of an eclectic group of people who support many different ideals” (Wade Gervin 2017). He moved on to point the reporter to his non-white gym members for their opinion.

White supremacy has always been adept at covering its tracks and traces. Black activist and educator DeRay McKesson references this maneuver in his regular use of the phrase “watch whiteness work” on Twitter.¹ Any time a white person is treated with more compassion, sympathy, or restraint by police or others in positions of authority than a person of color, McKesson invokes the mantra. His regular and repeated invocation of the phrase (sometimes separated by periods to add emphasis, as in “Watch. Whiteness. Work.”) operates on multiple levels. First, it highlights whiteness in a culture practiced at invisibilizing whiteness, making it assumed and therefore unmarked. Here, whiteness becomes absorbed into the fabric of “everyone’s” experience. Second, “watch whiteness work” is theatrically framed. We are watching whiteness. We are compelled to witness its workings. The phrase implies an audience. Finally, it also implies that the whiteness is performing. It is working in a double sense of the word. It is certainly working for white people. It is also laboring, even though, as I argue in this book, it often performs effortlessness to mask this labor. Whiteness in these cases works very hard to convince its audience it is one thing, while actually being another. As performance scholar Faedra Carpenter argues, “whiteness *is* by being what it *is not*” (2014, 9). The white supremacist rhetoric and symbolism Lemying mobilizes to describe his form of physical training borrows from

a long, long history of purposeful disguise. McKesson's "watch whiteness work" asks us to witness whiteness putting on sheep's clothing, and then calls it out for doing so.

This book strives to unmask the racial inequity at the root of the emergence of modern physical culture systems in the US. Not unlike recent arguments about the healthcare system, this project forwards physical culture as part of an ensemble of institutions that historically and ideologically privilege and invest in white middle- and upper-class bodies, ensuring they have the fitness needed to succeed as productive agents in the workplace and the world. The following chapters refuse to forget the paradoxical history of fitness in the US. That history and those who made it have both empowered and demeaned women, offered economic transcendence while abjectifying the economically disenfranchised, and uplifted Black, indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) communities while also denying them access to and excluding them from gyms and programs. Physical fitness programs have done all of this while remaining celebrated by federal government, social welfare, and educational institutions. Fit is *the* desired state of being. Everyone, it seems, should engage in physical activity and exercise, and want to be fit. Such widely circulated assumptions enable moral and ideological equivalencies to be made about a person's value to themselves as well as society. For instance, the cover of Bernarr Macfadden's *Physical Culture* magazine barked, "Weakness is a crime. Don't be a criminal!" at its readers for decades in the early twentieth century. You can now buy a t-shirt bearing the phrase, along with an image of Bernarr Macfadden flexing, on Zazzle, an Etsy-type online market (Physicalculture). Such nostalgic cross-marketing demonstrates the broad array of powerful institutions and media through which corporations and ideologies compel people to work on our bodies. The ubiquity of such messages and products masks the way such ever-present incitations to workout sideline ideals of community and connection by asking us to focus solely on ourselves. Why has the physical fitness movement been, and continue to be, so white? How were individual exercise routines meant to shape entire populations to act and perform "whitely," as performance scholar Megan Lewis suggests, over time and why?² How do private acts of self-management enable categorical differentiations of class, race, and gender?

In this book, I trace how various sites of physical fitness performance—known in the Progressive Era as physical culture—became sites of whiteness-in-the-making. My book investigates five sites: Steele MacKaye’s Americanized Delsarte philosophies between 1871 and 1873, physical director Dudley Allen Sargent’s work at Harvard and the Harvard Annex for women 1889–1914, Minneapolis YWCA physical director Abby Mayhew’s physical culture curriculum 1893–1897, Bernarr Macfadden’s physical culture publications 1891–1915, and the physical culture exhibitions performed at the Model Indian School at the 1904 Louisiana Purchase Exhibition in St. Louis. These diverse sites were part of an explosion of physical culture during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in the US. I focus on physical culture—systematic, non-competitive exercise performed under the direction of an expert—because tracing how people practiced physical fitness in the Progressive Era, especially middle- and upper-class white women, reveals how modes of popular performance, institutional regulation, program accessibility, and ideologies of individualism combined to sublimate whiteness beneath the veneer of liberal progressivism and reform. I choose to explore these sites because they give the fullest picture of the different strata of physical culture for women during that time. First, they demonstrate the unracialization of whiteness through physical fitness practices, illuminating the ways in which whiteness became a default identity category absorbed into the “universal” ideals of culture, arts, and sciences. Second, they show how physical culture circulated as a popular performance form with its own conventions and production design, audience, and promised profitability. Third, they reveal fraught connections between the daily habits physical culturists promoted and the eugenic movement’s incitement toward more reproductively efficient white bodies. Finally, to conclude I look at the remains of these ideologies and practices as they manifested in the rise and fall of CrossFit—a high-intensity physical training program. By examining these written, visual, and embodied texts, this study insists on a closer scrutiny of the implicit whiteness of physical culture and forwards it as a crucial site of analysis for performance scholars interested in how corporeality is marshaled by and able to contest local and global systems of power.

WHY PERFORMANCE

Performance theory provides a means to address how physical culturists utilized exercises and discourse in specific communities across cultural strata as a way to shape individual bodies and—through repetition and reproduction—entire populations. Looking at physical culture through the framework of performance allows us to see how bodies imbibe, transfer, proliferate, and remember specific physical culture practices. By looking at how everyday, mundane “techniques of the self,” affect global ideological, symbolic, social, and economic orders, this project refigures the position and impact of eugenics on physical culture in the US.³ Additionally, I argue that performance serves as a citational strategy that frames in a historical moment—either in photographs or live exhibitions—a specific body’s or bodies’ practices. Performance is crucial to understanding how these daily routines and habits became a “natural” way of being and moving through the world for a modern subject. Using performance as a framing mechanism allows me to examine how physical culture practice moved through and among bodies, making visible its historical contingency. By looking at moments in Progressive Era physical culture that expose the contingency of certain naturalized practices, I aim to open spaces to consider how physical culture might help us be governed, and govern ourselves, “differently and, perhaps, less.”⁴

The repeated references to government, management, and regulation in Progressive Era physical culture demonstrate the ways it aligned with emerging ideas of what Foucault referred to as liberal governmentality.⁵ To summarize his series of lectures on biopolitics, Foucault suggested that he spoke of liberal governmentality “not as a theory or an ideology, and even less, obviously, as a way in which ‘society’ ‘represents itself,’ but as a practice, that is to say, a ‘way of doing things’ directed towards objectives and regulating itself by continuous reflection” (*Birth* 2003, 318). As a “way of doing things” I align liberal governmentality with Elin Diamond’s assertion that performance is always “a doing ... embodied acts, in specific sites, witnessed by others (and/or the watching self)” and “a thing done ... the completed event framed in time and space and remembered” (1996, 1). Viewing liberal governmentality as a performance enables an exploration of *how* individual performative acts of self-cultivation serve as “vital acts of transfer,” travelling from one body to the next through witnesses, eventually spreading across entire populations (1996, 2). In return, biopolitics provides a way to examine how

these various acts are then utilized not only to govern populations, but also order and separate those populations according to performative categories of race, gender, and class. Examining physical culture through these lenses opens up a space to understand how its practices govern our bodies, to examine its contingency and in so doing provide an opening for different forms of (self) government, and thus the potential to reconsider, and perhaps redraw, boundaries of class, race, and gender.

The repeated doingness of performance helps explain how certain acts of transfer cease to bear the markers of their creation and come to be perceived as natural, or given.⁶ In Derrida's deconstructive sense "performativity signals absorption," a naturalness to the way something is enacted that masks its constructedness.⁷ In other words, in order for a behavior or an act to become a "nature" or "essence" it must disappear, or as Bourdieu suggests, be "internalized as a second nature and so forgotten as history" (1990, 56). As a medium for staging moving bodies, physical culture performances facilitate the construction of the nature of populations, make that nature visible, and in doing so make the bodies involved calculable and governable. However, performativity, as Derrida and Butler suggest, is always already "a citational practice," and as such often destabilizes the "given" nature of certain conducts (Derrida 1988; Butler 1993). In order for a conduct to be absorbed it must be practiced and repeated. For example, women's physical culture used repeated practicing of exercises in order to showcase the practitioners' absorption of certain movements into their bodies, demonstrated in the final performances as a naturalness through the perceived effortlessness of the movements.

However, returning to Diamond's definition, performance as a process of naturalization is never foreclosed or complete in that, with every performance, the unnaturalness of the movements is misremembered. It is at this crossroads, where both the "doingness" (its immediacy as an action happening right now, in the moment) and the "doneness" (its history as a series of repeated gestures with historical and ideological weight) of performance come to the forefront, that we have an opportunity to reimagine ways to change or shift the way power operates on us. Taking both the radical contingency and the historicity of performance into account, performance scholars Shannon Jackson and Joseph Roach articulate theories that provide the foundation for this book's exploration of physical culture. Jackson formulates her theory in relation to the

Progressive Era's reform mission, specifically addressing the reform activities performed by Chicago's Hull House residents around the turn of the twentieth century. She suggests that the shared etymology of reform and performance link both processes together to "re-create individuals by restoring behaviors and environments along alternative lines" (1996, 339). In other words, reform practices borrowed from past behaviors in order to reimagine the present through the body.

Roach's theory of surrogation imagines a similar combining of past, present, and ultimately future as he explores circum-Atlantic performances of racialization. Roach proposes that societies cope with loss—variously expressed in death, trauma, and/or historical distance—by refashioning substitutes to perform the functions and replace the affective weight carried by the person/custom/thing that has left. Such a process, Roach argues, demonstrates a "doomed search for originals by continuously auditioning stand-ins," highlighting the ties and tensions between historicity and contingency (1996, 3). For example, Progressive Era physical culturists often asked their middle- and upper-class white students to mimic the movements of rural and urban manual laborers in order to keep them in shape in their more sedentary work. In several examples in this book surrogation enacts both the citational and absorptive aspects of performativity by appropriating the daily physical actions of racially or economically disenfranchised groups, then perform those actions as effortless, therefore natural, aspects of an ideal white upper-class physical fitness practice, thus continually staging the actions of people depicted as part of an evolutionary past. These instances of surrogation not only destabilized an ideal white masculinity, but also demonstrated how performing race, class, and gender operated to spur white women to adopt behaviors that would ostensibly make their bodies and minds better suited to motherhood.

The following chapters genealogically trace the ways that physical culture organized, categorized, and cultivated bodies in ways that shaped them to occupy specific roles in the productive and reproductive economies of early liberal capitalism in the US. The remnants of these processes remain in contemporary ties between the physical fitness of individual bodies, and the mental and emotional health, economic productivity, and whiteness of the nation as a whole. By examining magazines, newspaper reports, visual media, medical examination logs, exercise manuals, committee reports, and physical culture discourse around the turn of the twentieth century, this book investigates the incessant, though disguised, labor involved in the practices and discourses that are taken for granted as part of fit living today.

DEFINING PHYSICAL CULTURE

Physical culture emerged as a historical movement throughout Europe and the US around the middle of the nineteenth century as Swedish and German systems of gymnastic exercise began to spread into colleges, universities, and newly built city gyms mainly run by Young Men's and Young Women's Christian Associations (YMCAs and YWCAs). Physical culture most often described daily habits meant to affect and correct bodily functions (digestion, breathing, musculature, circulation) and enable individuals to manage their behaviors through interventions into dress, bathing, posture, and diet. Reformers saw it as a way to combat the confined, polluted, and often sedentary character of urban living because the exercises and routines could be effectively deployed in small indoor spaces. Physical culture exhibits appeared at World's Fairs in both Chicago in 1893 and St. Louis in 1904, at exhibitions in Madison Square Garden beginning in 1902, and also at multiple smaller exhibitions given by schools and classes based out of the multitude of city gyms. In this emerging urban economy, consumption—the purchase of services, products, and entertainment—became justified as a central aspect of rational recreation, a pivotal practice for the emerging middle class. Rational recreation was then sold to the working classes in a way that historian Chris Waters suggests used middle-class values to keep them “working,” and thus outside of the boundaries of the middle class (1990, 22; see also Holt 1990). By the turn of the twentieth century, the physical culture movement hit its peak with classes in most public and private schools, numerous exhibitions on both local and national levels, mass production of related equipment and machines, and a panoply of rapidly circulating media—magazines, books, photographs, and films—championing its positive results for men, women, and children.

MUSCULAR MOTHERHOOD

I focus primarily on young white women practicing physical culture because, as a group, they were the main target of much physical culture rhetoric and practice in the Progressive Era, in part because their successful birthing of healthy white offspring became a central concern of the emerging eugenics movement. During Reconstruction and moving toward the Jim Crow Era, deep concerns surfaced about the strength of the so-called native-born white race in the face of the

northern migration of freed Blacks and the steady stream of immigrants to USAmerican shores. Anxieties began to appear in newspapers, novels, and magazines about white women's physical and mental capacity to bear and raise children as white birth rates plateaued and began to fall off. As a result, as sports historian Patricia Vertinsky points out, nineteenth-century medical and physical culture discourses constructed white women's bodies as "eternally wounded," and focused on the maintenance and protection of women's reproductive organs in order to tether women to their appropriate sphere, the home. In response to this repressive apparatus, she argues, many women turned to exercise as a way of "freeing themselves" from the restraints of the Victorian ideals of femininity, which included maternity (1990, 15). In contrast, sports historian Jennifer Hargreaves argues that emerging patriarchal physical educational and medical institutions were more concerned with restraining women. The Victorian cult of the family, she suggests, functioned as a "bourgeois ideology and acted as a dominant and constraining force on the early development of women's sport," concluding that women were victims of patriarchal institutions (2002, 52). Most feminist sports historiography on the Progressive Era tends to focus on physical culture as either a form of self-government that led to agency and liberation from hegemonic patriarchal forces or the constraining force that bound women to the domestic sphere. Athletic women in these narratives are either hapless victims or empowered pioneers.⁸ In addition, I argue, exercise, correct diet, and healthy habits came with the promise to young white women that they could be the saviors of a white race perceived to be under threat and in decline. Too much exercise, say in overexertion, competitive sport or heavy apparatus work or lifting weights, would result in a further weakening of the already prone-toward-weakness white femininity or worse, her masculinization.

WATCHING WHITENESS

In this book, I join in with a chorus of other scholars and public intellectuals who suggest that we are now reaping the fruits of what the dominant white culture sowed into whiteness during the Jim Crow Era in the US.⁹ Physical culture provided a convenient and pervasive mechanism by which to stitch whiteness and white supremacy into the seemingly racially neutral discourses of health and fitness. As a result, to be fit meant to