To Take Dancing Seriously Is to Redo Politics

I ask you Lord why you enlightened me, Without the enlightenment of all my folks, He said cuz I set myself on a quest for truth. And he was there to quench my thirst. But I am still thirsty ....... ....... what I am searching for are The answers to all which are in front of me, The ultimate truth started to get blurry! For some strange reason it had to be, It was all a dream about Tennessee.

—Arrested Development, “Tennessee”

I was tempted, in my first reaction to the question put to us (“Do we need to reject/transcend/escape an old way of thinking variously called Western Rationality/Science/Logic if we are to attain a better world?”), to paraphrase Gandhi and respond that Western rationality would be a good idea. But to be critical of “Western” rationality simply because of its inconsistent uses or the bad effects of particular uses of it is insufficient ground for criticism. I am, however, more interested in the anxieties that are shot through concern with Western whatever. Does the question imply that to criticize Western rationality is to reject, transcend, or escape it? Can one write, think, or act in a way that escapes the gravitational pull of one’s history? Look, my language is imbued with that about which I’m prepared to be critical—“Western” rationality. And it will continue to be throughout this essay. I am, like most who read this, both produced by and a producer of that West. To examine it, to want to be critical of its limitations, is not to be able to leave it behind and skip ahead into some glorious Western rationality-free future. (Indeed, from this point on, take it as read that any form of the West or Western is within quotation marks. “The West” is more than just what has always been understood as the West—the history of a particular group and geography. Remembering that can be a way to retain some humility about the Western Enlightenment from which our ideas about rationality, science, and logic flow. But thinking about and articulating the “worldliness” of the West can also be dangerously close to arrogantly sneaking in an insistence that since the West isn’t simply Europe, the project of Western Enlightenment is universal. In other words, to say that the West is made up of a multiplicity of groups and negotiations among cultures ought not to lead us to assume that, therefore, whether or not credit for Western rationality is claimed by Europe, the whole world produced it—and thus it was inevitable.)

But what is the anxiety I sense underlies the question? I suspect—given countless diatribes against poststructuralism and postmodernism from commentators in numerous places across the political spectrum—that it makes sense for me to perceive some anxiety in a question about criticisms of totalizing gestures cohering in the notion “Western rationality.” It seems to me that the question speaks a concern that failure to consider the world within the terms of accepted frameworks inevitably leads to divisive alienation, fragmentation, paralysis, nihilism, and the failure or end of politics, etc. (In other words, the question shares some of the hysteria of the religious confronting unbelievers.) All of which makes me wonder, what on earth was responsible for producing divisive alienation, fragmentation, paralysis, nihilism, etc., etc., prior to the advent of a number of notions, analyses, and theories generally referred to by the terms poststructuralism or postmodernism? The Anti-Christ? (And I am sure that such effects existed prior to the introduction of Derrida’s work here in the mid-1960s.) And given only a brief survey of the 200 plus years that the United States has been a sovereign state, one might well ask what doesn’t, at
What is the relation of rationality or reason to politics?

That confidence is my target here. Western rationality's hegemony marginalizes other ways of thinking about the world. Within the terms of its hegemony, what isn't considered rational—anger, desire, pleasure, and pain, for example—becomes a site for disciplinary action. Such action can take the form of language (or strategies based on commonsense understandings) such as "when the U.S. public realizes or learns the truth about social or economic or political injustice, it will want to do something about that injustice," or, "once white working class people learn that corporate capitalism is using racism to manipulate them, they will want to join with racially oppressed people against capitalism." These things are, of course, consummations devoutly desired by many of us. But pleasure or fear are not easily disciplined by reason even if they are not totally separate from the workings of reason. The interstices between our "rational" interactions and our other kinds of responses is not clear ground.

What is the relation of rationality or reason to politics? Reason's production of better knowledge is the progressivist justification for believing that reason can help us to a better world; however, it is also false assurance. I don't want to give up on the work of making a "better world," but the tools of rationality/science/logic are not enough. Just how are we to think and about what are we to think? How much can rationality tell us about the world? It seems to me that the question that we're responding to in this exchange itself bears witness to the limitations of its own thought: the limitations of rationality as a method, an epistemological posture for the work of politics. To answer on the question's own terms is to be bound by those terms: "reject" one way for another? "transcend" Western rationality to go beyond some better place, some better idea? "escape" the confines of a particular prison in order to create another? And, finally, what is "a better world"? For whom, under what circumstances, when, and against what or whom? What if instead of doing any of those things—reject, transcend, escape—we were to begin with something far less totalizing? We could begin with a caut-
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I opened this article with a quotation from the rap group Arrested Development to illustrate what I mean when I refer to rationality as a God-head. The lyrics describe a conversation between the rapper Speech and the Lord, to whom Speech turns for help in finding the truth. The Lord promises to deliver that truth, but Speech remains unsatisfied. The ultimate answer-satisfying "truth" eludes him; it blurs finally. Perfect understanding, like absolute justice, or freedom, or community, or like a return to a mythical and mystical Tennessee, is more easily dreamed than encountered.

One way to see how misplaced is uncritical confidence in Western rationality is to look at patriarchy and racism's reliance on and resistance to rationality. Reasoned arguments, for example, made in the 18th, 19th, and 20th centuries here in the U.S. for extending the benefits of rationality or the rights that come out of the Enlightenment to white women and black women/men didn't end racism or disrupt the patriarchy. Do not, however, confuse my reminder with my arguing that history should not have happened the way that it did, that people should not have agitated in the ways that they did with the tools at their disposal. Those moments brought their gains and it is from within the comfort of some of those gains that I speak now. Still, rationality often "dies" multiple deaths in the fact of what people want to believe. And therein lies the rub: the ties of rationality to pleasure, desire, anger, and fear. Reliance on rationality marginalizes attention to the realm of the irrational—wherein pleasure and pain partially reside. I don't want to suggest that pleasure and pain are never tied to reasoned responses to the world; it is precisely because they are not so easily separated that they constitute a challenge to rational discourse. Like Monty Python's Spanish Inquisition, you never know where or when pleasure (or pain) will show up. And then throw a wrench in the works.

Did a reasoned "truth" about "black people," about "blackness," produce a civil rights social movement? Or was it the insistence, on the part of blacks and their allies, on a new "truth"? Did the "truth" about the gendered nature of power and its constructions of social reality produce feminism as politics and theory? Or was it the explosion, the deconstruction of the old truth's limitations, that did so? Those engaged in challenging entrenched political power tied to a particular ethnic group or a particular gender entered politics—a negotiation that demanded new truths, disavowals of old appeals to in-place accepted rationality—and began contestations for power that could not afford to wait until appeals to reason persuaded those who were resisting.

We are well acquainted, for example, with the problem represented by the historically produced rationality of 19th century enlightened humanism that produced arguments for slavery that were based on its benefit to the slave. So how can we be confident that we know what "knowledge" to preserve? Those arguing for slavery's beneficence from the position of rationality were not necessarily horrible people. It simply never occurred to them that there were limitations to what they knew, to what they could reason; therefore, it was easy for them to "reason" that blacks weren't human (or weren't sufficiently so), that women were incapable of thought (or insufficiently capable to justify an education). We cannot even now "reason" our way to a rational argument explaining the irrationality of racism that will put a dent in racism no matter how much knowledge informs our rational appeals for justice.
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not found, fought for—not given.

Anger or desire can "kill" rationality: for example, beating to death a disobedient or smart-mouthed slave who nonetheless represented a considerable capital investment against potential production and profit was an irrational act—within the terms of capital preservation and enhancement logic. But it happened. What anger or desire interrupted the otherwise compelling reasons for preserving capital? Historians Alexander Saxton and David Roediger (among others) and black intellectuals across the 19th and 20th centuries, from W.E.B. DuBois and Zora Neale Hurston to Cornel West and Hortense Spillers, have argued that racism is the manifestation of complex psychological and ideological mechanisms, which remain in force long after capitalism's need to justify slavery or Western conquest—in large part because it helps whites forge identity, because it fulfills complicated desires. Capitalism does not necessarily require racism (though racism is useful to it in many ways); it exploited and exploits poor and working class whites all over the U.S. and Europe quite nicely. Grappling with the desires fulfilled by racism—and rationality's limitations as a counter-force to those desires—also makes up the work of politics.

I am not disavowing the use of rationality, of reason, in the negotiations and contestations that constitute politics. I (standing on the terrain of post structuralism/post modernism) am suggesting that knowledge is produced—not found, fought for—not given. Blacks contested the dynamics of power, remade "truth" by asserting other claims. Many whites were not then and might not ever be persuaded by appeals to reason, to what we "know" and agree to be "truth"—that all men/women were created equal, for example. Jane Flax argues that "it is simply not necessarily the case, especially in politics, that appeals to truth move people to action, much less justice" (my emphasis) ("The End of Innocence," in Feminists Theorize the Political, eds. Judith Butler and Joan W. Scott, New York: Routledge, 1992). The civil rights movement, like all movements to change the social, political, and economic terrain, was multi-faceted in its politics. It negotiated among knowledges, the desires of one group to attempt to break the stranglehold of another group, and the trade-off between the amount of chaos its strategies were able to introduce into the machinery of the State.

If I Can't Dance... —Emma Goldman

For politics in our moment we have to figure a way to speak to, to call on, things that have at best a vexed relationship to "reality"; we have to call on, make appeals to, and understand things like pleasure even as we pay attention to pleasure's relation to the social world. I've talked briefly about the limits of rationality's disciplinary effect on racism's relation to whites' desires or anger, but it is to the relationship between pleasure and politics that I want to turn for the rest of this essay.

Postmodernism's emphasis on the specifics of multiple, even collage-like, contingencies, formations, recognitions, and identities, could remake our thinking, our strategies, our politics. "To embrace politics in a postmodern sense," according to Michael Ryan ("Postmodern Politics," Theory Culture & Society vol. 5, nos. 2-3, 1988) "is to place a stake on contingency, on the insight that power, no matter how grounded in 'reality', how seemingly bound to 'material' necessity, is up for grabs, movable, and therefore removable." Deployments of the grand narratives that construct universal truths which undergird our conventional sense of and strategies for politics have been inadequate to the task of delineating the messy overlap areas of things like group cultural practice, racial identity, gender re-imaginings, and play, as well as the relation of those things to historical circumstances and change.

Subcultural style and production is a terrain whose features are and have been largely invisible to the conventional Left's analytical purview. Because certain kinds of analytical knowledge dominate Left theorizing—class, for example—the potential of specific cultural practices have been read either as inimical or incidental to better "real" world making. But pleasure and play are key to the realm of the political. Therefore, what might politics as fun look like? How might we articulate an
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analysis of such a dynamic? I want to use an unusual example here to illustrate what I mean; it is unusual in the sense that I haven't seen or heard any attention given to this particular subcultural practice.

How might we, for example, give an account of a particular racial group's specific cultural practice and its possible connection to politics? I want to answer that question in the "Jeopardy!" quiz show form: what is a black drill team? I raise the issue of black drill teams because at the recent Save Our Cities March in Washington, D.C. where there were a larger proportion of black people (many of whom were poor and working class) than any such demonstration in recent memory. I watched and listened to a white couple, who had identified themselves earlier as Leftists, say—while shaking their heads sadly—that it was a shame and so ironic that the black drill team they were watching was so caught up in copying military movements and sounds. The male half of the couple went on to say that someone should be explaining to those kids the meaning of what they're doing.

There it was again. The voice of "reason," always already there with the "correct" analysis, the Truth.

So, what is a black drill team? The black fraternity "step" contest—especially the formation and movements of "Da Fellas"—in Spike Lee's School Daze gives a hint of the performance intricacies of black drill teams—although such teams perform without the homophobic chanting that was so much a part of that scene in Lee's film. The chanting that goes on during black drill team performance is generally call and response to the drill leader's admonitions to and eulogies about the team's performance, and, often, its abilities vis a vis other teams. It is ironic that Lee's film represents male performers only when young women's groups make up so many of the black drill teams. So a black drill team is an articulation of black subcultural response, over the decades since the First World Wars, to black exclusion from highly aestheticized military band and drill rituals. It is a critique of that exclusion. It's the revising of those rituals to allow for the use of polyrhythms in both drum and body work. Is such a revision an interrogation? A black drill team is the transformation of military aesthetics into peace time black community performance, a bonding ritual with musical accomplishment. It's both a complicated accommodation to and critical commentary on black community relations with the military and military forms. It is also the internalization—never complete, never simple—of a master narrative of warrior ritual, and yet it's often performed by young black girls. While a drill team's default position in a parade performance is rows and columns, its aesthetics both run counter to those of the military and of high school majorette squads, and incorporate some of them with signal differences—consider the context.

Young women and men chosen for black drill teams don't have to look a certain way. They need not have beautifully coiffed long hair; they do not have to be thin. They do have to be able to dance, to move in syncopation with the others on the team, they have to be able to perform.

Unlike military bands, "playing with" (breaking up and reforming) their rows and columns is the highlighted aesthetic. Drill teams on the move do not necessarily preserve linearity—they play with it. The row and column formation is a grid which from time to time functions to contrast the team's departures from it. Black drill teams frequently form single lines that twist and curve, with intricate dance movements, from one side of the street to another; they stop parades continually in order to perform tightly choreographed routines. In fact, what is most consistent is their inconsistency of movement, their lack of regular forward motion.

One might say that a black drill team is an incredibly cathedged performance of anti-racist theory, counter-military aesthetics, group creativity, and certain kinds of aesthetic appropriations and reappropriations. If this is theory in motion, where do we locate its articulation? What would you say about it? What are we to make of it?

What are the implicit politics of a black drill team? Can we make of such a practice's contestations—its counter-aesthetics—a program, a strategy for social justice? Do we simply note what is
and has happened in the history of these groups? What is happening? The circumstances have changed somewhat from the originary moments of drill teams. The military is integrated—although high schools and their bands, especially their majorette corps, are not.

What are the elements of life on the ground that produce drill teams? I've noted racist exclusion from the white military, certainly. But African dance and music polyrhythmic retentions make their way into drill teams as well as musical instruments of European descent. The teams are class mixed, but are generally made up more of working class and poor kids who are found hanging out around communal public recreation spaces. One finds them in small towns (like the small mill town in western Pennsylvania in which I grew up) more than in cities, and they are relatively rare in the suburbs—even the all black working class suburbs around cities like Washington, D.C. They are segregated for the most part, although the drills, steps, and movements—like most informal black dancing—are non-gender-specific.

Do the elements reinforced in performance manifest themselves in a new knowledge, in a will to power, in a critique of existing social relations, in political agency? For what political spectacles might the aesthetics of a drill team have prepared a black audience? Perhaps, for example, the spectacle of the Black Panthers marching in syncopated and tightly organized lines and columns resonated in the minds and hearts of many black on-lookers in part because of that spectacle's appeal to an aesthetic that pre-existed both the Panthers and drill teams, but was renewed by both—rhythmic body movement that marks a formal separation from the dominant culture. Considerations of what goes into the maw of aesthetics and pleasure could help us determine the relation between cultural play and politics.

When I look at black drill teams, can I follow a straight line from military and/or high school band and majorette corps racism, repudiation, and creativity to political engagement? After all, when are performance lines of highly syncopated, somewhat military drills (even without military symbols) explicitly political? One could argue, as did the Leftist couple at the March, that such "play" keeps people from otherwise radical politics. But I'd like to suggest that speculating about black drill teams is one way to take seriously the realm of play as a necessary precursor to figuring out more complicated and efficacious politics. Not to do so is to allow our ignorance and preconceptions about what constitutes the political to keep us away from the messy ground of somebody's everyday culture.

What does this drill team stuff have to do with politics? "We cannot live without our lives"—and we certainly can't do politics without them, nor can we eliminate the parts of our lives that don't seem to fit on an axis leading straight to universal recognition of justice, of freedom. Those ambiguous and messy parts of our lives—like pleasure, like the ungrapability of our micro histories—constitute the world we want to make better.

We want people to be agents and there at the Save Our Cities March some young people on drill teams were beginning just that work. And who is part of black drill teams? People who identify themselves in the realm of a larger public as black (or African-American), certainly. But what of their identifications within the group? The New Kensington (Pennsylvania) black Elks Club drill team constructed itself against the Vandergrift or Rankin (Pennsylvania) drill teams as well as against U.S. military and local white high school band formations. A black drill team is a manifestation of temporary unity against a racist history and a racist present at the same time that within the safety of the group it fragments that unity as a manifestation of micro (gender, sexuality, and regional) specificities. The complexities of identity forging and dissolving within this cultural practice can teach us something about the world—but only if we don't dismiss the practice as false consciousness or as polyrhythmic opiate for certain of the black masses.

What is a black drill team for? Where does one see its operations? Is it part of the practice of being culturally black? Black Americans were formally excluded from politics until fairly recently and had to find other ways to make politics; the stakes for examining those "other" politics are high. And criticism is a necessary component of that examination. What if, for example, that which was once resistance isn't anymore, has outlasted the historical moment that produced it as a political praxis? What if the drill team activity is just cultural "fun"? Does its "play" leave it outside of politics? Of what use then is my analysis of it? Perhaps it depends on the circumstances for my address, its audience, and its intentions. What returns again and again to my mind is the presence of those particular young people at that march and its range of possible significations. Further, their participation added to the pleasure of that occasion for a lot of the people who
I'm a post-structuralist teacher-critic leftist.

were there. Does an analysis of their praxis and its relation to pleasure “make” politics more complicated? Can the extent of the drill team’s politics be measured? To insist that its activities are political only if the members self-consciously “know” that they are is a reassertion of someone’s judgment making itself knowledge of a group’s complicated activities. Rather than decide that a drill team is only of use if it gets the young people involved into more explicitly political (or recognizable as such to certain ways of thinking) engagement, we would need to begin our analysis by rethinking who is evaluating whom, under what circumstances, and to what end. We’d have to consider what is meant by “use” and by “more explicitly political.” And we’d have to be less certain that we can, finally or completely, answer those questions.

What does this micro example tell us about conventional rational imaginings of the world and its tools of analysis? If a conventional Left rationality is unable to imagine a black drill team as an object of analysis and possible site for politics, does that inability indicate something of the limits of Western science and rationality in accounting for the nexus of pleasure, ritual, history, and political significance? Of all the questions that I ask here, this is the only one to which I can return an unequivocal yes. I’ve looked at black drill teams because they are a demonstration of a particular marginalized group’s specificity of life. What is at stake here is the necessity of complex analyses of culture in order to more efficaciously “do” politics.

W e can learn to live without relying on rationality, reason, or science as charms to get us through the dark of a complex world. We can maneuver with less sureness, with provisionality always at the forefront of our thinking, with contestation as a dynamic even among allies and not simply with our opponents, and with the awareness that there are limits to what we can know.

What is the creative form of indeterminacy—especially as explanatory matrix—against the damage done in the name of sureness? Postmodernist theories suggest that there’s always more to say, more to know, more to negotiate (Gayatri Spivak: “So, when I hear someone putting up one Indian

voice as representing India, I feel I should say: look, there is more.” (Social Text 9.3, 1991). Are we paralyzed by discovering limits, by not being sure that there is a universal good, a common politics, a general strategy? Only if we need to feel that we’re always right, that we’ve said the last word.

Maybe it’s because every letter, note, or card that my mother ever wrote to me (from the time I could read any words at all) was signed “mom” (small initial letter “m”) within quotation marks that I have long been comfortable with unstable categories of thinking/describing the world; my entrance into language was accompanied by my mother’s ability and, equally to the point, her willingness, to distinguish between a position (parent) and other aspects of whatever else made up her life. Perhaps my mother’s insistence on not deriving (and then internalizing) all of her identity’s components and possibilities from one overdetermination—mother—was a form of living with indeterminacy that Audre Lorde (“School Note,” Black Unicorn, W.W. Norton, 1978) also articulates:

for the embattled
there is no place
that cannot be
home
nor is.

There is no home, no single self, no sure way of “knowing” the world or one’s position in it. There is no resting place and we are deluding ourselves if we think reason will provide it. We make our resting places temporarily and circumstantially as well as the means that will take us from one such place to another: we reason, we contest for power against others’ power, we guard against sureness, and we pay attention to desire, anger, pain, and play.

I’m a post-structuralist teacher-critic leftist. What I’ve written here is what I do whether I’m thinking, teaching, or engaging in politics (including strategizing). I think that it is part of my privilege, my work, and my pleasure to insist that those three activities are not clearly demarcated. Learning to live with the difficulty of not being absolutely sure and the comfort of not having to be is my reward for being critical about totalizing narratives—especially when we call them the truth.