Article

A Vernacular of Surveillance: Taylor Swift and Miley Cyrus Perform White Authenticity

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Abstract

This article looks at popular visual media in the context of the larger surveillance society in which it occurs. Bringing into conversation scholarship in feminist media studies, surveillance, performance, and critical race studies, the piece offers another way to explore race in popular media and consider the implications of surveillance. The work examines how principles from contexts of surveillance carry over into contexts not under surveillance. The article explores the vernacularization—the process of making things mundane, everyday, unremarkable—of ideas about authenticity and performing, and the implications when it comes to race issues, which are animated in contexts of surveillance, but exceed these and are apparent in contexts not under surveillance. Through a critical examination of Taylor Swift’s video “Shake it off,” and Miley Cyrus’s video “We Can’t Stop,” the author argues self-reflexivity marks their performing behavior as distinct from their authentic self, reassuring audiences there is an authentic (white) self under the performance. This authentic self is presented as stable, a core identity most naturally enacted by white bodies, brought into relief by performing otherness.

Introduction

This article looks at two popular mainstream music videos, for Miley Cyrus’ “Can’t stop” and Taylor Swift’s “Shake it off.” It will surprise few critical scholars that my analysis shows whiteness is privileged in the videos, and that women of color, particularly black women, are problematically put on display. My aim, however, is to contextualize racialization in visual media within the current surveillance society, asking: how might the articulation of race in popular forms of visual media be inflected by the larger surveillance society in which it occurs? Critical surveillance scholars note that surveillance practices and technologies have particular implications for disenfranchised bodies (Dubrofsky and Magnet 2015; Browne 2015; Hall 2015a; Magnet 2011). Feminist media scholars have long argued that visual forms of media put some bodies problematically on display, especially women (Mulvey 1975) and people of color (hooks 1992). This article brings into conversation scholarship in feminist media, surveillance, performance, and critical race studies—particularly on postracism—offering another way to explore race in popular media and opening up an additional avenue for considering the implications of surveillance.

Briefly, my understanding of “surveillance society” draws from Gary T. Marx (1985), Nikolas Rose (1996) and David Lyon (2001), who detail a society in which the tracking and monitoring of individuals is ubiquitous and part of the everyday. Partial to Rose (1996) and Michel Foucault’s (1995) theorizing about surveillance, I see behaviors occurring in surveillance societies as the productive result of discourses (ideas and practices that shape meaning), including the interplay between state and non-state authorities, resulting in citizens enacting behaviors, often unwittingly, that provide access to benefits and privileges.

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Surveillance scholar Simone Browne (2015), citing Lyon, warns that the term “surveillance society” suggests a homogenous experience of surveillance without attention to the subtle, and multiple ways in which surveillance functions. Browne (2015) draws our attention to Lyon’s call to look at sites of surveillance so we can be situated and contextual, as well as able to examine commonalities across sites. I focus on situated sites within a larger surveillance society—music videos—seeing these as contexts where ideas about a surveillance society are articulated.

Through an analysis of the two videos I detail a set of principles that stem from media contexts explicitly under surveillance, but are increasingly present in media contexts not under surveillance—in this instance, visual media spaces. Authenticity, I maintain, is at the core of much of contemporary culture, as Sarah Banet-Weiser (2012) suggests, and, I argue, verified through principles that stem from contexts of surveillance. This, I show, has critical implications when it comes to race issues. By looking at how ideas from contexts of surveillance carry over into contexts not under surveillance, I am able to theorize the wider impact a surveillance society can have on how we think about authenticity and the implications when it comes to race issues. I am particularly interested in what I see as a vernacularization of ideas about surveillance: conventions emerging in contexts of explicit surveillance but that exceed those contexts and have become mundane, everyday, unremarkable. My focus is on how vernacularization occurs, how principles privileged in a context of surveillance are both ubiquitous and normalized in spaces of surveillance and in ones not under surveillance, and on the critical implications.

Rachel Hall’s (2015a, 2015b) articulation of how whiteness functions when it comes to surveillance and airport security shows the overlap between explicit contexts of surveillance and media spaces that are not under surveillance, but that rely on an aesthetic of surveillance. Hall (2015a) smartly coins the term the “aesthetics of transparency” to talk about the affiliation of whiteness with a desire to visualize certain bodies as safe: not hiding anything. She details how bodies that are “visually accessible to the viewer or monitor” (Hall 2015a: 127) in airports—white bodies—are safe bodies. She calls this “transparency chic”: “a willingness to open the live body, its accoutrements and possessions, as well as its digital double, to routine inspection and analysis” (Hall 2015a: 132). If there is nothing to hide, then the body can be freely put on display. Safe bodies are racialized: bodies that have nothing to hide are most often white bodies, and unsafe, opaque bodies are generally brown and black ones.

This article looks at three principles (discussed in detail below) that are privileged in contexts of visual surveillance specifically related to authenticity, and concomitantly, to racialization. Building on Hall (2015a, 2015b), the first is transparency, the idea that authentic feelings and emotions are visible on the body. The second is self-reflexivity, the suggestion this carries of knowing oneself, which functions as an indicator of authenticity. The third is what I call “performing-not-performing,” where appearing to perform casts one as inauthentic, but appearing to not perform signifies one is being authentic. Self-reflexivity, as I discuss later, runs counter to authentic behavior because it is not instinctive, uncontrolled or spontaneous, markers of authenticity—rather, it is measured and planned, performed. Self-reflexivity, authenticity and performing are, however, reconciled in popular media in the current surveillance society since self-reflexively performing one’s self affirms a stable (not-performing) core beneath the performance.

I show how self-reflexive displays in the videos enable Swift and Cyrus to tell audiences: “I know who I am, it is not the racialized other I am performing for you.” Self-reflexivity marks their performing behavior as distinct from their authentic self, reassuring audiences there is an authentic (white) self under the performance. This authentic self is stable, a core identity most naturally enacted by white bodies, an identity brought into relief by performing otherness. The interanimation of authenticity, performing and self-reflexivity in the videos function as a form of what Browne calls “racializing surveillance,” which she defines as “a technology of social control where surveillance practices, policies, and performances concern the production of norms pertaining to race and exercise a power to define what is in or out of place” (Browne 2015: 16). As Browne specifies, racializing surveillance relies on “certain techniques in

order to reify boundaries along racial lines, and, in so doing, it reifies race . . . instantiating whiteness as the normative body” (Browne 2015: 16-17). In the videos, the principles of surveillance I examine are also techniques (2015: 17) that produce whiteness as authentic, entrenching “bodies along racial lines . . . where the outcome is often discriminatory treatment of those who are negatively racialized by such surveillance” (Browne 2015: 16).

Setting the Stage

On July 21, 2015, Swift’s video for “Bad Blood” was nominated for best music video by the Video Music Awards (VMA), while Nicki Minaj’s video for “Anaconda” was not. A feud between Swift and Minaj erupted on Twitter after Minaj tweeted, “If your video celebrates women with very slim bodies, you will be nominated for vid of the year.” Minaj followed up with: “I’m not always confident. Just tired. Black women influence pop culture so much but are rarely rewarded for it.” Swift took this as a personal attack, tweeting: “@NICKIMINAJ I’ve done nothing but love & support you. It’s unlike you to pit women against each other. Maybe one of the men took your slot.” The Twitter exchange continued, with other celebrities joining the fray (Katy Perry, for instance). This Twitter incident garnered significant media attention, and centered a discussion on issues of race and gender in the pop music industry.

This article focuses on precursors to the Twitter event: two popular mainstream music videos, Cyrus’ “Can’t Stop” (the song was released June 3, 2013) and Swift’s “Shake It Off” (the song was released August 18, 2014). Both attracted attention from the popular press (see, for instance, Lambert 2014) and online for representations of race, as well as other issues. For Cyrus, there was discussion of the appropriateness of her display of sexuality and questions about whether she was promoting drug use (to list a few, Gustafson 2013; and Rubin 2013), and about whether the video was racist (see, among others, Rose 2013; Stewart 2013), with smart insights in critical blogs about Cyrus’s engagement of race issues (for instance, Clayton 2013; NinjaCate 2013). There was a lively dialogue in the popular press about the racialized displays in Swift’s video (a few are Bueno 2014; Crosley 2014; Gupta 2014; Michaels 2014; Minsker 2014; Russoniello 2014; Seibert 2014; Young 2014; Zimmerman 2014). The two videos are not unique in attracting scrutiny for their articulations of race, and these discussions can be seen as part of ongoing recent conversations in the popular press and in the blogosphere about representations of race in popular forms of visual media. For instance, to give a sense of these discussions, Swift’s video, “Wildest Dreams” was also the focus of popular press stories and online discussions about problematic depictions of race (or lack thereof), as were the videos for Lilly Allen’s “Hard out here” (November 2013) and Iggy Azalea’s “Fancy” (February 2014), released around the same time.

As the tweets and conversations about popular music videos attest, race issues in the popular music industry are a hot topic. Additionally, the Cyrus and Swift videos and songs under analysis in this article were immensely popular, suggesting the ideas therein are symptomatic of a larger cultural ethos and are a good place to mine popular discourses about race. Briefly, “Can’t Stop” reached number 2 on Billboard’s “Hot 100,” number 4 on Billboard’s “Songs of Summer,” and number 9 on Billboard’s “Pop Songs.” The video for the song was released on June 19, 2013, and as of May 5, 2015, has 538,453,533 views on YouTube and 552,292,680 views on Vevo. “Shake It Off” reached number 1 on Billboard’s “Hot 100,” “Adult Pop,” “Adult Contemporary” and “Pop Songs” charts. The video was released on August 18, 2014. As of May 5, 2015, it had 775,375,845 views on YouTube and 789,189,453 views on Vevo. My focus on Swift and Cyrus enables a close and detailed analysis of the subtleties of *how* whiteness becomes part of the vernacular of a surveillance society, but what I outline is by no means confined to the videos.

Authenticity and performing

In an earlier article (Dubrofsky and Ryalls 2014), my co-author and I posited that contexts of surveillance forefront an ethic of authenticity verified through surveillance: appearing to behave in a manner that does not involve performing, what we call “performing-not-performing” (Dubrofsky and Ryalls 2014) in front of a surveillance camera shows one is authentic, that one is able to be one’s true self despite being under

surveillance. We argued that this carries over into contexts not under surveillance via presentations that prioritize spontaneous, unplanned, unrehearsed behavior, especially behavior that ostensibly cannot be repressed. Performing-not-performing has critical implications since it privileges a notion of authenticity most easily accessed by normative white bodies (Dubrofsky and Hardy 2008; Dubrofsky and Ryalls 2014). Indeed, Banet-Weiser (2012), in her discussion of brand culture, connects authenticity with normativity, noting that ideals about normativity are about finessing one's inner, authentic self. I push this theorizing to connect authenticity with whiteness, pinpointing the inferential and mundane ways in which principles emerging in contexts of surveillance about authenticity instantiate whiteness.

I characterize authentic behavior as behavior that appears un-premeditated, spontaneous, unplanned, without forethought, not under a person's control, and behavior a person is unable to repress or regulate (Dubrofsky 2011; Dubrofsky and Ryalls 2014). This kind of behavior can easily be read off bodies. As Hall (2015a) articulates, transparency is important in a surveillance society, and of particular interest is the belief that "one can read the interior dimensions of a person based on clues appearing on the surface of her face and body" (Hall 2015a: 134). In a surveillance society there is a demand that people "become self-evident" (Hall 2015a: 134). In contexts of visual surveillance, where a camera is capturing the actions of real people doing real things, emotional transparency is particularly prized: emotions written on the body (tears, anger, for instance). Another aspect of authenticity vernacularized through contexts of surveillance is the appearance of consistent behavior (even consistently inconsistent behavior—emotional outbursts, for instance) that can be captured in visual displays across disparate contexts, as seen in reality TV shows (Dubrofsky 2011). Inconsistent behavior denotes that one is not authentic, suggesting one performs for a given context, pandering to a particular audience, rather than being one's true self at all times. Banet-Weiser (2012) notes that authentic spaces are ones that are, despite a hyper-branded and commercial culture, seen as "*not* commercial" (2012: 11), considered "the space of the self, of creativity, of spirituality" (Banet-Weiser 2012: 11). Significantly, in this pure space, authenticity "resides in the inner self . . . the outer self is merely an expression, a performance, and is often corrupted by material things" (Banet-Weiser 2012: 11). The authentic self is an untampered-self, the expressive part of the self, unmarked by the demands of the market. Pointedly, authentic selves do not perform for the outside world. Performing and being authentic are in opposition. The authentic inner self needs to appear on the surface of a person in a manner consistent with how the authentic inner self is imagined (since it can never be known): authentic selves perform-not-performing.

I situate all behavior as a performance, including what is constructed as authentic, but my focus is on the ways in which, in visual forms of popular media—music videos—certain behaviors are marked as authentic and others as performing. Of course, the contexts in which authentic behavior is presented are often highly mediated where everything is a staged performance, such as the videos under analysis. Nonetheless, authenticity, even in explicitly staged media productions, plays centrally in meaning-making in a surveillance society.

Some behaviors are presented as authentic by explicitly eschewing performance, the eschewing part of the performance of authenticity. The ethic to perform-not-performing is an important aspect of good, heroic people in US popular culture (Dubrofsky and Ryalls 2014) and aligns with performances of 'good whiteness' since these are also marked by an appearance of not performing. Joseph (2013) illustrates the implications, in a postracial context, of the alliance of whiteness with naturalness—not-performing—in her analysis of *America's Next Top Model*. She details how the supposedly multiracial notion of "being simply 'who you are'" (2013: 141) translates "into whiteness, or at least passing as white" (2013: 141), the norm. Joseph (2013) reminds that in a postracial context where race becomes "a lifestyle choice," whiteness is ultimately centered (Joseph 2013: 141), the preferred and natural choice. As Joseph (2013) elaborates, "Post-race equates the power of people of color's racialization with white racialization" (2013: 27). Citing Mary Waters, Joseph details how white people are afforded the luxury of seeing their "ethnicity as 'optional,' a voluntary label. For many whites, according to Waters, 'ethnicity is increasingly

a personal choice of whether to be ethnic at all, and, for an increasing majority of people, of which ethnicity to be” (Joseph 2013: 27). Of course, this has implications for people of color who in this set-up “are assumed to have this same flexibility, or the same ability to throw off forces of racialized ascription” (Joseph 2013: 27). The implicit assumption is that people of color will and can opt to be white, since white is seamlessly cast as most desirable. For Swift and Cyrus, as I illustrate shortly, whiteness is not only desirable, it is inescapable since it presents as most natural. They may opt to be racialized in moments, but ultimately, whiteness is less a choice than an inevitability.

Swift and Cyrus express desires that cannot be controlled because these burst forth naturally, a marker of authentic behavior, as is the insistence to enact behavior regardless of risk (judgment of others, for instance). As the title of Swift’s song articulates, when it comes to attempts to box her in, or make her be someone she feels she is not, she “shakes it off.” The song advocates the value of ignoring the judgment of others and doing one’s own thing. Swift details how she can’t stop walking to the beat of her own drummer, with lines like “But I keep cruising” and “Can’t stop, won’t stop moving” suggesting her desires are irrepressible, unconstrainable, and by implication, authentic. She talks of everything being fine as long as she follows her desires, championing expressing herself without constraint: “It’s like I got this music,” “In my mind,” “Saying, ‘It’s gonna be alright.’” She promotes being oneself at all times no matter what others might think. Swift sings about how people will judge anyhow, so why worry: “‘Cause the players gonna play, play, play, play, play,” “And the haters gonna hate, hate, hate, hate, hate” “Baby, I’m just gonna shake, shake, shake, shake, shake,” “I shake it off, I shake it off.” Swift does not want to reign in her behavior, and she could not even if she wanted to because her desires cannot be contained. This aligns with aspects of authenticity: her behavior emerges without forethought, is unplanned and arises instinctively, and, I argue below, enacts racializing surveillance (Browne 2015) since authentic displays in visual popular media in a surveillance society are aligned with whiteness.

Swift’s song assumes anyone can freely express her or himself if they simply shrug off the shackles that bind, which are to overcome inhibitions, and in many instances, if one’s desires are authentic, these inhibitions will automatically be overcome because one cannot constrain authentic behavior. It is worth noting that vanquishing one’s inhibitions keys into ideas about neoliberal individuality, another popular contemporary notion, where all that is needed to be free is bravery, free will and making the right choices. Ultimately, the free need not take any explicit action since their desires will be irrepressible: as Swift shows (discussed shortly), if she tries to behave in ways contrary to her authentic self, she will end up looking silly. Her authentic self shines through regardless of her actions.

Cyrus similarly articulates the virtues of being oneself at all times, and the impossibility of doing otherwise. For Cyrus, her and her friends will always be themselves, always express themselves freely, because, as the title of the song indicates, “We can’t stop.” Her video invites us into a world where youth are hampered by the judgment of people who would reign in their expressive energies, singing, “remember, only God can judge you,” imploring people not to fear the judgment of others. Attempts to censor are ridiculed—in one scene a woman is lying on a blowup raft in a pool with a black strip across her mouth with the word “censorship”—a reflexive and mocking gesture, indicating that these kids will not abide attempts to censor. Pointedly, the lyrics detail how, despite endeavors to stop Cyrus and her friends from being themselves, they are: “doing whatever we want,” “this is our house,” “this is our rules” “and we can’t stop,” “and we won’t stop,” “we run things, things don’t run we,” “Don’t take nothing from nobody.” Just like Swift, youth in this video are guided by their desires, and importantly, unable to repress these even if they wanted to (“we can’t stop”).

Cyrus and Swift emphasize they cannot and should not restrain themselves. Important is not that they do not want to reign in their behavior, but that they could not even if they wanted to because their desires are irrepressible. This suggests affiliations with authenticity: the actions emerge without forethought, are unplanned and beyond their control. Claims to authenticity are also embedded in the insistence on

enacting behavior regardless of risk (judgment of others, for instance) since if the behavior is instinctive, it will emerge regardless of possible dangers. While actively expressing oneself is authentic, and acquiescing to attempts to silence is inauthentic, an expression of personal will, of (making the wrong) personal choice, what is left out of this set-up is attention to structural inequalities which can make expressing oneself and resisting attempts to silence and to control very difficult, particularly for certain bodies, especially brown and black bodies. Freely expressing oneself, having one's authentic self burst forth unwittingly, is a principle of surveillance that verifies authenticity and functions as a form of racializing surveillance (Browne 2015) by racializing certain bodies as normative. In the next section, I add another layer to the argument about the implications by examining how racialized displays are cast as fun performances that contrast with stable white authentic identity.

Self-Reflexive Authentic Whiteness

In his smart analysis of the television series *Mad Men*, Kent A. Ono remarks on the complicated way racism is displayed when there is an acknowledgement of the problems of racism. His analysis of *Mad Men* details how the television series gives us “a thoughtful and thought-provoking representation of racial politics,” showing itself as “aware, knowledgeable, and progressive about racial representation” (Ono 2013: 304), while being racist. Ono notes that *Mad Men* is self-reflective specifically because it is the product of a “*postracial* context” (Ono 2013: 304), characterized by “relatively subtle processes of deferral, indirection, and self-reflectivity. Postracial representational politics are typically not straightforward: race is more commonly represented indirectly and inferentially; thus what is being said about race requires careful analysis of rhetoric that obfuscates more direct ways of understanding racial politics and racial experience” (Ono 2013: 304-305). Ono (2013) articulates the need for new ways of theorizing how race functions in contemporary media that are self-reflective and present as aware of race issues. I heed Ono's call, and add to this conversation an examination of self-reflexivity in a surveillance society.

Ono uses the term “self-reflective,” while I favor “self-reflexive,” but there is overlap. A possible distinction is that self-reflectivity refers to rethinking, reflecting again, looking back at oneself and one's actions, or at ideas, while self-reflexivity emphasizes the ability to reflect on one's actions, and think about these in a contextual and situated fashion. To some extent, being self-reflective is contained in the act of being self-reflexive, but not necessarily the other way around. I see self-reflexivity as a form of expression—a manner of displaying the self—and increasingly part of an ethic of how to express one's authentic self in a surveillance society.

By self-reflexivity, I mean a display of being self-aware, of acknowledging what one is doing while one is doing it. Using Banksy as an example, Banet-Weiser notes that in our “current creative economy... self-critique and reflexivity... [are] read as authentic” (Banet-Weiser 2012: 113), it is “how individuals organize their everyday activities and craft their very selves” (Banet-Weiser 2012: 10) in a US culture “characterized by the postmodern styles of irony, parody, and the superficial” (2012: 10). In a surveillance society, where constant monitoring of the self is encouraged, where the self is a product one produces (selfies, status updates, for instance), that is in demand and distributed widely, self-awareness about one's presentation of self is required and ubiquitous. In the videos, Swift¹ and Cyrus focus on self-expression, and are self-reflexive by calling attention to their own actions, reflecting on these. They also use self-reflexive humor, often ironic (calling attention to the opposite of what is expected), ubiquitous in a post-racial (racism no longer exists, we can ignore race altogether) and postfeminist era (gender equality has been reached, there is no longer a need for feminist activism).

¹ Self-reflexive presentations are something for which Swift is known in her public displays, both in the video under analysis here, and in her ironic video “Blank Space” (2014) where she pokes fun at her public persona by explicitly engaging rumors about her dating life.

In the two videos, the ironic, humorous and self-reflexive behavior occurs particularly around racialized displays. People of color and the appropriation of tropes and aesthetics from racialized cultures prop up essential whiteness by showcasing the racialized behaviors each performs as ironic (and sometimes funny) because these are not representative of Cyrus and Swift's authentic selves—their non-ironic, not-performing self. As Banet-Weiser reminds, “authenticity and conventionality are intimate bedfellows, not contradictions” (2012: 221), and in the videos, authentic behavior is aligned with whiteness, whiteness the default natural (conventional) position about which they are being self-reflexive (I am not this racialized performance, I know who I am: white). Racializing surveillance (Browne 2015) is on display via principles from a surveillance society about authenticity and performing, instantiating privileged behavior and reifying racial ideals (Browne 2015: 16-17). When Cyrus and Swift self-reflexively adorn themselves with racialized attire and perform racialized identities, this is done for humorous effect, amusing because the racialized identities are antithetical to what is presented as their most natural authentic self: white. The antithesis reifies whiteness as authentic and stable.

When notions of authenticity and performing are tied to racialization, issues of power and disenfranchisement come to the fore, particularly when performance is understood, as McKenzie (2001) argues it must, as “an emergent stratum of power and knowledge” (McKenzie 2001: 18). Foucault articulates the interanimation of power and knowledge as directly implying “one another; that there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations” (Foucault 1995: 27). Power emerges from knowledge that enables the power relations, facilitating a certain kind of sense-making in a specific context. Authenticity is prioritized in this context, and tied to aesthetics of not-performing, since this is valued as normative. As Butler theorizes, what is presented as normative is “performative normativity” (McKenzie 2001: 166). Ideas about authentic whiteness in US popular culture divorce performing from normativity, instantiating normativity as expressly not-performing, as behavior that appears natural, unplanned, without artifice or forethought.

Cyrus is expressly performative and ironic in her video, her self-reflexivity displayed through exaggerated and humorous actions. This sets up distance between Cyrus and her actions, and the possible implications of these: none of what she does can be taken seriously, as an authentic expression of who she is. The atmosphere of fun, frivolity and excess is emphasized through the behavior of the twenty-something year old kids who party and are carefree. Many of their antics are absurd. In the opening scene, an ankle monitor worn by Cyrus is cut off by hugely oversized red cartoon-like scissors. At another point, when a woman's fingers are cut, pink Pepto Bismol liquid spills from her fingers instead of blood. Another scene features people wearing preposterously large teddy-bear back-packs while dancing, and in one instance we see taxidermied animals wearing funky sunglasses. Everything is exaggerated, with Cyrus making funny faces to the camera (sticking her tongue out repeatedly, for instance), letting us know she is aware she is being silly and that this is all just for fun. There are scenes of late-night drunken or drug-induced antics, with people playing in a pool at night, lounging on the floor, on sofas and on beds. There are intimations of having the “munchies” (hunger induced by drug use, usually marijuana). Food is presented playfully (these are not people who worry about where their next meal will come from). One guy is laying in a pile of white bread, eating the bread, his eyes half closed. In another scene a guy eats a sandwich made of money. At one point we see someone building a skull made of French-fries, and in another moment candles on a chandelier are lit with flaming marshmallows on the end of sticks. In another instance, Cyrus strikes a piñata that bursts open—instead of the usual candy spilling out, hot dogs and buns scatter everywhere. People scramble to grab these, with one guy trying to light a hot dog to smoke it, as one might a cigar. Nothing can be taken too seriously in this context.

Swift is also expressly self-reflexive in her video: the first scene makes clear she is not afraid to make fun of herself, has an awareness of her limitations and shortcomings. She begins the video in full ballet regalia, tutu, headdress, tights, and ballet slippers. Her body, of course, fits the stereotype of the very thin

and lithe dancer, but Swift makes fun of the persona she easily embodies by making goofy silly faces, which clash with the prissiness of the image of the ballet dancer. Her demeanor also contrasts with the seriousness of the other dancers who demurely practice their ballet: Swift shakes her tutu in a decidedly un-ballet-like-manner. Her behavior emphasizes that she cannot be a demure ballet dancer because she is inherently too silly—her goofiness will seep through, she will always dance to the beat of her own drummer.

What is also apparent, but not explicitly referenced, is that physically Swift embodies the image of the ballet dancer seamlessly, naturally. In fact, despite Swift eschewing any form of recognized dance style, insisting she needs to dance to the beat of her own drummer, in scenes where she tries conventionally white dance styles—ballet, modern dance, and cheerleading (Grindstaff and West 2010; Fisher 2015)—her clothing is not ill-fitting (as it is when she tries her hand at racialized forms of dance, discussed shortly), her appearance does not appear antithetical to her expressed sense of self. Instead, in these moments, the focus is on her goofy behavior. For instance, towards the middle of the video, we see Swift in a tight-fitting grey modern dance-like outfit, putting her body, an ideal (white) dancer's body, on display. While this scene is meant to showcase her inability to conform to a particular style, it ultimately illustrates how easily she embodies this type of (white) dancer. Importantly, she does not seem to be performing, rather, she appears goofily natural: her true self. Towards the end of the video we see shots of Swift dressed as a cheerleader, this outfit also fits her well.

Towards the middle of the video, recurring scenes of Swift, dressed all in black in a turtleneck and slim jeans a-la-Audrey-Hepburn, are framed as Swift finally being herself (Taylor Swift), with no explicit pretense—she does not make funny faces, or act as if she is out of place. Here the clothing fits her well, her movements are not awkward, and she appears not to be performing. This is her true authentic self. Swift's demeanor and attire are presented as natural, as is the case when she is dressed as a ballet dancer, a modern dancer and a cheerleader, highlighting the ease with which she takes up these (white) identities, implicitly aligning her authentic (Audrey-Hepburn-like-self) with her other white presentations of self. This stands in contrast to Swift's appearance and demeanor when she attempts racialized forms of dance and dress, discussed below, presented as antithetical to her authentic white self.

Postracial Context

Cyrus and Swift operate in a postracial context where people of color and racialized aesthetics are featured, but where race itself is unimportant, and racism is a thing of the past (Vavrus 2010; Esposito 2009; Ono 2010, 2013). There is a growing and important body of critical scholarship on postracism (to name just a few, Bonila-Silva 2009; Ono 2013; Griffin 2015). Building on this work, my interest is in the intersection of postracial thinking and the increasing move towards self-reflexivity, particularly in popular culture in a surveillance society.

Daphne Brooks and Ralina Joseph, two critical race scholars, end their books by pointing to a newer form of racism and its engagement with ironic, self-reflexive displays. The last section of Brooks' *Bodies in Dissent* (2006) provides commentary on the 2004 Tony awards, with a focus on the musical *Avenue Q*, which details the emergence of an ironic type of racism, noting "In this changing cultural universe, a new and subtle sardonic racism, the product of Gen X irony crossed with savvy multicultural education, has reared its ugly head" (Brooks 2006: 345). Just over ten years after Brooks wrote this, her diagnosis of "a new and subtle sardonic racism" in the United States seems even more apt. In tracing the move from minstrelsy to a newer form of racism, Brooks highlights that Generation X popular culture reflects a generation "raised in the wake of the Civil Rights movement and in the midst of educational integration and popular culture's visible efforts to diversity" (Brooks 2006: 345), which breeds "a new crop of young artists and producers, fed on *Sesame Street* and *Fat Albert*, *Zoom* and the *Electric Company*" (Brooks 2006: 345), well-schooled in the need for diversity and the evils of racism. Indeed, Joseph (2013), in her recent work on blackness, mixed-raced identities and postracism, speaks to current aspects of this newer

form of racism, commenting on the intertwining of self-reflexivity and humor when she shares an anecdote about a neighbor who tells a racist story laced with humor: “she assumed that she could make such jokes because she read my family as middle class, mixed-race, and African American, and, as such, post-racial. She assumed that we were members of the exceptional multiracial tribe, who were so above racial sensitivities that we could recognize her as just joking, and laugh at her racism” (Joseph 2013: 156-157). Joseph explains how her neighbor’s self-reflexivity—expressing knowledge that what she is saying is racist—enables the neighbor to claim a kind of insider status that absolves her of being racist.

Significantly, Brooks and Joseph point to the emergence of a particular kind of racism where people are aware of racism, which authorizes them to place themselves above racism while being racist. This enables racists to perform racism while affirming they are not racist, since they know what racism is and that it is bad, and their authentic core is not racist. Their racism is a self-reflexive performance, not indicative of their authentic self. My analysis of Swift and Cyrus asks how this updated version of racism might be inflected in a surveillance society. I suggest we are seeing a twist to this postracial ironic self-reflexivity detailed by Brooks (2006) and Joseph (2013), pushing this a step further, instead of white people self-consciously enacting racism to show an insider status as not-racist, they point to racialization to show their insider status as white. Crucial is the affirmation of an inner self as authentic, since authentic people can do no wrong, they are simply expressing what is in their hearts. Affirmations of the naturalness of whiteness translate as personal expressions of overpowering emotions.

In instances where Swift performs racialized dance moves and attempts to embody racialized aesthetics, the video takes a troubling ironic turn, made more problematic by the fact that racialization is not referenced directly, but is implicit, with inferential references to race (Hall 2003; Shohat 1991) through self-reflexive humor. Swift draws attention to her own shortcomings at performing otherness, with no express attention to otherness. She adorns herself with attire and performs racialized identities that are humorous specifically because they are antithetical—and therefore ironic: she is not what she appears to be (the other). She is what is implicitly presented as her most natural authentic self: blond, thin, white. This antithesis works to draw attention to—and reify—these aspects of her self. For instance, we see Swift holding a huge boom box on her shoulder, wearing a red leather jacket, oversized baseball cap, 80s black break dancer style, standing in a hunched position, surrounded by what look like stereotypical Latino “gang”-members (which doesn’t quite make sense). There is no reference to racialization, but a sense that something is amiss: Swift is presented as utterly unable to emulate this dance style. Unlike the scenes where she performs white styles of dance, Swift does not easily embody the break-dancer’s body nor does the style of dress fit her seamlessly. The clothing is presented as too big, she looks awkward, her movements appear exaggerated and she seems uncomfortable. In another scene featuring hip-hop dancing, Swift is dressed in acid wash shorts, sporting oversized gold hoop earrings, and running shoes. Images of the shaking derrieres of black women dancers suffuse the scene. At one point, we see an extreme close-up of one girl’s derriere, and in another instance Swift is featured sliding through the legs of the black girls (whose rears are facing the camera), with a focus on Swift’s face bearing an awkward surprised OMG (oh-my-god) expression, and then we see Swift smacking her own bottom. In contrast, the faces of the dancers are barely shown. Swift’s body is markedly missing a key racialized characteristic (Negrón-Mutaner 1997; Guzman and Valdivia 2004) that is the focus of the other dancers in the scene: a large butt. As with the scene with the break-dancers, Swift appears awkward and the clothing ill-fitting, forefronting this behavior as a self-reflexive performance, not who Swift is naturally: the irony of the display (discussed more below) is the basis of the humor.

In this postracial context, the obstacles Swift faces performing the different dance styles have to do with who she is—her authentic self—and her inability to be anything but this authentic self. Hilarity ensues because all attempts to be anything other than her real self (white, adorable, playful and free) results in Swift’s real self inevitably and unwittingly surfacing. The humor is rooted in how badly Swift fits the conventions of the style of dance she attempts to embody, and her recognition of this fact: a knowing

wink-wink, nudge-nudge to the audience. There is no explicit attention to how her white body and white aesthetics might be an obstacle to performing racialized forms of dance, or to the concomitant critical issues. In this new era of racism where people are knowledgeable about racism and self-conscious about their displays of racism, Swift gives us a knowing self-reflexive wink similar to what Joseph and Brooks outline and what Ono touches upon in his analysis of *Mad Men*. The wink indicates to Swift's audience, "I'm so white, you know it, I know it, which makes it so funny when I try to dance like a person of color." The humor in Swift's failed performance of otherness is in the irony: she will never be that which she is playfully trying to perform, ultimately affirming her non-performing (authentic) whiteness. In contrast, Swift finds her real self when she embodies the Audrey-Hepburn-pixie-white-girl, presented without irony or humor. People of color and the appropriation of tropes and costumes from racialized cultures humorously prop up Swift's essential whiteness, signified when she is featured as most at ease in her clothing and displayed as not-performing.

Cyrus shows a bit more awareness of racial difference than Swift in her video, but the context is also postracial: racial difference is ultimately marked as inconsequential. The key instance where Cyrus attends to race is when she urges black girls to follow their bliss, regardless of what others might think, with the lyrics: "To my home girls here with the big butt," "Shaking it like we at a strip club," "Remember only God can judge ya," "Forget the haters 'cause somebody loves ya." Cyrus seems to acknowledge that black women ("my home girls with the big butt") face particular obstacles when they behave in a sexually provocative manner ("shaking it like we at a strip club"). However, postrace logic prevails with the suggestion that all races are on a level playing field when Cyrus champions agency and choice. She situates the black girls as having the same amount of agency and freedom as her, able to disregard the judgment of others, express their desires and live freely. There is no attention to the implications of freely expressing oneself for differently raced bodies.

As with Swift, Cyrus is front and center when people of color are featured, her attempts to perform otherness the focus, involving a similar kind of wink-wink, nudge-nudge gesture to the audience, animating ironic self-reflexive humor: Cyrus is performing, she knows it, the audience knows it, and at the end of the day, just like Swift, she affirms her authentic whiteness in opposition to this performance. For instance, immediately after the lyrics "To my home girls here with the big butt..." we see an image of a spoon in a bowl of alphabet soup with the word "twerk," then a shot of Cyrus, and the next image is of her derriere facing the camera in white leggings, bent over twerking while a group of black girls make surprised "OMG" faces: the focus is on Cyrus, on her humorous attempt to twerk and her lack of the proper equipment (large butt). In another scene, Cyrus grabs the derrieres of black girls, then falls to her knees surrounded by black girls: again, the focus on Cyrus, the humor premised on showing a white girl playing at being other, lacking the racialized markers to do so with any conviction.

Like Swift, Cyrus uses black people decoratively, blackness a fun costume Cyrus can don at will, all the while emphasizing whiteness as her authentic identity. Unlike Swift, Cyrus uses aesthetics and markers from aspects of black culture to give her a cool factor, what hooks might call "spice" (hooks 1992: 157). Cyrus borrows from black culture as if difference does not matter. As hooks (1992) insists, in her discussion of Madonna, it is highly problematic when a white woman takes pleasure in performing aspects of blackness without paying the debt of the pain black bodies suffer for that pleasure. These signifiers are layered on to Cyrus's authentic whiteness to add interest to her whiteness. For instance, the opening shot in the video is of Cyrus wearing signifiers from black street culture. We see shots of her hand adorned with a ton of gold rings, gold bangles and gold nail polish, then a shot of her face as she pops a gold grill (gold caps) into her mouth, makes a mean face for the camera and combs her hair with a gold comb in an exaggerated fashion. The closing scene has her similarly dressed, wearing a tuque, gold grills, gold fingernails, lots of gold jewelry, sticking her tongue out, making a mean face and gang-like hand gestures. This is all done in an excessively performing manner, making clear she is pushing boundaries, does not quite fit the model of blackness from which she borrows. Cyrus also expressly uses black aesthetics to

fashion her own unique white identity. For instance, her tuque has a black mesh veil, not a signifier of black culture, but mixed in with all the other markers of black culture, she is able to construct a unique white identity by borrowing from black culture.

In Closing: White Freedom and Authenticity

Hall's (2015a, 2015b) articulation of how whiteness functions when it comes to surveillance and airport security, particularly her theorizing about notions of transparency and opacity, is helpful in pulling together the analysis of the videos. Hall's (2015a, 2015b) work adds the useful insight that part of what makes whiteness good is the idea that safe bodies do not and cannot hide. By extension, I add, whiteness cannot hide. No matter how Swift and Cyrus may accessorize their bodies, or the postures they might attempt, their whiteness shines through. In fact, their authentic whiteness emerges that much more clearly for their attempts to perform in a racialized manner.

Swift consistently reminds that she might look out of place or silly at times, but what is most important is that she follow her heart's desire and follow the music that makes her body instinctively move. For Cyrus, when she performs otherness, her whiteness is centered—like Swift, her inability to perform otherness, and the humor in her attempts are featured. Additionally for Cyrus, her appropriation of racialized signifiers is used to add an edge, spice to her whiteness, but works ultimately, as does the action in both videos, to re-confirm that the star is always already white.

The invocation to simply be oneself and ignore the judgement of others in both videos is interanimated with notions of authenticity and whiteness: as it turns out, authenticity and freedom of expression are privileges most easily harnessed by white bodies. The implications of this set-up are important when it comes to race and privilege. The opening image of Cyrus has her cutting off, with big cartoon red scissors, an ankle monitor, letting us know she is someone who breaks the rules—who has been punished for this but is not afraid to continue breaking the rules. She celebrates breaking the rules as an expression of her free will—she does it her own way, with absurdly big scissors, emphasizing her uniqueness—and of her authentic (white) self. Authentic people do not let themselves be controlled by convention, the judgment of others, laws and rules; instead they defy these, almost unwittingly, because they must express themselves. By implication, those who abide by convention, laws, and the judgment of others, are being inauthentic (suppressing their true selves). The ease with which Cyrus breaks the rules, and champions such actions, is significant in speaking to her class and racial privilege. The lived material realities for differently disenfranchised bodies are things with which Cyrus need not concern herself. In a time when young black men like Treyvon Martin, Michael Brown, Alton Sterling and Philando Castile are criminalized and murdered (to name only four among countless others), it seems wise to ask: who has access to the freedoms Cyrus exhorts us to celebrate in her video? Can everyone party as freely and break the rules as blithely as she does? Who will be freed by flaunting convention, refusing to abide by the rules (often put into effect via laws) and speaking freely? Who will be punished, criminalized, murdered? As black activist and actor Jesse Williams reminds in his moving speech at the 2016 BET Awards about black people in the United States "...freedom is always conditional here. 'You're free!' they keeping telling us. 'But she would be alive if she hadn't acted so... free.'" (Aswad 2016).

Hall (2015a) elaborates that transparency in contexts of surveillance functions the same way as whiteness, as neutral and unremarkable, "normate," "the term Rosmarie Garland Thompson (1996) has used to refer to what is understood as the generalizable human being or the body type thought to be normal" (Hall 2015a: 7-8). Building on Hall's theorizing, and making the case that conventions normalized in a context of surveillance exceed these contexts, we see in the videos that Cyrus and Swift's whiteness is always apparent, visible through whatever racialized aesthetic they might try on. Their bodies are not so much transparent in the way Hall (2015a) articulates safe (white) bodies are when it comes to surveillance and airport security, rather, any racialization they attempt to emulate becomes transparent: their whiteness seeping through. For Swift and Cyrus, the placement of people of color, and of the cultural signifiers from

racialized groups, express a vernacular from contexts of surveillance that emphasizes whiteness as the non-performing, natural, authentic state.

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