

Between Modernity and *Poshlost*: Sensoric Locating of Russian White Femininity

Lönn, Maria. 2018. *Bruten vitthet: Om den ryska femininitetens sinnliga och temporala villkor*. PhD diss. Stockholm: Leopard. (315 pages)

“WE ARE THE trashy sisters of Swedish women,” laments “Valda,” a Russian woman living in Stockholm. While having had experiences of racism through being called “white trash,” overly sexual, and even being referred to as a “Russian prostitute,” she had also been discriminated as a *poshlost* (a concept referring to someone who tastelessly imitates the modern, and thus is time-frozen in the past) object by the Swedish majority. This hierarchically constructed interplay of time and place in Russian femininity builds up the setting for Maria Lönn’s ambitious PhD dissertation, *Bruten vitthet: Om den ryska femininitetens sinnliga och temporala villkor* (translated by me to “Broken Whiteness: On the Sensual and Temporal Conditions of Russian Femininity”).

Lönn’s research employs the lenses of critical whiteness studies and theorizes the multi-sensuality and inter-corporeality of the body through the phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Lönn makes fascinating use of this theoretical combination by looking at the subject’s embodied experience in different settings. She depicts whiteness as lived and embodied identity, but also as constructed performativity (Butler 1990) and stylized femininity. Located and temporal constructions of whiteness realize themselves in the dissertation as learned

and internalized appreciation of mostly Eurocentric racial differences (Gilroy 2000), as expressed in Valda's comment above. The experiences of the subjects and their participation with other bodies and objects in different locations shape their criterion of whiteness, which is then realized in their perceptual orientations.

Lönn's data consists of interviews with 23, what she describes as "fashion-oriented" Russian women, located in three cities: Stockholm (8), St. Petersburg (8), and Moscow (7). Lönn makes use of the phenomenology of whiteness through a method of "sensory ethnography," in which she observes the othering "white" gaze that is both experienced and practiced by her interlocutors. The interviews were made in English or Swedish. Due to the limited language options, all the women are relatively young, born between 1970 and 1990, and all have a university education. They represent creative and resourceful subjects who work as photographers, fashion bloggers and designers, located in three different contexts. In search of the temporal symbolic boundaries of Russian white femininity, Lönn first inquires her interlocutors in Stockholm where their "other" – often the backward, "leopard-dressed" and "catching up" (Boatcă 2006, 321) – femininity can be "found." Following their gaze, Lönn then travels to Russia. From St. Petersburg, guided by the local interlocutors, she proceeds eastward, to Moscow.

Through her travels, Lönn succeeds in showing how complex the concepts of white femininity are. While whiteness is an embodiment of a privileged position in one location, it similarly holds the risk of losing this position in another setting. Additionally, as one of the signs of whiteness, fashion is an ambivalent modality that can allow for several temporalities at once: past, present and future. Lönn demonstrates how her interlocutors, especially those living in the borderlines of what is considered as Europe and Asia, have a kind of sensual compass to understand the body, whiteness, and time. A trendy-looking dress made of inexpensive polyester in China is already "old" while sold in Russian markets. Being modern and white is thus connected to social valuation and hierarchies in which "polyester, sweat and poverty," as one of Lönn's interlocutors described it, simply cannot fit.

Lönn's journey into the temporal and constantly escaping concept of whiteness, in different settings, is at its most fulfilling in the theoretical parts of the thesis. The combination of critical whiteness and racial studies with phenomenology is creative and insightful. The rather concise ethnography alongside the extensive (and indeed well-structured) theoretical part, however, brings along some ethical challenges to the research.

Lönn's approach to the sensory ethnography means, "loaning the gaze of her interlocutors." While Lönn depicts how her "informants" bodies are both seeing and being seen, both moving and being moved, she rarely reflects on herself in this manner; that is, as Lila Abu-Lughod (1991) has argued, a power-holding subject who balances between observation and action, whose work and presence have implications on her interlocutors. Apart from the first contacts in Stockholm, Lönn does not specify how she found and contacted her interlocutors. For the sake of ethnographic transparency, a clarification of why these women in different locations agreed to work with her is called for. The length of her ethnographic fieldworks in the three locations, two of which were new to her, also remains unclear.

Lönn's distant role in the ethnography does not prevent that she sometimes becomes visible. When referring to one of her pseudonymized interlocutors, she alternates between the names "Ekaterina" and "Katarina." That may simply be mistakes from the proofreading, but it might also be understood as a "translation" of the name to one that is more familiar for a Swedish speaking reader.

Furthermore, it would have been interesting to get a deeper understanding of Lönn's interlocutors' located activities within a broader political geography and different temporalities. What inspires them? How do they create their own art in form of design, photos, makeup, or writing? How do they approach fashion(s) in different settings through their work? What are their backgrounds, networks, and positions in the local and transnational fashion industry? The near absence of the interlocutors' biographies and geographic contexts risks causing a depiction of them as a mostly homogeneous group, holding a rather passive position of consumers of Western-European fashion. This could problematically

re-colonize (Spivak 1988; Mohanty 1991) their position through the de-colonial frames of critical whiteness studies.

Some of the interlocutors interestingly hint to their backgrounds, and this could have been further analyzed by Lönn. For example, one of the interlocutors describes how second-hand shops do not exist in Russia because, “why would we want to save something that we wish to forget.” This “thick description” (Geertz 1983) with a complexity toward the interlocutors’ socio-historical background may have expressed how the dismantling of the Berlin wall has also meant that new borders are constructed; this time made up of socio-economical barriers such as class, new distinctions, and clashes of ideas (Ries 1997; Hemment 2007, 22).

There are 190 different ethnicities in Russia, Lönn writes, and her analysis might have gained from taking a closer look on Russia’s own “second-hand” former colonies (Wolf 2001; Boatcă 2006; Tlostanova 2012; Wallerstein 2012). This could have further opened up the meaning-making of her interlocutors’ argumentations and actions in an interesting way. For example, the social hierarchies of “Russianness” between *russskiy*, ethnic Russians, and *rossiyan*, Russian citizens, the latter consisting of different ethnicities, are interestingly re-constructed in the gazes of her interlocutors.

Lönn’s research on Russian femininity opens up a new and vital discussion within critical whiteness studies. It is thus a pity that Lönn’s thesis is only published in Swedish, since this limits the possibilities for her interlocutors, but also a wider audience, to get access to it. With a more self-reflexive approach on her position(s) in different localities, the research could further importantly call for an increased responsibility in bringing the “second world” into feminist ethnographic research. This is momentous as the attempts to apply the decolonial approach in ethnographic research on former socialist countries is on the rise.

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