

Scoring Race: Jazz, Fiction, and Francophone Africa. Pim Higginson. 2017. Woodbridge (Suffolk): James Carrey. Index, 237 pp.

Through a study of jazz music performance in Francophonic Africa this book sheds a unique light on the colonial representation (and creation) of trans-Atlantic blackness. As an interdisciplinary study on the racialisation of jazz, the author provides an insight into the objectification of blackness and its continuum during the colonial and postcolonial period in various countries such as Cameroon, the DRC Congo, Senegal or France, among others. In particular, Higginson analyses how jazz is portrayed in publications (novels and films) by authors in various French speaking countries in Africa.

Given the broad theme of the racial representation of jazz in the Francophone world, the book does not include relevant information from an area of research such as North Africa (Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia). The book provides generalisations on the interpretation of jazz and race based on specific texts coming from the broad category of Francophone literature. The book uses certain texts to analyse the notion of “French whiteness” in the depiction of blackness in jazz music.

The book examines publications by French and African writers and filmmakers in relation to how they represented blackness through jazz music (Chapters One and Two). Additionally, the book incorporates a contemporary discourse on the use of blackness in jazz either in music albums or in soundtracks (Chapters Three and Four).

Through a chronological narrative of Western philosophy in the Introduction of 50 pages, Higginson examines the colonial way of thinking on racial discourses. The author provides a historical account of the functionality of music by Plato and Aristotle in ancient Greece, the notion of music as entertainment by Western philosophers such as Kant or Nietzsche, nineteenth century colonial literature on the objectification of black bodies, and the use of Louis Armstrong’s performances in Kinshasha in the 1960s to challenge the expansionist ideals of Russia and the USA. In doing so, the author exposes the historical weight of racial and derogatory discourses in sub-Saharan African music. Higginson shows how Western colonialism did not allow any space for embracing African knowledge.

Chapter One examines the racial objectification of jazz music by French writers, Souppault, Sartre, Vian and contemporary authors such as Gailly, Viel and Cormann. As the author observes (47), Souppault and Sartre “assume and celebrate” racial stereotypes in jazz music. Vian offers an “intellectual and sociological” view of jazz in which he does not avoid intellectualising the use of racial stereotypes. Lastly, the author provides a view on contemporary French authors’ writing about the politics of embodiment by jazz musicians and how these authors provide a new form of racial stereotype. This form of removing the writers’ whiteness from their narratives on jazz music and blackness is defined by Higginson as “abject whiteness” (82).

Chapter Two examines the writings on jazz music by popular African writers such as Soce from Senegal, Songala from Congo and Beti from Cameroon. The author describes various views on the racial discourse of jazz and how jazz portrayed notions of modernity during the colonial period; became revolutionary during the process of

independence in many African countries during the 1960s; and the notion of jazz as an art form rather than a popular music form. This chapter offers a valuable contribution to postcolonial studies and for reconsidering the development of jazz and its intertextual relationship with literature.

Chapter Three shows how the notion of jazz is not static but evolves through “decomposing and recomposing” (48) racial stereotypes through the writer’s agency. In particular, this chapter emphasises both: the incorporation of jazz by the postcolonial elite in African countries and how the lyrical content of Scott-Heron reinforces black consciousness within the notion of jazz in a trans-Atlantic black identification. One of the remarkable sections of this chapter appears when the author offers an examination of gender related issues (171). The discourse on jazz and race are questioned and in sum, the writer’s agency offers new forms of narratives regarding unexamined elements in the notion of blackness such as the representation of women in jazz.

Chapter Four describes the use of jazz in film soundtracks. In particular, the objectification of jazz musicians as a kinetic cliché which is open to being racialised or objectified through the colonial lens. On the other hand, the author shows how the racial score is decomposed to find ways of decolonising the image of jazz and jazz artists in films such as “Princess Tam Tam” (1935) with Josephine Baker and Ramaka’s “Karmen Gei” (2001). By drawing a comparison of how jazz and race are represented in these films, Higginson offers a new dimension of racializing jazz as in the objectification of the black body in Baker’s songs and in “Karmen Gei,” a white male’s sexualisation of a Gypsy woman. Further, Chapter Four offers a new approach to the notion of jazz and race through image rather than through novels, as in previous chapters.

This book offers a great variety of relevant information on contemporary and interdisciplinary literature in decolonial studies. Higginson examines a wide range of themes from the embodiment politics of racial discourses in jazz to the deliberate defragmentation of racial politics by contemporary novelists and film-makers. This book provides a general view on the creation of blackness by colonial tropes, and how it is recomposed and decomposed in creative spaces. As a result, this book suggests that jazz has become a globalised phenomenon due to colonial and postcolonial agencies (including the music industry) in which race, gender, class and nationhood are constantly contested. In other words, this book can become a template for specific studies on the racialisation of jazz in specific countries rather than offering a review in vast areas of study such as the Francophone world.

References

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