

Listening for Africa: Freedom, Modernity and the Logic of Black Music's African Origins. David F. Garcia. 2017. Durham: Duke University Press. 22 images, bibliography, index, 376pp.

The historical period spanning the decades between the 1930s up to the early 1950s was one of major political upset and social change worldwide. It encompasses the Harlem Renaissance, the Great Depression, the rise of Fascism in Europe and the Second World War, the beginning of the Cold War, the Civil Rights movement in the United States of America and the first stirrings of African decolonisation. In *Listening for Africa: Freedom, Modernity and the Logic of Black Music's African Origins*, David Garcia suggests that during this particular historical moment a reevaluation of black music and dance was underway in the United States: activists, scholars, academics and performers became specifically interested in the African origins of black music and dance, foregrounding the dichotomous relationship between Africa as space of “ancient origin” and the “New World” America of the early to mid-twentieth century.

Garcia's intricate and complex text critically analyses how and why the African origins of black music and dance became central concerns for certain individuals engaged with these practices in the United States during the early-to mid-twentieth century. Tracing the writings and research of individuals such as Melville J. Herskovits, Richard Waterman, Katherine Dunham, Zoila Gálvez, Modupe Paris, Asadata Dafora, Duke Ellington and Harry Smith (among others), Garcia argues that the “logic” of locating black music's and dance's origins in Africa served different purposes for each of these key figures. These include: revealing and highlighting the significance and heritage of ancient African civilisation, connecting with statements of “African pride” in racialised, segregated 1930s America; showing the shared histories of oppression and liberation between black America and Africa; and rediscovering and foregrounding the redeeming human qualities in black music. Garcia takes as axiomatic that for these individuals engagements with black music's and dance's African origins had more to do with understandings of the modern world and their often precarious place in it, and less with empirical questions of the actual origins of these practices. In other words: studying, exposing and situating “Africa” as construct within histories of black music and dance in 1930s, 40s and 50s America served a purpose of destabilising modernity's hold on individual understandings of space and place. In Garcia's articulation (2017: 19):

The book's aim is to situate the logic supporting black music's and dance's African origins within modernity's social and political imperatives of the 1930s through the early 1950s, revealing it to have been not so much a construct as to have involved individual affects and desires taken up into the assemblage of modern living.

The book traces the thinking, writing and activism of a group of people from widely differing disciplines and backgrounds, race and gender, working within starkly divergent paradigms. It does so by use of a common denominator: the positioning of Africa as point of origin for black music and dance, in the thinking and writing of each of the individuals featured in the book. The opening chapter—*Analyzing the African Origins of Dance in a Time of Racism, Fascism and War*—focuses on the research activities of

Melville Herskovits who, together with colleagues Erich von Hornbostel, Fernando Ortiz, Mieczslaw Kolinski and Katherine Dunham worked in the developing field of cultural anthropology in the 1920s, 30s and 40s against the background of rising fascism, racism and antisemitism on the European continent and in America. Chapter 2, *Listening to Africa in the City, in the Laboratory and on Record*, traces listening practices prevalent during the time period that enabled a “hearing of the past” (p. 77); listening practices in modern spaces are examined, as are experiments in sound perception by (among others) German Gestalt psychologists Kurt Koffka and Richard Waterman (who came to be described as a “laboratory musicologist”). The third chapter, *Embodying Africa against Racial Oppression, Ignorance and Colonialism* explores the contributions of individuals such as Modupe Paris, Kingsley Mbadiwe and Asadata Dafora, who staged performances and lectures on black music’s and dance’s African origins during the 1930s and 40s; and Zoila Gálvez and Chano Pozo who worked towards fostering political solidarity between Afro-Cubans and African Americans. Shifting the focus towards notions of temporality, Chapter 4 examines the strivings of some to transcend the limitations implied through Africa’s implied antiquity as opposed to the successes of Western modernity. *Disalienating Movement and Sound from the Pathologies of Freedom and Time* draws heavily on Fanon while exploring the work of figures such as Katherine Dunham, Duke Ellington and Harry Smith, to show how Fanon’s theory of disalienation materialized in acts of musicking. The final chapter, *Desiring Africa, or Western Civilisation’s discontents*, theorises a psychological perspective of the modern world, arguing that its inhabitants suffered a collective existential crisis from 1945 into the 1950s. The mambo is featured as it was practised in Cuba, the United States, South America and Mexico, and connected to national histories as these manifested through mambo music and dance.

Garcia explores the writings and other outputs of the several key figures in the book, while simultaneously critiquing their positions: the book exposes how these performers, scholars, activists and writers, in spite of best intentions, did not manage to definitively break from the trappings of modernity, instead remaining dependent on modernity’s notions of the “modern city” and “primitive Africa” as epistemological axes of human history and progress. The author simultaneously accentuates though how the key figures were attempting to establish a shift in attitudes towards Africa and racial others, not only in America but in the case of some like Herskovits on a global platform. The tension between modernity and the idea of “Africa as origin,” and concerns regarding the trappings of modernity in general, are regular points of return. This book engages a historical archive of individuals that harnessed black music’s and dance’s potential to inspire social and political change. It draws together threads of history, historiography, social and cultural studies, musicology and media studies in a single text which covers a broad range of related topics. The decision to conclude this text by drawing on Deleuze and Guattari’s rhizome theory seems apt, as this construct convincingly represents the many different threads that make up this work.

Each chapter covers a vast amount of material, and Garcia takes pains to maintain a broad scope throughout, rarely neglecting to add viewpoints, arguments and

caveats required to present as encompassing a picture as possible. This approach, while admirable, does at times expand the reach of the text to such an extent that it becomes difficult to remain cognisant of the “common thread”: the presence of Africa in articulations of the origins of black music and dance in mid-century America. Some may feel that this text attempts to cover too much ground, and that its broad scope perhaps hinders complete engagement with and comprehension of the central aims of the project. It is also arguably so that the title is somewhat misleading, as the focus of the book seems to be less on listening—less on concerns of a primarily musical nature—than on historiographical and socio-political concerns. It is a text that requires commitment and complete immersion for the full impact of the several argumentative threads to register with a reader. That said, such commitment is highly recommended: regardless of specialisation or focus area, Garcia’s book allows discerning readers to greatly expand the way we think of our own place in history and the world.

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