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Tap Dancing America: A Cultural History. By Constance Valis Hill.


Review by Douglas C. Macleod, State University of New York, Albany

On May 9th, 2010, actress and singer Lena Horne died at the age of ninety-two. In an ironic twist, it was on that same day that I was reading about Ms. Horne and Bill “Bojangles” Robinson in Constance Valis Hill’s comprehensive encyclopedia of tap dance entitled Tap Dancing America: a Cultural History. In her work, Hill talks about a then-twenty-six-year-old Horne performing in Stormy Weather, a 1943 musical that contains what some may consider one of the greatest tap sequences of all time: “Jumpin’ Jive.” Here is a segment of Hill’s description of that scene:
Dressed in tailcoats, they [the Nicholas Brothers] jump table to table, then over the railing and onto the stage floor. Stepping and sliding across the floor, they follow [Cab] Calloway to center stage and begin their tap dance (their A section). Spins, cramp rolls, turns, and crossover steps are woven into an intricate pattern of sound and movement, as the brothers spin out backsliding rhythms that slip them smoothly from place to place on the stage. In the second A section, they repeat and vary their step patterns in alternating solos and duets. Then, with a back-slide split that springs up into a jump-split, they land on the platform where a row of musicians are seated. (136)

As one can clearly ascertain from the passage above, Hill is not only an accomplished tap dance historian (and performer), but an extremely descriptive and passionate writer; she is able to paint a colorful and dynamic picture for her reader, which is an arduous task when writing about a visual and aural art-form.

In fact, that is what makes *Tap Dancing America: a Cultural History* such a compelling read. Obviously, her knowledge of the subject is substantial; but, with the material she is covering, she could have easily slipped into just providing her reader with a list of names, dates, movies, and scenes. Instead, Hill *shows* the reader the dance sequences she writes about using specificities and fine detail. This helps prove Hill’s claim that tap dance is a people-filled, tangible form of entertainment that is “intercultural and interracial” and is all “inclusive to men and women, soloists and choristers, sister acts and two-man teams, producers and choreographers” and to “proselytizers and preservationists” (xiii).

Hill also successfully proves her claim by taking the reader back in time, to the early days of tap. Starting with the mid-1600’s to 1900, she delves deeply into the roots of modern-day American tap dance, which stem from a fusion of Irish American jig and sean-no dancing and Afro-American jig and gioube dancing, as well as turn of the century buck-and-wing dancing, which in and of itself stemmed from Appalachian clog dancing (22). She takes her time to provide to her reader a rich and layered history of tap, a history filled with many different racial and cultural dance styles. She then takes her reader on a decade-by-decade journey, writing on filmed and un-filmed dance sequences, and memorable and less-than-famous tap dancers like: Jack Donohue, Bert and Baby Alice, and George Primrose (1910s); James Barton, Buddy Bradley, and Fredi Washington (1920s); Buck and Bubbles, Edith “Baby” Edwards, Louise Madison, Fred Astaire, and Bill “Bojangles” Robinson (1930s); Betty Grable, Ann Miller, The Brothers Condos, Ray Bolger, and Gene Kelly (1940s); Little Teddy Hale, Leon Collins, Jimmy Slyde, Donald O’Connor, and Clayton “Peg Leg” Bates (1950s); Bunny Briggs and Charles “Cholly” Atkins (1960s); The Hines Brothers (Maurice and Gregory), Brenda Bufolino, and Honi Coles (1970s); Lynn Dally, Linda Sohl-Donnell, Diane Walker, and Savion Glover (1980s); Roxanne “Butterfly” Semadini, Baakari Wilder, and Ayodele Casel (1990s); and, Chole Arnold, Dormeshia Sumbry Edwards, Derrick K. Grant, and Sarah Petronio (present day). All of these tap dancers (amongst scores of others Hill writes about) have influence not only
in the decade in which she spotlights them in, but also within the decades when the old timers intentionally or unintentionally stepped out of that spotlight to allow younger hoofers to continue on the path to tap dancing greatness.

Not only does Hill provide her reader with a significant (almost too much, in some instances) amount of physical detail, but she intertwines that physical detail with her thoughts and observations on the cultural significance of the dance. Her section on Ada (Aida) Overton Walker, for example, is one of her strongest:

Mourned as the foremost African American female stage artist, Overton Walker’s interest in both African and African American indigenous material and her translation of these to the modern stage anticipated the choreographic work of modern dance pioneers Katherine Dunham and Pearl Primus. Both in her solo work for women and in the unison and precision choreographies for the female chorus, she claimed a female presence on the American theatrical stage. She also gave presence to black rhythm dancing, thus opening the prime-time, public professional space for tap performance, which had been previously restricted to post-show-time, late-night buck-and-wing contests. By negotiating the narrow white definitions of appropriate black performance with her own version of black specialization and innovation, Overton Walker established a black cultural integrity onstage that established a model by which African American musical artists could gain acceptance on the professional concert stage. (41)

Very much like Lena Horne after her and in her own way, Aida Overton Walker was foundational and set the standard high for future dancers; and, Hill certainly gives Overton Walker recognition because of it. Overton Walker broke major misogynistic barriers, although it was (and in some ways still is) prominent some sixty or seventy years after she first set foot on stage. Hill’s strength is certainly in her ability to recognize the importance of women in a medium that never fully appreciated dancers like Overton Walker, Bufolino, and Dally.

I must admit that it was extremely difficult to get through Tap Dancing America not because of its sheer length, nor because of its abundance of information, but because, after reading sections of Hill’s book, I felt compelled to go to YouTube to see many of the acts she alludes to. Bunny Briggs, Brenda Bufolino, Honi Coles, Gregory Hines, Jimmy Slyde: simply amazing clips, all of which are readily available for everyone to see. Just type in each name, and watch how sweet it is.

And, yes, the Nicholas Brothers in “Jumpin’ Jive” is definitely one of the greatest tap dance sequences ever filmed; but the best: debatable.

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WEDNESDAY, JULY 28, 2010

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Review by Robin Dasher-Alston, American Historical Association

Reconstruction was a period when former slaves attempted to create new lives for themselves following the Civil War, and when the whites who occupied the cities, towns, and hamlets where these newly freed men and women settled were faced with the challenge of attempting to reconceptualize their perceptions of race and the racial hierarchy that had heretofore dictated their interactions. In 1865, Memphis, Tennessee was one of the many cities and towns that experienced an influx of former slaves from the surrounding countryside and other parts of the south. Recently freed blacks were drawn to Memphis, located in former Confederate territory, in part because of the strong presence of the Union Army and access to a local Freedmen's Bureau. Of particular importance was the presence of black Union soldiers, who aided the federal government’s efforts to protect and provide for these newly freed slaves. The former slaves embraced their newfound freedom, establishing schools, churches, and benevolent societies with such speed and vigor that local white communities were shocked by the sense of urgency.
associated with those efforts. Freed slaves did not hesitate to seek ways to exercise their rights as citizens, and quickly began to explore the opportunities associated with their new status as free men and women. Black women in particular sought the protection of law as administered by the local Freedman’s Bureaus. One former slave sued her employer for unpaid wages, and another filed a complaint against a former slave owner who refused to release her children. By virtue of such actions, these former slaves were redefining racial boundaries and their status in the public sphere—efforts to integrate and fully participate in every aspect of society as emancipated citizens—that had previously been denied them. Prior to this period, the very definition of citizenship was associated with being male and white.

What occurred in Memphis was, in many ways, illustrative of the struggles and conflicts that escalated as previously enslaved men and women sought political and social equality in realms that had been the preserve of whites. The Memphis Riot of 1866 and the brutal violence that followed was an example of how violence was tactically used to preserve black subjugation. For black women, rape and the threat of rape was used to intimidate, and to force them into submission. The presence of armed black Union soldiers, along with the accelerating tensions between those soldiers and the white city police provided the impetus by the white citizenry to correct perceived wrongs by Union troops. The events that led to the Memphis Riot were in were in many respects a violent collision between the established political order, with its historic racial hierarchies, and the demand for the rights and opportunities associated with citizenship by the previously enslaved. Hannah Rosen reveals, through careful research and insightful analysis, that the violent response by white southerners against the push by former slaves to gain status in the political, social, and economic spheres served to unite whites across social and economic boundaries that had previously divided them. While wealthy white males may have initially resisted the economic implications associated with freed men and women seeking fair wages for their labor, immigrant whites understood the implications in terms of the potential loss their growing political power and a threat against the promise of enhanced economic status. The white citizens of Memphis were now united across class lines with a common goal and against a common
target. While the goal was to suppress any actions by black men and women that would enable them to assert political, economic, or social independence or power in the public sphere, or to claim any notion of equality in the social sphere, black women were often targeted. The author reveals that the Memphis Riot was an attempt by the local white citizenry and the police to regain the control that they saw slipping away.

Rosen establishes that sexual violence against African American women enabled the rioters to reestablish the dominance of white over black, to reinforce racial differences and to assert racial and gender inferiority. The actions of the Memphis rioters were supported and, in some cases, even encouraged by local politicians and the press as an assertion of white manhood—protectors of not only the public spheres but also the private spheres of the home, hearth, and family. Not surprisingly, the riot erupted with a violent confrontation between black Union soldiers and white city policeman, followed by rumors of a planned attack by the black soldiers against the white community in general.

As Rosen asserts, the press often characterized blacks as disorderly and criminal, perceptions that black women, regardless of their status, were prone to sexual promiscuity and lewdness. These blatant mischaracterizations only served to heightened fear and anxiety amongst the white citizens who increasingly viewed the black community in Memphis as dangerous and out of control. During the riot, at least 48 blacks were killed, many were wounded, and at least five black women reported that they had been raped. Of the two white men who died, one succumbed to a self-inflicted gunshot.

Rosen presents the documented testimony of individuals—both black and white—both the perpetuators and victims of the violence of the Memphis Riot. Yet, most compelling is the testimony of the black women who were raped. The testimony of these women in itself was extraordinary because it revealed that they believed that the congressional committee that received their testimony would accept their statements as truthful, and that the law would recognize their rights as victims. To wit, their testimony challenged the perceptions of black women as immoral, incapable of being virtuous and honorable.
Among the many strengths of Rosen’s deeply engaging and penetrating book is that she uses the emergence of these formerly enslaved men and women into the social, political, and economic arena, as well as the Memphis Riot and its aftermath, as a way to examine and assess the radical shifts and disruptions that began to appear after emancipation. Rosen reveals, how, in an all-too-brief moment in history following emancipation, blacks sought to exercise their rights as citizens, and black women defied both racial and gender hierarchies as they sought to redefine those socially defined constructs.

African American Book Reviews

American Culture and Melville’s Art: The Creative Process in Benito Cereno and Moby-Dick.
By Sterling Stuckey.


Review by Babacar M’Baye, Kent State University

American Culture and Melville’s Art: The Creative Process in Benito Cereno and Moby-Dick examines the relations between Melville’s aesthetics and African culture. While the critical literature about Melville is abundant, it usually eschews the significance of African traditions in the work of this complex American writer. American Culture and Melville’s Art focuses on three major books of Melville: Redburn: His First Voyage (1849), Moby-Dick (1851), and Benito
Cereno (1855). According to Stuckey, interpreting these works’ relationships with African art will demonstrate that Melville was “a far more subtle and inventive writer than even the most fervent admirers” of these works “claim” (3-4).

Stuckey has always been interested in the connections between Africa and North America, as was apparent in the numerous times in which he hinted at them in his previous works such as Slave Culture: Nationalist Theory and the Foundation of Black America (1987) and Going through the Storm: the Influence of African American Art in History (1994). For instance, while discussing the African influence in Thomas Wentworth Higginson’s Army Life in a Black Regiment (1870), Stuckey suggests, in Slave Culture, Higginson’s fascination with the pervasive and ineradicable African-inflected “ring shout,” chants, rhythms, and feet and hand movements that blended with the Christianity of the Sea Island blacks during the Civil War (83-84). Discussing these Africanisms, Stuckey writes: “It should not surprise us that the same people constructed African huts in which they shouted and, as Higginson demonstrates in a passage that recalls Herman Melville’s Redburn, brought African sensibility to bear on Christianity” (84). A similar connection between Melville and African culture is apparent in Going through the Storm in which Stuckey reveals the ties between the African American folk figure Brer Rabbit and the character of Babo in Herman Melville’s 1855 tale Benito Cereno, whom he represents as a Senegalese. He writes: “The play of irony that informs Babo’s activities on board the San Dominick is precisely that adopted by Brer Rabbit in his African American expression . . . What is certain is that Babo is so much like Brer Rabbit that it is perfectly logical that he should have come from Senegal, a thriving center for tales of the African hare, Brer Rabbit’s ancestral model” (165).

Further connections between Melville and African traditions are also apparent in African Culture and Melville’s Art when Stuckey discussed how Melville’s knowledge of Africa mainly derived from the nineteenth-century philosophical and ideological scholarships about Africa that he read. In an attempt to refute the critic Edward Margolies’ argument that “Melville did not know blacks well” (37), Stuckey writes:
“On the contrary, because he knew them well, Hegel was very useful as Melville imagined Don Benito’s dependence on Babo” (37). Stuckey continues: “Melville was almost waiting for Hegel to provide the philosophical terms for what he had long thought and espoused. Melville ties the slave trade to the wealth of England in Redburn, informing us that the wealth of Liverpool derived mainly from the slave trade, which underscores his command of the economics of master-slave relations” (37). As Stuckey argues, Melville’s knowledge of African culture is also evident in a passage in Benito Cereno in which a group of six enslaved Africans dance like “delirious black dervishes” (39). According to Stuckey, this example suggests “Melville’s recognition of abstruse aspects of Ashantee culture in [Captain] Delano’s account—the dance and music of the women” and “the best of his knowledge” of this culture (39).

Yet the strongest quality of Stuckey’s African Culture and Melville’s Art lies in the interdisciplinary methodology that he uses to suggest the links between Melville’s writings and Africa. This method is based on the use of the scholarship that might have influenced Melville before or as he was writing Moby-Dick, Redburn, and Benito Cereno. Drawing from this scholarship, which was usually and unarguably racist, Stuckey nonetheless shows its significance in the study of early African influences in early American writings which would have been difficult to corroborate without such historical documents. Two examples of such Africanisms appear in Stuckey’s analysis of Melville’s representations of non-Europeans in Benito Cereno and Moby-Dick. Discussing Benito Cereno, Stuckey refers to the personae of Atufal, Babo’s lieutenant, whose characterization was influenced by Joseph Dupuis’s description of Ashantee warriors in his Journal of a Residence in Ashantee (1824). Stuckey writes: “As we know, the royal gold, in Melville’s hands, became Atufal’s iron. The ‘iron collar’ about Atufal’s neck was derived from Dupuis’s reference to [Ashantee] warriors ‘armed and equipped in their full military habits; some with iron chains suspended round the neck’” (47).

In a similar vein, Stuckey shows that Melville’s description of “the carvings of flesh from the backs and thighs of Africans in Redburn” was
an image that was initially reported in Captain Amasa Delano’s book *A Narrative of Voyages and Travels in the Northern and Southern Hemispheres: Comprising Three Voyages Round the World; Together With a Voyage of Survey and Discovery, in the Pacific Ocean and Oriental Islands* (37).

This book was first published in 1817 under the authorship of Amasa Delano, an American sea captain who was Born in Duxbury, Massachusetts, and served in the American Revolution as a soldier at fifteen and later as a “privateersman.” Stuckey includes this entire narrative in the last segment of *African Culture and Melville’s Art*, providing current scholars with an important text that can help to better understand the background that influenced Melville’s imagery of Africa in his writings, and his portrayal of the character of Captain Delano in *Benito Cereno*.

Additionally, Stuckey suggests the relations between Melville’s descriptions of the character of Atufal in *Benito Cereno* with his portrayal of the character of Daggoo in *Moby-Dick*. Stuckey writes: “Melville uses similar language in describing them—Atufal: ‘a gigantic black,’ ‘colossal form’; Daggoo: ‘a gigantic, coal-black negro,’ ‘colossal limbs. . . . Daggoo’s ‘hearse-plumed head’ and Atufal’s death song, however, seal the argument” (48). By providing us with these parallels between Melville’s African and non-European characters, Stuckey suggests the strong impact of Africa in mid-nineteenth century American literary imagination. In this sense, *African Culture and Melville’s Art* compliments Toni Morrison’s *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (1993), which also examines the representation of Africans in nineteenth-century American culture. In her book, Morrison explores the intricacies of White imagination of Blackness through her concept of “American Africanism,” that is, the study of the origins, literary uses, and constructions of the “African like (or Africanist) presence or persona” in the United States and “the imaginative uses this fabricated presence served” (6). In a similar vein, Stuckey explored the imagination of Africans in Melville’s writings and its derivation from the wider tradition of European ethnography of Africans that influenced it.
Another way in which Stuckey demonstrates the intricate relationships between Melville and Africa is through his analysis of the linkages between *Moby-Dick* and the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglas* (1845). According to Stuckey, a major element in Douglas's narrative is its allusion to slave dance and music that were heavily influenced by African traditions (82). As Stuckey suggests, the lyrics that Douglas heard on Colonel Lloyd's Maryland plantation without largely referring to them were blues-like songs that “predated conventional spirituals” and “were difficult to grasp—perhaps owing to improvised, African-inflected song[s] intensified by the sheer agony of the slavery experienced” (82). As Stuckey points out, the shades of “sadness” and “joy” that Douglas reveals in the dance and music of the enslaved blacks might have influenced Melville’s representation of art in *Moby-Dick* (84). According to Stuckey, “Melville takes particular notice” of Douglas’s simultaneous expression of cheer and gloom in musical tones, “by ‘gloomy,’ and ‘jolly’ as Douglas uses ‘sadness’ and ‘joy,’ to describe both music and the social condition that it reflects on the *Pequod*” (84). In this sense, Stuckey reveals the impact of both the slave narrative and African art in mid-nineteenth-century American literature.

Stuckey’s *American Culture and Melville’s Art* is a very important contribution to interdisciplinary scholarship because it establishes major connections between African culture and Melville’s *Redburn: His First Voyage*, *Moby-Dick*, and *Benito Cereno*. These influences demonstrate the pervasive imagination and representations of Africa in nineteenth-century American and European travel writings which provided Melville with the prism through which he learned about Africa. By considering these writings as vital historical and anthropological sources, Stuckey suggests the important role that interdisciplinary scholarships can have in the study of the relations between Africa and its parental cultures in the United States. As Stuckey points out, “the soul of the [American] nation is tied to that of black Africa” (82).
SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 29, 2009


By Lisa Materson.


Review by Jason Hostutler, Mount Mary College, Wisconsin

In For the Freedom of Her Race, Lisa Materson makes an important contribution to our understanding of the role of African-American women within Jim Crow era politics. Materson tells the story of black women activists in the context of the Illinois political system, working in favor of the Republican Party agenda that supported the use of federal authority to protect the constitutional rights of black citizens. Separated from the influence of Southern white supremacists, these women strove to make a positive political impact for those black Americans facing disenfranchisement and terror in the American South. Individually, these women-activists were of diverse social, economic, and educational backgrounds. However, each had migrated to Illinois from the recently “redeemed” and increasingly racist South, and each possessed a zealous drive to assist the embattled Southern black community in any political way possible. Initially these political opportunities were very limited for Illinois women, but gradually increased alongside expanding suffrage. Women in Illinois won the right to vote in school elections in 1891, and for municipal and federal offices in 1913; they were finally granted full franchise in 1920. Materson convincingly makes the case that even when the outlets for
political expression were limited, these African-American activists represented those in the South who had lost their political voice “by proxy,” and encouraged African American men in their communities to do the same. Over time these activists began to lose faith in the Republican Party, as Republican politicians failed to make good on promises to assist their black constituents with anti-lynching legislation. In this manner, the origins of the African-American embrace of the Democratic Party are visible years before the 1932 election of Franklin Roosevelt.

Materson provides numerous case studies to convincingly demonstrate the high level of engagement of Illinois black Republican women in the years 1877-1932. The author describes these decades as the “nadir” and “crucible” of black life in America. Activists such as Ella Elm, Jennie Lawrence, and Alice Thompson Waytes rose to the challenge and actively engaged local, state, and eventually national politics with a zeal fueled in part by the racial injustices occurring in the southern states. Materson’s examination of these women provides much-needed detail to a political drama that in previous historiography has been overshadowed by the story of the black reformer Ida B. Wells. Wells is mentioned only as a side note to allow lesser-known actors to take center stage. The stories of these women make Materson’s study a colorful and fascinating read. Still, the author’s treatment of the specific activities of these women can be at times too superficial. When lacking specific evidence to detail the exact words and activities of her subjects, Materson relies on generalizations based on the overall social climate of the era to imply what the women should have been thinking or doing at the time. Furthermore, the author is also vague about the specific accomplishments of the black activists, especially with regard to their impact on the lives of the Southern black community they are supposedly representing. While these issues are troubling, they do not detract from the quality of this study overall. For the Freedom of Her Race sheds new light on a previously under-examined topic in the political history of the Jim Crow era. The accessibility of this study is due in no small part to Materson’s clean and precise writing style and vibrant storytelling. Her research, most notably in Chicago-area archives, is meticulous.
Recently, scholars have witnessed an outpouring of works concerning racial passing in American society: for example, George Hutchinson’s excellent biography, In Search of Nella Larsen: A Biography; Martha A. Sandweiss’s Passing Strange: A Gilded Age Tale of Love and Deception Across the Color Line; and now Near Black: White-to-Black Passing in American Culture by Baz Dreisinger.

In five succinct chapters, Dreisinger takes readers through the various mechanisms in which whites have used to imitate black culture. Her thesis, that some whites “chose blackness or brownness merely as a way to escape the stigma of whiteness and to avoid responsibility for owning whiteness is still very much an act of whiteness” (149). She also argues that whites seldom give attention to or pay respect to the very blacks they seek to emulate or copy. She wants whites, as self-identifiers, to be cognizant of the historical perspective in which they operate, to recognize it for its validity and give credit where it’s due—to black culture—rather than prostitute black culture, that is, earn money
Dreisinger uses a number of filters through which to describe near-passing. Some novels and historical texts that cover slavery and Reconstruction, for instance, include William Wells Brown’s Clotel and Ellen Craft’s Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom. In these works, Dreisinger describes the physical passing from white to black. In chapter two, she turns to whites who make an effort to become black through various means, including tanning or oil-skin dyeing. Chapter three continues the theme of some whites who pass for black via physical means, but Dreisinger also addresses how some white women pass. According to the author, passing on the part of white women usually occurs through interracial sex. Here, she uses narratives about interracial relationships but exhibits her best analysis through films. In Jungle Fever, Zebrahead, Save the Last Dance, and Black and White, she clearly demonstrates how and why these unions take place. Although she explores music and how some white women seek out black musicians for passing, this filter in chapter three is not as useful as her analysis of films. Nevertheless, her point is persuasive: some white women operate as “passers” to acquire sex from black men in a way that shocks and challenges white culture.

Chapter four moves the analysis to American music, especially jazz, rock-and-roll, rap, and hip-hop. Here, Dreisinger presents her strongest case for racial passing. Beginning with examples from the 1920s, she shows how whites initially referred to jazz as uncivilized music but as its popularity grew, some white jazz artists crossed over. Two prominent examples were Mezz Mezzrow and Johnny Otis, both of whom not only passed as black men in their music but also in their written works. Dreisinger does miss a key point when she fails to discuss bebop. Black jazz musicians developed this form of music to protect it from whites. Although she analyzes Elvis Presley as a passer, she did not elaborate on his interracial affair resulting in a bi-racial child. This section would have also benefited with a discussion of Alan Freed, the white disc jockey during the 1950s who coined the phrase rock-and-roll and played black music for white audiences.
The author brings out her best in an analysis of rap and hip-hop music. Born in the streets of Brooklyn and Harlem, rap personifies black masculinity and sexuality, so powerfully that once congressional hearings were held to discuss its impact on American culture. White rappers, among them Vanilla Ice, Fred Durst, Boss, and Eminem all embraced this genre of music when it became more socially accepted and whites in suburbs became the major consumers of rap and hip-hop. Quick to seize on the lucrative genre, some white rappers turned out to be frauds. Boss, for example, a female rapper from Los Angeles, came from a wealthy suburb and did not possess the authentic linkage of black rappers from rough areas like Watts and Compton. In addition, while white male rappers sometimes have sexual affairs with black women that help them in passing, it is more important for white male rappers to have links to black male rappers. Thus, white rappers like Fred Drust, Paul Walls, and Paul Barman have found “blackness” in collaborations with Method Man, Chamillionaire, and Prince Paul of De La Soul respectively. Some readers of Near Black may quibble about its unbalanced nature: for instance, its lack of discussion of Mick Jagger, a rocker known for racist comments but one who appropriates black music. Some may also question Dreisinger’s focus on mostly white male passers with less emphasis on white women as crossovers. Her use of the concept “post-racial society” also presents a problem. Racism remains a deep societal ill, despite the election of the nation’s first black president.

Overall, Near Black is a good read and highly recommended for scholars and lay persons alike. It would also make a good text in most American culture courses. Finally, the book makes a significant contribution to the growing genre of works focusing on racial passing.
Joseph G. Schloss’s *Foundation: B-Boys, B-Girls, and Hip-Hop Culture in New York* brings new, invigorating, exciting, and much-needed in-depth analysis of hip-hop culture’s ethnic origins specific to b-boying. By examining the historical and cultural elements of b-boying and b-girling in New York City between 2003 and 2008, Schloss highlights the significance of the transmission of cultural ideas from one place to another by mapping the experiences of dancers in the field. While hip-hop has been labeled a “problem” by mainstream popular culture, Schloss posits that one of its cultural forms, b-boying, embodies a plethora of cultural traditions such as Afro-diasporic competitive dance, battle tactics, acrobatic power moves, and martial arts that live in the Afro-Caribbean, African American, and Latino communities today. He posits that “hip-hop’s strength lies precisely in the diversity of its concepts and practices” (7). In other words, Schloss suggests that hip-hop cannot be understood in terms of “good” versus “bad,” but each of its components should be viewed as representing an artistic flair that should be examined more specifically through ethnographic methods. One of the reasons he cites that b-boying has been often overlooked in scholarship is because it operates “within the framework of literary analysis and culture studies” (8). It is not theory alone that assists in the full understanding of b-boying and b-girling culture, but it is the voices of the dancers themselves that should be a part of scholarship. Moreover, Schloss suggests that if scholars immerse themselves within the communities in which b-boying has emerged and continually transforms over time, they will be more engaged and create research that represents the reality of the culture itself. In the end, literary and culture studies alone cannot holistically represent the voices of the people; however, when it is combined with ethnographic methodology, the voices of the people shine through and create a remarkable presence.

The book’s title, *Foundation: B-Boys, B-Girls, and Hip-Hop Culture in New York*, focuses on its core by illuminating the definition of
foundation as “a term used by b-boys and b-girls to refer to an almost mystical set of notions about b-boysing that is passed from teacher to student” (12). With a total of 8 chapters Schloss eloquently situates b-boysing as its own unique cultural form within hip-hop by analyzing the philosophies, practices, and experiences of b-boys and b-girls. In chapter 2, “The Original Essence of the Dance: History, Community, and Classic B-Boy Records,” the author examines the relationship between music and dance. The premise is that a relationship between music and choreography exists that allows b-boys and b-girls to transfer historical associations of the music to their dance movements (38). One of the remarkably interesting ideas that materialize in this chapter is that b-boys and b-girls make almost spiritual connections to classic songs such as “Apache” and “Give It Up or Turnit Loose” as a principle that brings to light the bond shared between “modern proponents and the historical essence of the dance, giving strength, energy, and legitimacy to modern devotees” (39). Essentially, b-boysing and b-girling becomes a venue by which culture and history meet, sort of like a spaceship traveling in time.

The next chapter, “Getting Your Foundation: Pedagogy,” builds on this idea by solidifying the foundation of b-boysing as the combination of the artist’s mentorship, mental approaches, philosophies, attitude, rhythm, style, and character, as well as b-boys’ and b-girls’ ability to recognize another’s dance lineage from his/her style (51). Although it may be assumed that b-boys and b-girls are from a specific geographic area, they are not; b-boysing is a collaborative culture that reaches across states and cities. In the words of Schloss, “a b-boy or b-girl is representing a relationship between dance and musical form (a ‘boy’ or ‘girl’ who dances on the ‘break’ or to the ‘beat’ of a record), a reaction to the psychological stress of poverty (one who ‘breaks,’ emotionally), symbolism of the dance over commercialism (b-boy versus breakancers) a commitment to dance over other aspects of hip-hop (as in the Source Manifesto), and a sense of geographical and class pride (‘Bronx-boy’ versus, presumably, ‘Manhattan-boy’)” (64). Despite the fact that there are contradictions in the way that b-boysing is defined, for example, “breakdancing” is not seen as “authentic” b-boysing culture, as it is connected to commercialism. Furthermore, what is even more intriguing is the idea of b-boysing as an expression of gender
identity. One of the female artists, Seoulsonyk, describes what she does as b-boying; but male dancers will never call what they do “b-girling.” Schloss suggests that at times, this contradiction can force b-girls to be at odds with their identity. This brings up the idea of masculinity not just in b-boying but hip-hop in general as a representation of male standards. In his film *Hip-Hop Beyond Beats and Rhymes*, Byron Hurt posits that hip-hop is a reflection of American society’s view on gender roles, wherein men’s roles are pushed to the forefront more often. Even though the author tackles the idea of masculinity and femininity somewhat in this chapter, I believe that there is room for a more focused study on gender roles within “b-girling” culture.

Chapter 4, “We Have to Be Exaggerated: Aesthetics,” integrates the aesthetic principles of b-boying as an art form that provides insight into the communities’ abstract understanding of, and approach to, those conditions. What I loved most about this is that it builds on the idea of locality and/or space, which is called by b-boys and b-girls “cipher” – a circle that encapsulates the dancers while they perform. Not only is this space a sacred entrance into the world of b-boying, but in many instances, it is a place where b-boys and b-girls are given their code names. By and large, Schloss’s book *Foundation* is a wonderful masterpiece that outlines the historical and cultural experiences of b-boys and b-girls in New York. I highly recommend this book as required reading for scholars in the field of popular culture (i.e., hip-hop) and for students in the classroom.

**THURSDAY, JUNE 25, 2009**

*Living as Equals: How Three White Communities Struggled to Make Interracial Connections during the Civil Rights Era*

Scholarship on the civil rights era has been shaped in significant ways by white southerners from religious families who witnessed the injustices of the Jim Crow system during childhood and subsequently published books that reflected upon and interpreted their experiences. Timothy Tyson's *Blood Done Sign My Name* and Charles Marsh's *The Last Days* are just two examples of this compulsion to explain what now seems inexplicable. In the introduction to *Living as Equals*, Phyllis Palmer describes her similar background and, we might assume, comparable desire to explore the complexities of race and religion in recent history. *Living as Equals* is not a memoir, but it does qualify traditional narratives of the civil rights era which focus attention on the recalcitrance of whites whose resistance to racial equality marks popular memory. However, Palmer reminds her readers that most white Americans were not violent racists, nor were they avid supporters of the civil rights movement. Historians have recently begun examining the actions and attitudes of the majority of whites who located themselves between these two poles, and Palmer’s work belongs in this discussion because it explores the efforts of “white Americans who responded hopefully to the civil rights era’s promise of a freer and more equitable nation” (6). If most white Americans did not actively participate in a civil rights movement, then “civil rights inspired some white Americans to become new kinds of white people” (13). Palmer aims to trace how and why these changes occurred.
Most whites did not respond as hopefully as Palmer’s subjects, but these three organizations, or “communities” as she calls them, warrant careful consideration for understanding the changing dynamics of race from the 1950s through the 1980s. Chapters 1 and 2 assess the National Conference of Christians and Jews’ (NCCJ) Brotherhood Camps. Inspired by religious imperatives of community and equality, these summer camps brought together teenagers from a variety of racial and religious backgrounds. Campers inevitably experienced a variety of “encounters,” as they shared living quarters, discussed current events, and pursued romances. Palmer emphasizes that camp leaders “had a more radically democratic ideal in mind than opening up a white world to a few nonwhites who could assimilate” (35). NCCJ counselors organized activities and discussions which facilitated interracial cooperation and dialogue in an environment where campers did not feel threatened. About twenty-five thousand young people participated in camps that were conducted in New York City, Newark, and Los Angeles between 1951 and 1974.

Chapters 3 and 4 evaluate Neighbors Inc. (NI), an organization composed of residents from four neighborhoods in Washington, D.C., which sought to “preserve the area as a first-class community of good Americans regardless of race and religion,” according to its founding document (98). NI included 175 households by the end of 1958, the year it was established. Homeowners who participated focused on three objectives. First, they actively opposed the convention of labeling real estate as “colored” in advertisements listed in the Washington Post and Washington Evening Star. The newspapers quietly dropped the descriptor in 1960. Second, NI worked to maintain open communication among residents by establishing and distributing a monthly newsletter. Third, NI marketed their interracialism, creating what Palmer calls “a narrative of middle-class, family oriented, multiracial achievement and security to compete with the idyll of white suburbia” (105).

Readers of the *SJC* might be most interested in Chapters 5 and 6, in which Palmer analyzes multiracial community organizing in San Antonio, focusing upon the quest by Mexican American and African American groups for greater political power. Early efforts to address the immediate needs of racial minorities were largely confined to the
city’s Roman Catholic diocese, particularly Archbishop Robert Lucey, whose appeals to Anglo charity resulted in “acquiescence to policies that offered a bit of relief and left intact the racial norm: white people controlling public life” (181). The foundation of Communities Organized for Public Service (COPS) in 1974 challenged this norm to such an extent that the 1977 city council elections resulted in victory for five Mexican Americans and one African American. These three disparate narratives are loosely held together by several themes. Many figures who sought interracial connections were motivated in part by religious faith. Another theme involves the assertions of racial pride and consciousness in the late 1960s. Such expressions provided special challenges to the NCCJ’s efforts at facilitating racial harmony among teenagers, for example, while COPS ultimately benefited from greater Chicano consciousness. Palmer also makes concerted efforts to emphasize the roles of specific individuals in these stories, an objective made possible by her extensive use of oral histories. She notes that the organizations in her study enabled white Americans to cultivate new relationships and undergo “intellectual and emotional shifts” (12). Palmer contends that these new associations and perspectives were transformative and crucial for understanding how some whites awakened to the possibilities of interracial cooperation in the civil rights era.