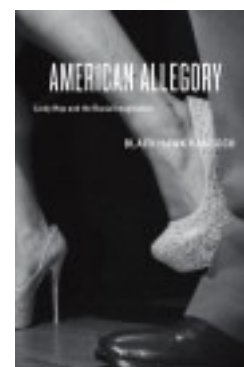


BOOK REVIEW

AMERICAN ALLEGORY: LINDY HOP AND THE RACIAL IMAGINATION BY BLACK HAWK HANCOCK (2013)

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As you may have realized the Lindy Hop, that unique American social dance originating in the late 1920s US when jazz became the soundtrack of America, is back; that is, it is back again, and again and again. This explains the various Lindy Hop revivals of the 1980s, 1990s and the early teens of this century. Actually, it has never been away, even though it vanished from the popular radar in the mid 1950s or so.



When it was “revived,” the “discoverers” were mostly white middle class, who learned and imitated a style and the particular movements and patterns of a cultural expression that were 1920’s state of the art . Currently Lindy Hop parties also are huge dance-floor events still accompanied by jazz music, i.e. swing bands and swing Djs.

Nevertheless, this dance also has remained a popular practice, nevertheless (surviving sort of underground in black neighborhoods) being perpetually redefined and altered until it became “Steppin’,” a modern form of African American social dance today, but lacking the enormous popularity of the Lindy Hop. And Steppin’ today is performed to today’s state of the art music of African American origin: namely hip hop and modern R’n’B.

Steppin’ (luckily) never became too attractive to the majority of the white middle class, hence it could remain mostly free of commercial influences and the limits of a short popularity. Thus, it would remain a form of social interaction limited more ore less exclusively to members of the black communities; the dance is called Steppin’ in Chicago, “Hustle” in Detroit, “Hand dancing” in Washington, D.C., or “Boppin’” in Houston.

This is the starting point of Mr. Hancock’s study where he investigates the nature of

two Chicago dance scenes segregated by the ethnic origin of their performers. By comparing the two similar yet different social dance styles of African American ancestry of today's Chicago, he devotes a rather long excursion on the origins of the differing interpretations of the dance and the respective black or white aesthetics. *American Allegory* also convincingly demonstrates how strong the term "race" and PC still seem to constitute a huge problem in the US even while talking about "race" and the various precious cultural products associated with ethnographic research itself. However, he manages to avoid the many "traps" seemingly waiting there while he tries to gather information on the different approaches to ethnic aesthetics. As he confesses, "there seems to be fear of race...[which] generates an almost paranoid sensibility and consequently people often think that silence is better.... it proved almost impossible to have an open and honest conversation with anyone about race or the research I wanted to do " (p. 17).

As we realize quickly, Black Hawk Hancock is a Native American name; so the reader gets a very distinct and unusual report from a Native American who describes how an African American cultural form is being claimed by white American middle-class people.

As with many cultural inventions and products of African Americans, the author correctly states that the Lindy Hop was reintroduced to the center of American popular culture by white Americans, while the originators of the dance (as well as their heirs) remain segregated from this very center both politically and economically.

Here we have one of the strongest features of the book, namely the author's physical participation into the cultural practices of an almost entirely African American art form with almost entirely black dancers when he enters the Steppin' scene of Chicago's West Side and South Side.

If you expect a book about cultural practices and ethnic field work, you may not be totally satisfied. However, if you are looking for first-hand experiences of a Lindy Hop and Steppin' dancer developing from novice to master dancer, well ... you may not feel satisfied either. Even so, you will get something in-between. You get a hybrid, just like the most powerful feature of American culture is its diversity.

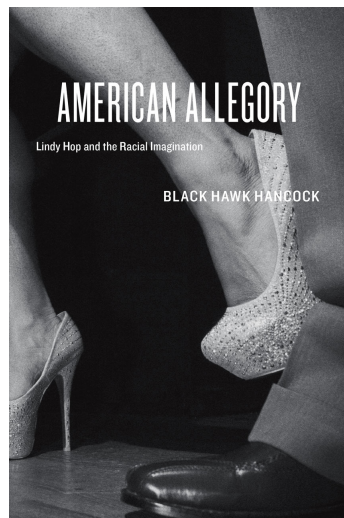
American Allegory is not the next book of theory on African American heritage with emphasis on music. Nor is it a practical guidebook to the mastership of the Lindy Hop.

But here you will definitely find many pages on the physical nature of those cultural practices, the meaning of inclusion, learning, improvisation, cooperation and the meaning of the body for the originators of the Lindy Hop.

Add to this many references to Ralph Ellison's writings on the uniqueness of American culture and its two main influences (black and white customs and approaches to life itself)

paired with Bourdieu's interpretations of group behavior and Wacquant's "carnal sociology," you will be glad to have come across this study. It keeps a good balance between academic study and cultural practice "as told by an insider" who carefully investigates an art form both intellectually and physically.

Review by Dr. A. Ebert, © 2014



Black Hawk Hancock. American Allegory: Lindy Hop And The Racial Imagination. University of Chicago Press, 2013, 265 p.

◀ AFRICAN AMERICAN MUSIC ▶ AMERICAN ALLEGORY ▶ BLACK HAWK HANCOCK ▶ BOPPIN'
◀ CARNAL SOCIOLOGY ▶ CHICAGO ▶ HAND DANCING ▶ HUSTLE ▶ JAZZ ▶ LINDY HOP ▶ RALPH ELLISON
◀ SOCIAL DANCE ▶ STEPPIN' ▶ SWING

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