Mamadou Diouf & Ifeoma Kiddoe Nwankwo (eds.)


In their introduction, editors Mamadou Diouf and Ifeoma Kiddoe Nwankwo eloquently characterize the essays in *Rhythms of the Afro-Atlantic World* as “interventions ... that restage and revise aesthetic, corporeal, aural, cultural, and political conversations about Africa, Europe, and America that have been going on at least since the beginning of the Atlantic slave trade” (p. 15). This ambitious volume, which emerged out of the University of Michigan Atlantic Studies Initiative, addresses the way circum-Atlantic communities recollect and reconfigure their histories through creative performance. The broad-ranging compilation features substantive contributions from more than fifteen authors, and spans the performative geographies of Africa, Europe, the Caribbean, and the Americas. The book is organized into three parts: “Religion,” “Dance,” and “Contemporary Music,” each of which presents a collection of multilayered and nuanced circum-Atlantic performative scholarship.

In “Religion,” Yvonne Daniel deftly lays the groundwork for understanding how Cuban dance, and especially sacred Afro-Cuban dance, has contributed to the Cuban national project of attracting foreign tourism while maintaining its roots in sacred performance. She pinpoints how dance has benefited all sectors of the tourist industry—from sacred performers, to audience members, to dance company administrators, to tour group leaders, to the economy itself—showing that Cuban dance, tourists, and the Cuban economy are each “fortified” by the vitamins of Cuba’s sacred African roots. Melvin Butler provides an intriguing ethnographic portrait of the complexities of Jamaican religious identity, showing how African American gospel music and Jamaican reggae rhythms have filtered into Jamaican Pentecostalist religious performance, creating new and contested ways of performing religious belonging. While Pentecostalist preachers decry the “worldliness” and secular contexts in which these musical genres are typically performed, Pentecostalist congregants defend their music, asserting that it is as “authentically religious” as the church’s traditional hymns and choruses. Deborah Smith Pollard’s essay focuses on “holy hip hop” in the United States, featuring interviews with pastors, performers, and congregants from Detroit, New York, and Philadelphia. According to teenage congregants, the main difference between holy hip hop and its secular counterpart is that in holy hip hop, “the women have on all their clothes.” The tension between “church” and “street” behavior is reminiscent not only of the issues raised in Butler’s article, but of the thin line between gospel music and rhythm and blues.
and of the porous boundary between sacred and profane that is particularly
germane to Afro-Atlantic performance.

“Dance” features the work of four authors—Yvonne Daniel, Lucía Suárez,
Susan Leigh Foster, and Millery Polyné—and provides wide-ranging exam-
pies of embodied remembrances. Daniel offers a comparative perspective on
the African-based dance traditions of Cuba, Haiti, and Brazil, focusing on
the gestures and utterances that convey sacred presence and sacred knowl-
edge. Lucumi, Vodou, and Candomble share a coastal West African ancestry,
and Daniel elegantly demonstrates the important structural similarities in the
regions’ music and dance. In a far-reaching essay that ranges from dance to
film to social programs, Lucía Suárez asserts that Brazil’s complex history is
embodied in the prolific choreography of modern urban dance company Grupo
Corpo, which not only remembers the often violent past of Brazil’s bifurcated
cities, but provides possibilities for a better future. Essays by Susan Leigh Foster
and Millery Polyné both focus on iconic dancer/choreographers. In the format
of a creative dialogue, Foster invites readers to enter into the choreographic
processes of recollection and remembrance engaged in by African American
dancer/choreographer Diana McIntyre and Senegalese dancer/choreographer
Germaine Acogny, both of whom draw on African roots to empower their work.
In a detailed historical study, Millery Polyné focuses on the efforts of African
American dancer/choreographer Lavinia Williams and Haitian dancer/chore-
ographer Jean Léon Destiné to bring Haitian folkloric dance to the forefront of
Haitian—and global—consciousness in the 1940s and 1950s, using dance as a
means to gain entry to the international political stage.

In “Contemporary Music,” six authors present case studies of Afro-Atlantic
popular music, analyzing music’s power to reclaim and reshape identities.
Through her theory of “connective marginality,” Halifu Osumare offers a nu-
anced analysis of the way hip-hop cultures in Senegal and Kenya critique
social and political dynamics, and challenges mainstream African-American
hipster to realize the affective power of its music to create positive change.
Raquel Rivera’s richly ethnographic essay on the Haitianess of such “Spanish-
Caribbean” genres as Puerto Rican bomba and Dominican palos in New York
critiques the idea of latinity as a panethnicity that “bleaches” the essential
Africanness of Afro-Caribbean performance genres. Dierdre Gantt’s detailed
trans-Atlantic study compares Trinbagonian soca music and the “go-go” music
culture of Washington D.C., arguing that both genres have come to represent
working-class blacks and, through their growing popularity, have contributed
to the tourist industries of both locations. Patricia van Leeuwaarde Moon-
sammy’s article astutely analyzes the place of marginalized “rapso” within the
larger commercial context of Trinbagonian Carnival and its calypso perfor-
mance, tracing the roots of *rapso* to the resistant and subversive masquerade traditions of the colonial period. Umi Vaughan offers a deft and informed treatment of the Cuban popular music genre *timba*—examining it in terms of musical structure, instrumentation, lyrics, and social context—and concludes that *timba* remains an important forum for negotiating Cuba’s identity both locally and globally. Juan Flores and René López “activate musical memories” of two groundbreaking salsa groups from the 1960s and 1970s—Conjunto La Perfecta and Grupo Folklórico y Experimental Nuevayorquino—and celebrate their current incarnations as innovative and *descarga*-based bands, steeped in the Afro-Latin rhythms of the Caribbean.

As Carroll Smith-Rosenberg writes in the epilogue, *Rhythms of the Afro-Atlantic World* “links traumatic and resistant memories to current creativity and political agency” (p. 273). True to the original mandate of the conference, the book interweaves disparate methodologies and perspectives, encourages discussion among Latin American, Caribbean, British, and African scholars, and opens the borders constraining U.S. history. Perhaps most important, the volume signals the underlying strength of performance: a deeply embodied refusal to forget.

*Katherine Hagedorn*
Department of Music, Pomona College
Claremont CA 91711, U.S.A.
khagedorn@pomona.edu