



Waltzing in the Dark: African American Vaudeville and Race Politics in the Swing Era by
Brenda Dixon Gottschild
Review by: Thomas DeFrantz
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Waltzing in the Dark: African American Vaudeville and Race Politics in the Swing Era by Brenda Dixon Gottschild. 2000. New York: St. Martin's Press. iii + 270 pp., illustrations, notes, references, index. \$45.00 cloth; \$19.95 paper.

The emergence of scholarly literature focused on African diaspora performance practice and theory promises a fuller consideration of the politicized foundations of corporeality. As several authors have convincingly argued, especially Margaret Drewal, Sterling Stuckey, and Robert Farris Thompson, in many African idioms the political directly informs the production of performance. African-American forms follow this imperative, as evidenced in the dual-meaning texts of spirituals, the mocking stance and attitude of the cakewalk, and the blatantly radical lyrics of some rap.

How these politicized aesthetics have influenced American conceptions of the body, its subjectivity, and its liberatory potential are questions that have yet to be thoroughly engaged. Some historians, notably Saidiya V. Hartman, refer to “scenes of subjection” embedded within the literature and performance texts of widely appreciated American writers. Hartman and others underline the political motivation of Africanist expression within the context of the slave trade and its middle passage. Black subjectivity emerges from a crucible of terror, and the particularities of African-American performance practice ensue.

In dance studies, Brenda Dixon Gottschild writes on both the underlying theory of Africanist performance and the history of African-American artists subjected to twentieth-century American race politics.

Her latest book, *Waltzing in the Dark: African American Vaudeville and Race Politics in the Swing Era*, continues her groundbreaking work in this vein. Focusing on the vaudeville adagio team Norton and Margot (Harold Norton and Margot Webb), Gottschild mines the racialized contradictions that circumscribed the expressive possibilities of black artists in the swing era—roughly from the 1920s to the 1940s—even as Africanist performance imperatives emerged on American stages with new vigor, embodied by both black and white performers.

Gottschild's triumphant book is actually a performance in itself. It is a breathing, innovative text, written with unmitigated drive, passion, and insight. Her voice is close to the surface throughout, and reading *Waltzing in the Dark* often feels like sitting in on an extended classroom lecture.

Gottschild casts herself as a “notator, in words, for those who were ‘dancing in the dark’” (p. 4). “Dark” here refers to the survival mechanisms that African Americans employed in response to social climates that allowed them no humanity, since “African Americans disguised themselves, were hardly ever allowed to be themselves, masked their blackness, wore their blackness as a disguise, the mask (as it was since the days of minstrelsy) both a deception and a protection” (p. 4). Ultimately, Gottschild hopes to corroborate “the unimpeachable fact of the beauty, originality, innovation, creativity, and historical significance of African American cultural invention, with the swing era component as but one exquisite example” (p. 5). This she achieves mightily, and it is impossible to read this volume without a heightened awareness of the powerful mechanisms that African Americans employed to

create beauty and safety in a hostile climate.

Gottschild propels her interrogations far and wide. She explicates the rise of swing music and its instrumental differentiation from Dixieland jazz; the effects of touring on black artists often denied accommodation in the very hotels they headlined; the conditions of working on the black vaudeville circuit; caste and race among African Americans. She engages issues of commerce, examining salary differentials for black and white artists touring similar performance circuits with similar acts; of law, studying the effects of civil rights legislation and Southern Jim Crow laws on opportunities available to black performers; and of international race relations, chronicling Norton and Webb's European touring and their ouster from Germany during the Nazi regime. At times, the wide scope of the study threatens to overwhelm its effect, and I couldn't always keep up with the shifting paradigms and documentation that Gottschild cites. However, the breadth of *Waltzing in the Dark* contributes to its significance for the fields of dance, cultural, and performance studies.

Waltzing in the Dark was inspired by Gottschild's intellectual response to the idea of an African-American adagio team working in vaudeville, and she interviewed Margot Webb extensively as part of her research. Working from newspaper accounts and her interviews, Gottschild describes Norton and Webb's act with great fluency, and opens fascinating avenues for future inquiry. These include Norton's "secretive" background and biography after the team split up, and the appearance of an all-male chorus line at the Cotton Club in 1934. While Norton and Webb's story is distributed throughout the text, I sometimes lose the thread that places them at its center. I also wonder what makes their story different from that of other novelty acts of the era. As an adagio act, Norton and Webb were not "typical" swing-era perform-

ers, but Gottschild seems disinclined to view them as having rejected the swing aesthetic. Instead, they are most frequently portrayed as victims of racial politics, without the means to resist stereotyping through their performances.

Gottschild revisits Africanist aesthetic principles theorized in her first book, which continue to hold enormous potential for the analysis of contemporary dance performances.¹ A recurrent theme of her analysis is how whites were able to "appropriate black performance styles, trends, and traits and offer them for praise and profit as their own in white performance venues, but the equation was not acceptable when it went the other way" (p. 6). In a discussion of Fred Astaire, Honi Coles, and Paul Robeson, Gottschild notes how "white privilege versus black proscription" separated the careers and choices of these three men, with racism stopping African-American artists "in their tracks, like the first runners in a relay race, with whites ready to pick up the baton and assume the victory" (p. 83). This raises the important point that white American audiences have historically preferred white artists to black ones, whether or not the artistic idiom is African-derived.

Gottschild characterizes the swing era as a generative period when "subliminal Africanist influences that had been under wraps for centuries were now out in the open and, for all intents and purposes, owned and managed by whites" (p. 105). Even as her writing and its theory offer "an antidote to marginalization and a celebration of black centrality in the creation of the swing aesthetic" (p. 204), she notes that this aesthetic was only one stop in a long lineage of African-American creative innovation. Other forms followed, but whites remained committed to swing and its descendant idioms, continuing to "revise, codify, reconstruct, 'academicize,' and perform them" (p. 206).

Gottschild terms this racially charged process “maddening” and notes that it also applied to the histories of the Lindy Hop and tap dance. However, given that the Africanist imperatives she maps out stress innovation over an impulse to document or preserve, I wonder at her surprise in this.

Another important strand of her analysis traces the Africanist underpinnings of modernism through performances that embodied the “wit, irony, parody, spontaneity, meta-commentary, and self-reflexive turn that the twentieth-century would aspire to” (p. 209). Here Gottschild builds on her earlier writings, outlining “obvious, tangible links between swing culture and the modernist aesthetic,” including “abstraction, atonality, dissonance, improvisation, a lack of sentimentality combined with a sense of irony and a wrenchingly definitive move away from the ‘bogus realm of the Titaness’ – meaning, with regard to music, the hegemonic grip of the Germanic musical tradition that dominated orchestral works in Europe and Euro-America” (pp. 209–210). In this, Gottschild hopes to do more than provide theoretical connections between Africanist performance and modernist art. She exhorts us to “do away with the labels that separate the popular and the so-called art culture.” Citing the Lindy Hop and “modern dance” as constructed opposites, she observes that labels of high and low “serve the function of racism by separating the realms of endeavor that have traditionally been reserved for blacks—that is, vernacular or pop culture—from those that are the exclusive property of whites—namely, the world of ‘art’” (p. 215). Because “the African American presence is basic to just about every aspect of American life” and “black dance, music, and theatrical forms are fundamental threads in the fabric of the dominant culture” (p. 201), it should be difficult to consider work by any American artist without thinking through his or her relation-

ship to African-American culture and Africanist compositional techniques. This crucial argument must be underscored, as it gestures toward a more fully conceived scholarship on American performance.

Indeed, Gottschild’s book points repeatedly toward a future literature, now only in embryonic form and represented largely by her singular writings. In this, *Waltzing in the Dark* makes me wish for the era when Brenda Dixon Gottschild will have cohorts who write well and often about race politics in performance, willing to engage with her magnificent theorizing to argue points and points of view.

Thomas DeFrantz

Massachusetts Institute of Technology

Note

1. These include the embrace of conflict (an interest in friction and dynamic tension); high-affect juxtaposition (an emphasis on breaks that omit the connective links between ideas); ephebism (the power of youth, marked by fullness, percussive vitality and luminous energy); polyrhythm (the employment of cross rhythms and improvised beats); and the aesthetic of cool (“a balancing act between semblance and secrecy,” p. 15). Gottschild characterizes these as “interrelated, interactive, and interdependent” constructs which, in practice, “cannot possibly be manifested as separate entities” (p. 12).

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Posing a Threat: Flappers, Chorus Girls, and Other Brazen Performers of the American 1920s by Angela J. Latham. 2000. Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press. xi + 203 pp., 37 black and white illustrations, notes, index, and bibliography. \$50.00 cloth; \$19.95 paper.

Angela Latham's *Posing a Threat* is a welcome addition to writings that endeavor to parse the female body's significance in daily as well as performance situations. Focused on the 1920s in the United States, it turns close attention to issues of flapper fashion, new swimwear styles for women, and chorus-girl stylings—with special reference to the Ziegfeld Follies, and Avery Hopwood's play *Ladies' Night in a Turkish Bath*. The case studies and examples that the author develops are drawn largely from the eastern half of the country, especially New York and Chicago. Happily, she also invokes the mass circulation periodicals of the time, whose readership stretched across the country, considerably extending the range of the conclusions she draws.

A theme of dress and "undress" runs through the book's several foci, enabling the author to return to some key concerns in the conclusion of each chapter. She is particularly interested in charting transgressive efforts on the part of women as they pressed against the structures that staged them or which they used to stage themselves. She points to ways in which such structures both

circumscribed women and simultaneously provided them with opportunities to challenge limitations placed on their gender. Her treatment of 1920s flapper fashion in the chapter "Fashionable Discourse" is representative of the approach she pursues throughout. First, she goes directly to period discourse about flapper fashion, citing the worried comments about women's skirt lengths delivered in a June 1921 sermon by Reverend John Roach Straton, pastor of New York City's Calvary Baptist Church and vocal advocate of theater reform. She peruses as well magazines like *Good Housekeeping* and *The New Republic*, and pairs these with graphic images from the likes of the *New York Times*, the *Atlanta Sunday Constitution Magazine*, and sheet music sources. Particularly useful is the photograph reproduced from the May 14, 1921, *Literary Digest*, which illustrates "proper and improper" stances for young women (p. 23). As Latham makes clear, it wasn't simply the short skirts and length of leg paraded by flappers that troubled contemporaries; the rounded shoulders, forward head, and slung-into-the-hips posture that these women adopted aroused just as much concern. The disposition of the hips, in particular, reminds me of some Renaissance statuary, and the vertically stressed "proper" stance with which it is contrasted in the photography makes very clear the degree to which a woman's posture was taken to telegraph her affinities and investments.

Latham goes on in this chapter to discuss a period legal case in which an actress refused payment to a tailor who delivered a new gown "too late" to be useful before styles changed. Ranging synchronically, she links the prosecution of the case with contemporary debate in Illinois about women's service on juries and a range of writings on the issue of fashion's "tyranny" in women's lives. The latter present perspectives voiced