

*American Allegory: Lindy Hop and the Racial Imagination.* By Black Hawk Hancock. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013. Pp. xiv+265. \$90.00 (cloth); \$30.00 (paper).

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Black Hawk Hancock's *American Allegory* represents the first book-length meditation on how the neoswing renaissance, and its ahistorical cross-cultural engagement with "African American cultural forms," sustains racial domination. Hancock's key interlocutors include Loïc Wacquant and Ralph Ellison—who, in 1943, posited the riddle of the Lindy hop and, upon this book, casts an impressive shadow. Ellison's *Invisible Man* (Random House, 1952), a bildungsroman nonpareil, serves as a distant echo for *Allegory*, which is equal measures a fine ethnography and a coming-of-age narrative.

In 1997, Hancock brings the dedication of a carnal sociologist to the Chicago swing scene and takes up Wacquant's call to gainsay the "ethno-racial common sense" that permeates "white consumption" of black culture (p. 34). Hancock, in effect, wants Ellison on Wacquant's dance card, but I don't think Ellison's game. Briefly, Ellison-the-humanist (and Americanist) sustained a durable optimism and great patience with history, despite vilification from academics ("black Jew") and activists alike ("Uncle Tom"; *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison* [Modern Library, 1994], pp. 362, 359). Ellison was, I suggest, a nimble, negative dialectician: he sought to negate unfreedom with courage, wit, and switchblade-sharp irony. In service to the promise of democracy, Ellison wrote (and spoke) with disruptive clarity: "I don't recognize any white culture. . . . I recognize no American style in literature, in dance, in music [lacking] the mark of the American Negro. . . . [Likewise,] I don't recognize any black culture the way many people use the expression" (Ellison, *Essays*, p. 356).

Hancock cites Ellison's vision of music and art as "agencies of human freedom" (p. 26), but his fidelity to Ellison often wanes between chapter 1 and the coda. In successive chapters, Hancock explores the labor of learning to dance, swing as cultural appropriation, and "the bodily model of practice" in Chicago's steppin' scene. In the two-chapter coda, Hancock reflects upon the composition of *Allegory* and outlines an action agenda for neoabolitionists.

Hancock's prose is especially inspired in his description of the Lindy hop: a social dance of ten steps (or so) over eight beats that "hinges on few formal rules [beyond] the syncopated swing beat" (p. 41). Like a jazz solo, the dance entails individualism and cooperation, and its "contradictory logic makes the dance a dynamic interaction as partners . . . interpret the music together" (p. 41). Initially, Hancock imagines the dance as "completely uninhibited . . . to border on both chaos and complete precision" (p. 43) but learns from one dancer how it provides the structure for voracious improvisation: "We can bring in everything, the Ballroom, the West Coast Swing,

the Latin, the Tango . . . it all fits" (p. 43). Via Ellison, Hancock reprises this theme (and this politic) in his meditation on the hybridity of "soul": "a diversity within unity, blackness within whiteness" that, like jazz, "was born out of plurality of groups that gave rise to that sound and feel" (p. 195).

Hancock, then, turns Ellison's riddle upon himself: "Had I developed the . . . practical mastery . . . to understand how culture [and] racial mythologies" become embodied? (p. 196). Following his positive experience in the "all-African American" steppin' scene (a swing-inspired social dance), Hancock responds tentatively in the affirmative and outlines his action agenda: "The rearticulating of white identity in nonessentialist and relational ways to form political and social coalitions" (p. 218).

Who could quibble with this endeavor? For Hancock, "the rarity of white bodies [in] all-African American communities [destabilizes] notions of white racial identity and forces [African Americans] to make sense of . . . our [skilled] dancing in some way" (p. 187). The indeterminate conclusion of his decoding is significant. While Hancock and his white dance partner secure honorary status as "family" from select participants, they were apparently not invited to invite their friends. Let me identify two potential problems with Hancock's political project. First, his call for whites to embody black cultural forms through dance and to demonstrate "this labor in an African American public sphere" (p. 224) reflects a cursory imagination of status-based privilege: select cultural sociologists get paid for engaging in and representing such activities; the rest of us don't. Second, if a critical mass of white cultural activists tried to enter the steppin' scene with this agenda, the doors opened to Hancock might be immediately slammed shut.

Hancock's vision, though, is gutsy, and in *Allegory's* coda he provides evidence of a radicalization of his own consciousness, for it offers a reversal of the argument of chapter 2, "Caught in the Act of Appropriation," especially. For the *early* Hancock, whites perform tripartite transgressions in neoswing: whitewashing, minstrelsy, and commodification. Contra to the cross-cultural exhortations of Ellison or, say, P-Funk's George Clinton ("Free your mind and your ass will follow"), the posteriors of white neoswingers can't win for losing: if they dance too upright, they're guilty of whitewashing. If they stick their rumps out too far, they're guilty of minstrelsy. When her Swedish pupils err in excess, a black British female instructor scolds, "Be ladies! This is not ladylike!" (p. 94). Hancock finds evidence here for an international racial imagination (a most un-Ellisonian conclusion) but leaves the gender implications uninterrogated. In my years in the swing renaissance (I, too, am white), the scene provided the space for women to regularly take roles as "leaders." More important, Ellison provides little in the way of theory or practice for claims of appropriation. Ellison was quick to skewer "friends of the Negro people" who failed to recognize black artists as American artists (Ellison, p. 128), but he did not police the racial boundaries of cultural forms. (Hancock includes James O. Young's erudite *Cultural Appropriation and the Arts* [Blackwell, 2008] in his bibliography, but does not, alas, draw upon its critique of "existential authenticity" [p. 50].) Likewise, Ellison would have understood that these

alleged transgressors were not stiff-backed Irish step dancers slumming in the swing scene: most Americans have been dancing “blackly” since their teens. Ellison, too, as a Marxist through the 1940s, knew full well that all that is holy will eventually be profaned.

Still, I adore this book, for it comes so close. With a strong-willed editor, dozens of hermetic claims such as “this cultural engagement not only oppresses African Americans, but . . . dominates whites themselves as they remain trapped in their own essential whiteness” (p. 79) might have been better attuned to the more open-ended coda—in a word, made more Ellisonian.

*Allegory* deserves a readership beyond well-credentialed white liberals committed to more expansive forms of self-loathing and would be a vital addition to syllabi in courses on racialization, culture, and methodology. Like the protagonist of *Invisible Man*, Hancock’s hunger for justice remains unabated, I figure, and I look forward to his next excavation of the remaining riddles in the American vernacular.

*Black Citymakers: How the Philadelphia Negro Changed Urban America.* By Marcus Anthony Hunter. New York: Oxford University Press, 2013. Pp. xviii+286. \$35.00.

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In *The Philadelphia Negro*, W. E. B. DuBois examines the physical and the “far-mightier social” environment in Philadelphia’s Seventh Ward. His classic and too-neglected account of racial inequality in urban space develops an elegantly multidimensional story about how massive poverty and decay occurred in this neighborhood over the course of the 19th century. This multidimensionality enables DuBois to focus on a main story—the historical and structural conditions perpetuating racial domination—while refusing to relent to an overdetermined view of the black residents of the Seventh Ward (we see evidence of agency and find suggestions for how the oppression of this community can be eased). After all, he is attempting to provide an analysis that leads to further academic study and to more “practical reform.” Unfortunately, sociology has not taken the DuBoisian multidimensionality to heart. While a robust literature has developed around the causes and consequences of racial inequality, less research has focused on the agentic responses black Americans develop to counteract and resist systematic forms of racism, discrimination, and political disempowerment. Marcus Anthony Hunter’s book, *Black Citymakers: How the Philadelphia Negro Changed Urban America*, provides a way forward by focusing on the political agency of black residents of the Seventh Ward in the 20th century.

Hunter’s emphasis on political agency draws attention to the strategies that people in weak positions use to make sense of and challenge structural conditions. In this framework black Philadelphians need not successfully