

DANIELLE ROBINSON (2015). MODERN MOVES. DANCING RACE DURING THE RAGTIME AND JAZZ ERAS

Review by Valentin Meneau

Noticing a gap in the dance histories, Danielle Robinson's book *Modern Moves, Dancing Race During the Ragtime and Jazz Eras* focusses on the years from the 1890s to the 1910s and the dozens of dances separating cakewalking and jazz. Although some of the dances are performed to jazz music or ragtime, Robinson does not focus on the music so much rather than on the socio-cultural meaning attributed to the movements. Considering blues, ragtime, modern, ballroom, and jazz dancing as cross-cultural practices, she intends to understand the relationships between dances, peoples, and cultures, reminding the reader that

although seemingly far removed from the present, early twentieth century social dancing still influences our thinking about dance and race today. For example, competitive ballroom dancing is still divided into two racially discrete categories – standard and Latin, (15)

which originated in particular notions of »whiteness« and »non-whiteness«.

In the course of the book, Robinson shows the cross-cultural borrowings, the creative and identity processes undergone by dancers seeking to respond to specific ethnic intentions (distinction, acculturation, or self-empowerment, for instance). She describes the origin of the »animal« dances (such as the Turkey Trot, Bunny Hug, Grizzly Bear, etc.) as secular African American plantation and jook house dances, which were later adapted into modern social dances by European American ballroom dance teachers through a process they called »refining« (6). This transformation of the playful and jaunty dances into more glamorous versions was necessary in order to cater to white middle class entertainment, thus establishing the new industry of social dancing. At the same time, these dance teachers were establishing their business

and authority as teachers and performers. This cross-cultural borrowing, however, is based on different political aims and implications, and thus has to be understood as a (at least) bilateral exchange, as shall become clear later.

The book is divided into five chapters, or five overlapping case studies. Each chapter starts with a short narrative (about two pages) in which Robinson describes the places, actors and practices relevant for social dancing at the particular time. Her depictions help to imagine the social dance contexts in a lively way. The first chapter focuses on the partner dancing of working-class African American migrants. Chapter two describes the ragtime dancing of European immigrant youth, which, practiced as a form of minstrelsy, performed blackness as a means to remind themselves that they could take off their role as immigrants, thus assimilating as white middle class Americans. The third chapter outlines the marketing of social dancing as a »refined« modern dance where, through specific movements, European American dance professionals undermine connotations to racial or ethnic groups by erasing sexual references and animal imitations. The traditional European ballroom dancing of African American elites, practiced in order to reach a higher-class status by performing dance moves connoted as culturally superior, is examined in chapter four. The fifth chapter closes the book on a description of the selling of jazz dancing to white Broadway stars through a nascent studio system founded by African American dance teachers (Nad Wayburn or Billy Pierce are named as examples).

Drawing on the resources of dance reconstruction, dance ethnography, and dance cultural studies, the hybridity of Robinson's research methodology enables her to analyse the interweaving of identity, history, culture and politics in the embodiment of social dance forms. Trained as a historian, she engages with ethnographic issues and her interest in social practices leads her to emphasize »physical experience and respect for cultural difference« (17). Before presenting the result of her archival research, she opens each chapter with »vignettes«, issued from experience-focused ethnography, in order to exemplify the social context of the following chapter and help the reader focus on the dancers rather than the dance. In addition, the dance reconstruction enables her to understand the ways in which dancers performed in different ethnic styles: »In short, the project became more ethnographic just by considering *who* was dancing« (22).

Robinson focuses on New York City's Tenderloin (from Midtown to Chelsea) because of its fame as an entertainment district with dozens of dance spaces and its particular demographic evolution: It was mostly inhabited by African Americans prior to the construction of Penn Station and the rise of Harlem as

a black metropolis. The intensification of European immigration and of African American migration from the southern U.S. between 1900 and 1915 significantly increased New York City's population—, which met and mixed in these entertainment spaces.

The author chooses to concentrate on the room for maneuver and the tactics employed by the different ethnic groups to pursue their empowerment, sought for on a quotidian decisional basis, by performing specific ethnically connoted movements. She describes how different communities have used dancing they perceived to be black or white to transform their lives; how cross-cultural dancing can play a role in both European American and African American identity-formation processes; and how dance as employed by people of different racial backgrounds can be part of efforts toward and expressions of social mobility. (16)

For example, the assimilation as migrant or immigrant, the establishment of professional dance careers and industries, or the social advancement of specific communities were rendered possible by social dancing.

In transforming the dances into more broadly marketable versions, the dance professionals of various ethnic and racial backgrounds established their authority by convincing consumers (also of various ethnic and racial backgrounds) of their dominating knowledge and skills. Furthermore, the process of marketing these dances relied upon implicit race and class-based strategies (such as performing movements with specific connotations) appealing to social upward mobility or the assurance of their own social dominance. The dances have been widely distributed (through teaching in public entertainment spaces, publications in books, magazines) and influenced the social dancing practices in North America and Europe. »Cross-cultural borrowing was at the heart of this industry; it was a major source of innovation in social dancing ... It helped normalize dancing ›otherness‹ in American culture« (13).

Robinson shows how the dance floors have been used as both an entertainment space and an opportunity to construct the different ethnicities' own identities through their performances (by comparing them to others). Furthermore, she describes the universal importance to perform movements culturally associated to specific ethnicities (although for different political implications), in order to improve the communities' social status and to reach a higher self-empowerment. Simultaneously to these identity practices, and based on these racial and ethnic associations, a new ballroom dance industry flourished, nationally and eventually internationally.

Reflecting on the outcome of her research, the author notices three recurrent themes: assimilation, nostalgia, and distinction, the latter being the

most obvious. Assimilation, for example, has been sought after by young European immigrants aspiring to indicate their new identity as Americans. To do so, they performed racially connoted ›black‹ moves, in order to demonstrate their distance from this ethnic group: as in minstrelsy, this blackness was something they could take off. Nostalgia was present in the performance of European-derived partner dances of the nineteenth century (such as quadrilles, polkas, schottisches, varsouvianas) by black southern U.S. migrants, while distinction was strived for by black elites who adopted these traditional European ballroom dances because of their association with the socially dominant class and ethnic group. Closing her book, Robinson considers the presence of these themes throughout twenty first century dancing, highlighting the topicality of borrowing movements for social mobility purposes, or the growth of the ballroom dance industry through its competition-oriented counterpart, dancesport, a now ›multibillion dollar endeavor that still sells social mobility to the middle classes and their aspirants‹ (153).

In describing the tightly interrelated dance groups of various ethnic and racial backgrounds, and their cross-cultural borrowings, Robinson manages to depict the diversity and evolution of the dances and their performers. She shows which movements are associated with blackness and whiteness, and how performing those movements helped the actors to reach their respective social goals.

This book is an essential response to a lack in the socio-historic academic discourse about social dancing. In the last more than twenty years, Julie Malnig's *Dancing Till Dawn*¹, for example, focused on professional ballroom teams and their creativity, or Juliet McMains' study described the dances' standardization from an institutional perspective², leading to the industry of dancesport as we know it today. However, neither of them concentrates as precisely as Robinson does on the process of the dances' development, which is tightly related to the social aspirations of the dancers.

Modern Moves' focus on the flexibility and fluidity of the dances, depending on the groups of dancers and their respective hopes and desires, combined with Robinson's very diverse ways of presenting her results lead to a critical account of the relevance of social dancing for constructing identity—still a topical issue, as Robinson reminds the reader. I especially recommend this book to—not exclusively—dance scholars working on the display of race and class in—not only social—dancing, or on the evolution and history of these

1 Malnig, Julie (1995). *Dancing Till Dawn. A Century of Exhibition Ballroom Dance*. New York: NYU Press.

2 McMains, Juliet (2006). *Glamour Addiction. Inside the American Ballroom Dance Industry*. Middletown: Wesleyan University Press.

social dances. The interplay of race and standardization was very interesting to me, although a parallel reading of McMains' book might be a good complement to provide further reflections on the standardization process.

Danielle Robinson (2015). *Modern Moves. Dancing Race during the Ragtime and Jazz Eras*, New York: Oxford University Press, (197 pp., Paperback: \$31.95, 27€).