

Jody Blake, *Le Tumulte Noir: Modernist Art and Popular Entertainment in Jazz-Age Paris, 1900-1930* (University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania University Press, 1999).

Le Tumulte Noir investigates the “historical context for primitivism” through an examination of “the reception of African American music and dance in France, from ragtime and the cakewalk to jazz and the Charleston.” (2) Author Jody Blake’s overarching argument is that France’s art history was undeniably influenced by the influx of African American jazz musicians who migrated to Europe at the turn of the nineteenth century. These artists found in Europe an environment in which to cultivate their aesthetic talent, capitalize on a widespread exposure, experience a new sense of liberality, and escape the restrictions the U.S. imposed on them because of race.

While the position Blake advances is one that is universally shared by a variety of scholars and is not necessarily new, her treatment of the extent to which African-American jazz musicians directly influenced French art history is most intriguing. Blake’s work seems to assume multiple positions. First, she attempts to refute and dispel early scholars who because of their own polemics regarding race refused to acknowledge the influence of jazz musicians on the formation of French art history. Second, she attempts to call attention to those African-American artists whose contributions to French cultural art forms remain evident.

Blake carefully deconstructs how primitivism as an extension of blackness coincided with early art forms. Specifically, she contends that “among scholars of primitivism in modernist art, there is, in fact a heightened awareness of the need to examine the impact of African sculpture in conjunction with that of African-American music and dance.” (3) She suggests that “the term *l’art negre* was as likely to call to mind the music and dance of black America as it was to evoke the sculpture of black Africa. The French were quick to disregard that ragtime and jazz were created by American blacks, contained European elements, and were commercialized for white audiences.” (5) To support her position she demonstrates how the intersection of African and African-American sculpture, music, and dance survived and was captured in various art forms — magazines, Picasso paintings, music that filled Paris’s leading music halls, and dance. It is Blake’s contention that “the enthusiasm for the ‘eccentric’ rhythms of ragtime and the ‘bizarre’ strutting of the cakewalk, no less than the admiration in the Picasso and Matisse circles for the ‘grotesque’ forms of African sculpture, was typical of European interactions with the ‘primitive’ in the modern period.” (18) Blake seeks to establish the connection between African and African-American art on French art forms, as she levels accusations at the critics who failed to acknowledge such influence. For example, Blake charges that “rather than promoting greater objectivity, ethnomusicological publications reinforced racist myths concerning black

music and dance Musicologists perpetuated the belief that, for blacks, music and dancing were spontaneous outpourings of life instincts rather than conscious expressions of aesthetic principles.” (25)

Blake’s work is particularly astute in reconstructing early African-American jazz musicians who traveled to Europe, including Sydney Bechet, Opal Cooper, Buddy Gilmore, Sammy Richardson, and Cricket Smith. She actually leaves the reader longing for more on their import and contributions to Parisian music. She only hints at how the intensity and aggression of World War One transformed the jazz music created by these and other artists. In much the same manner, she criticizes Josephine Baker who symbolized the exotic racial Other in dance. Instead of expounding on Baker’s dance style (preserved on film to strengthen her argument), Blake relies on critics of the period. But these voids are nearly erased by the inclusion of extensive and rare photographs illustrating Blake’s reconstructed art history that capture the time period, that represent diverse art forms, and that give authenticity to the arguments alluded to in her text.

Although Blake criticizes the failure of French art critics and scholars to acknowledge African-American influences on their artistic expressions, she is herself guilty of excluding (probably due to the difficulty of locating) the black voice in providing her own critique of this period. She does mention black literary figures such as Langston Hughes and Claude McKay who commented on the impact of the Harlem Renaissance on French cultural forms, but she could have enhanced the work if she had included other black voices such as musicians, artists, dancers, etc., and shared their views on the impact to the development of these art forms.

Blake does suggest that “the purists did not, however, envision jazz solely in terms of classicism and machinism. They also associated it with Africanism, but an Africanism rendered every bit as chaste and cool as fluted columns and crankshafts.” (147-8) In her last chapter, Blake declares, “what critics of the formalist discourse of primitivism have failed to recognize is its historical origins in the backlash against the jazz age. Until the 1920s, and the ascendancy of notions of pure painting, pure music, and pure dance, the formalist understanding of primitiveness was secondary to a racial and cultural one.” (165) And as she concludes her critique, Blake states that the “reductivist version of African art and its impact on modernism is perhaps the most lasting legacy of the artistic, social, and political upheaval associated with le tumulte noir.”

Blake’s work is a must read for those who, though not exclusively art historians, are nonetheless particularly interested in the influence of African-American jazz artists and their lasting impact on French cultural art forms.

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