

Stolen Time: Black Fad Performance and the Calypso Craze

Stolen Time: Black Fad Performance and the Calypso Craze. Shane Vogel. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018; Pp. 254 + xi.

A trip backstage at the Imperial Theatre in late fall 1957 promised brushes with a number of black performers who would help radically transform the cultural and racial logics of the United States. In an effort to profit from the “calypso craze” fueled by the success of Harry Belafonte’s 1956 record *Calypso*, producer David Merrick teamed up with composer Harold Arlen, lyricist E.Y. Harburg, and playwright Fred Saidy to bring the original, conspicuously titled musical *Jamaica* to Broadway. The incomparable Lena Horne was tapped to lead a company that included such tastemakers and change-agents as Alvin Ailey, Ossie Davis, and Josephine Premice. As Shane Vogel outlines in his thoughtfully researched and compellingly written book, *Stolen Time: Black Fad Performance and the Calypso Craze*, their musical proved much more than “a typical instance of midcentury Broadway Caribbeana” (133). Vogel reveals how the production not only “provided a surface for constantly shifting and destabilizing configurations of nation and race,” but also opened space for “political alternatives to be staged, sounded, and embodied, even in the face of the tourist economies and minstrel traditions in which black fad performance trafficked” (134-135). In so doing, this recent book exposes musical theater as one of the many potent sites through which black performers interpellated by the Jim Crow era’s various “Negro vogues” staged and embodied various acts of refusal.

Vogel examines performances across multiple media—sound recordings, nightclub acts, film, television, dance, as well as musical theater—to highlight some of the sophisticated strategies black artists developed to negotiate the racist, imperialist, and appropriating impulses of the American entertainment industry. He brings particular attention to the ways these artists engaged performance to challenge, sometimes playfully, binaries such as “inauthenticity/authenticity, false/true, improper/proper, ungentle/gentle, and insincerity/sincerity” (7). *Stolen Time* notably does not offer a comprehensive accounting of the calypso craze. Instead, the book explores several key examples that elucidate how black performers thwarted the representational imperatives and constraints demanded and imposed by American fad culture.

As detailed in chapter one, the 1950s calypso craze was not the first “race craze” to generate widespread excitement during the Jim Crow period. Indeed, Vogel draws direct links between earlier crazes—notably, the ragtime craze of the 1890s and the Harlem vogue of the 1920s—and the midcentury thirst for Caribbeana, thereby exposing “the structural repetitions that shape[d] these fad cycles” (34). The chapter’s close readings of Josephine Premice’s nightclub performances and the two albums she recorded at the height of the craze, in addition to evidencing Vogel’s assertion that fad time is always already stolen time, shed important light on the tactics black performers deployed to make “the tempos and tastes of the marketplace” (66) align with their own motivations and aspirations.

Vogel offers additional evidence and analysis of these tactics in subsequent chapters. Chapter two, for example, examines the cinematic calypso craze of the 1950s and the live nightclub revues coopted and reproduced on screen to illuminate the self-reflexivity of the “calypso program.” This chapter offers particularly astute readings of Maya Angelou’s performance as a calypso chanteuse in the low budget film, *Calypso Heat Wave* (1957), which serve to substantiate Vogel’s suggestion that the “calypso craze

project[ed] nothing other than itself” (89). Chapter three turns attention to Duke Ellington and Billy Strayhorn’s 1957 live television presentation of their LP recording, *A Drum Is a Woman*. Vogel analyzes the event as an example of “radical counterprogramming”—that is, “an alternative to the middlebrow’s exploitation of blackness in the project of Cold War internationalism and a fundamental rewriting of the calypso program” (108). As “radical counterprogramming,” the live broadcast of *A Drum Is a Woman* stole back the time of the calypso craze and, in the process, “posed important questions about the relationship between nation and diaspora; African American and Afro-Caribbean cultural exchange; white commercial culture and black performance; and the sounds and gestures that reshaped cultural geographies in the twentieth century,” Vogel writes (108).

Chapter four’s focus on the Broadway production of *Jamaica* further surfaces and explores the entwinements of race, nation, and diaspora. Vogel examines the production as a signal example of “mock transnational performance”—“a theatrical mode and performative stance that takes up the misuse of diasporic cultural indices to critique and refigure the politics of the nation-state and racialized national formations” (134). The chapter also considers how the show’s multiracial cast fostered and forged community on and offstage, thereby posing direct challenges to the white supremacist status quo. Through the careful attention he gives to Horne’s performance as Savannah in the musical, Vogel expands on some of the arguments he explores in his first book, *The Scene of Harlem Cabaret: Race, Sexuality, Performance* (University of Chicago Press, 2009), further illustrating the range of approaches black performers developed and deployed to frustrate the racial expectations and assumptions of their Jim Crow audiences. Chapter five’s considerations of the crucial role that dancer-choreographer-director-performer-designer-painter Geoffrey Holder played in stirring and sustaining interest in the calypso craze serve to underscore Vogel’s assessments throughout *Stolen Time* that the fad was often marked by and constituted through the avowals and disavowals of its most prominent participants. Even as he disavowed what he called “Manhattan calypso,” characterizing it as an amusing imitation of “true Calypso,” Holder, Vogel notes, disavowed his own disavowals, popularizing a new dance form, the “Limbo-Calypso,” with the public. He also drew on the craze for inspiration to develop work for the concert dance stage.

Especially striking throughout *Stolen Time* is Vogel’s skillful weaving of history, biography, theory, and critical inquiry to contemplate the significance of the calypso craze and the ontological conditions of black fad performance. The book is rich with fresh insights and important methodological interventions that add complexity to our understandings of concepts such as race, time, performance, diaspora, transnationalism, and mass culture. Students and scholars across myriad fields— theater studies, performance studies, media studies, popular music, and critical race studies, among them—will no doubt benefit tremendously from rigorously engaging with each chapter. To be sure, there is much to be gleaned about the significant role that artists continue to play in prompting social, cultural, and political change from *Stolen Time*’s absorbing prose and its shrewd considerations of black performance in the Jim Crow era.

Isaiah Matthew Wooden
Brandeis University

The Journal of American Drama and Theatre
Volume 32, Number 1 (Fall 2019)
ISSN 2376-4236
©2019 by Martin E. Segal Theatre Center