



Ring Shout, Wheel About: The Racial Politics of Music and Dance in North American Slavery

By Katrina Dyonne Thompson

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In this ambitious project, historian Katrina Thompson examines the conceptualization and staging of race through the performance, sometimes coerced, of black dance from the slave ship to the minstrel stage. Drawing on a rich variety of sources, Thompson explicates how black musical performance was used by white Europeans and Americans to justify enslavement, perpetuate the existing racial hierarchy, and mask the brutality of the domestic slave trade. Whether on slave ships, at the auction block, or on plantations, whites often used coerced performances to oppress and demean the enslaved.

As Thompson shows, however, blacks' "backstage" use of musical performance often served quite a different purpose. Through creolization and other means, enslaved people preserved some native musical and dance traditions and invented or adopted new traditions that built community and even aided rebellion.

Thompson shows how these traditions evolved into nineteenth-century minstrelsy and, ultimately, raises the question of whether today's mass media performances and depictions of African Americans are so very far removed from their troublesome roots.

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Editorial Review

Review

"Thompson forces readers to rethink the place and meaning of performance in early America. ...*Ring Shout* stands as one of the more intriguing new works on slavery and performance."--*Civil War Book Review*

"Katrina Dyonne Thompson makes an important contribution to our understanding of slavery and racial formation. An engaging, well-argued book that uses the contested areas of dance and music to explore the many worlds of slavery and the cultural development of both blacks and whites. *Ring Shout, Wheel About* will take its rightful place alongside its academic forbearers, and should be the standard to follow for years to come."--*Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society*

"Provides a thorough examination of the "complex and conflicting roles" of music and dance in the lives of the enslaved, arguing that double consciousness was one result of the "paradoxical dynamic of agency, masquerade, and subjugation" found in black performances."--*The Journal of Southern History*

"Thompson has written a powerful study whose implications reach beyond distant American history or the preconceptions of 'black studies' to ask urgent questions about African American identity."--*Times Literary Supplement*

"Thompson's extraordinary book relates the story behind the story of the genesis of blackface minstrelsy as the first entertainment form in the new US. Essential."--*Choice*

"Thompson offers the first cultural history of how music and dance shaped Euro-American and African American identities and how these American culture producers manipulated the performing arts to mold public perception... On virtually every page of *Ring Shout, Wheel About*, Thompson perceptively deconstructs this complicated quartet of music, dance, slavery, and American culture, and she brilliantly organizes her argument around a 'page to stage' metaphor of theatrical production... *Ring Shout, Wheel About* succeeds tremendously in historicizing racial stereotyping well before blackface and in explicating the many uses Europeans, Africans, African Americans, Euro-Americans, southerners, and northerners found for music and dance."--*Register of the Kentucky Historical Society*

About the Author

Katrina Dyonne Thompson is an assistant professor of history and African American studies at St. Louis University.

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