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

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Recommended Citation

Gac, Scott (2014) "Ring Shout, Wheel About: The Racial Politics of Music and Dance in North American Slavery," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 16 : Iss. 3 .

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.16.3.25

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol16/iss3/23>

Review

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Summer 2014

Thompson, Katrina Dyonne *Ring Shout, Wheel About: The Racial Politics of Music and Dance in North American Slavery*. University of Illinois Press, \$28.00
ISBN 978-0-252-07983-2

Performance and Race in American Slavery

Ring Shout, Wheel About presents a vivid reconceptualization of the origins of American entertainment. In five short chapters—Script, Casting, Backstage, Advertisement, and Same Script, Different Actors—, Thompson draws readers' attention to the performative aspects of North American slavery. In Script, she focuses on the racist European imagination in Africa and the diverse cultural traditions brought together under enslavement. Casting focuses on the Middle Passage, where Western slave traders upheld a belief that song and dance, though elicited by force, maintained the health of their human chattel. In Backstage and Advertisement, the author's focus centers on music and dance in the United States. The communicative and subversive aspect of performance is revealed in the chapter on slave resistance while, again, slave performance as a sign of health and contentment is seen in the chapter on the internal slave trade.

After demonstrating the deep historical roots of performance within American slavery, Thompson chips away at long-held beliefs on blackface minstrelsy in Same Script, Different Actors. Most recent scholarship argues minstrelsy as the product of urbanization, the market revolution, and the long record of white actors who onstage assumed a "black" character. Thompson looks beyond an urban environment that placed poor whites alongside free blacks and beyond the burgeoning nineteenth-century infrastructure for performance (the concert stages and the ticketholders who had the leisure and means to support commercial production). Minstrelsy, she states in an argument that many scholars intuit but fail to explain, was about American slavery—not as contemporaries in the 1830s and 1840s held when they debated whether minstrelsy truly represented the lives and nature of slaves, but within a long

tradition of blacks performing for whites within a grossly mismatched relationship of cultural, political, and economic authority.

The strength of *Ring Shout, Wheel About* is the theoretical framework listed above. From black slave performance enacted by a commodity to the performance of blackness as a commodity, Thompson forces readers to rethink the place and meaning of performance in early America. Sadly, however, the execution of the arguments often fails to live up to the vibrancy of the book's structure. Reliant on published accounts of Westerners, the sections on Africa and the Middle Passage lack the depth and complexity that one presumes the push and pull of slavery and performance provides. As key modes of expression, the music and dance of the enslaved demonstrates resistance, sadness, hope, deliverance, and more often within the same segment. Yet Thompson falls prey to a constant discovery of the "culturally arrogant and ethnocentric" ways of whites paired with black "self-desecration" and the "negative racial imagery" that pervades American entertainment (19, 194). The vitality of "love and theft," the term used by historian Eric Lott to characterize white engagement with black culture in the 1830s and 1840s, is thus reduced to the authoritarianism of slavery. In the end, there simply is not enough evidence introduced to support the bold, broad ideas that underpin the book. Nevertheless, *Ring Shout* stands as one of the more intriguing new works on slavery and performance.

Scott Gac is Associate Professor and Director of American Studies at Trinity College in Hartford, CT. He is the author of Singing for Freedom (2007) and is at work on Born in Blood: Violence and the Making of America.