

Dance Floor Democracy: The Social Geography of Memory at the Hollywood Canteen, Sherrie Tucker

Harri Heinilä

Volume 14, numéro 2-3, 2021

Improvisation, Musical Communities, and the COVID-19 Pandemic

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1080731ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

University of Guelph College of Arts

ISSN

1712-0624 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Heinilä, H. (2021). Compte rendu de [Dance Floor Democracy: The Social Geography of Memory at the Hollywood Canteen, Sherrie Tucker]. *Critical Studies in Improvisation / Études critiques en improvisation*, 14(2-3), 1–6.

Book Review

Dance Floor Democracy: The Social Geography of Memory at the Hollywood Canteen

Sherrie Tucker
Duke University Press, 2014
ISBN: 9780822357421
ISBN: 9780822357575
408 pages

Reviewed by Harri Heinilä

Professor Sherrie Tucker, a feminist jazz studies scholar, discusses the Hollywood Canteen, a USO-like nightclub and a military recreation spot in Hollywood, Los Angeles, which operated between October 1942 and November 1945. Movie stars and other volunteers mainly from the Hollywood movie industry operated the Canteen (xiii, xiv, 320). She focuses on the Swing-dominated dance floor of the Canteen and its contradictory connections between democracy, race, and gender (xix) by exploring the ideologies and interests of volunteers and patrons of the place, who were mostly soldiers of different races and of the Allied nations. Tucker is interested in how these individuals experienced the Canteen in the past, but also in how they shape and convey their memories of it in the present in their interviews with her (xiv, xxiii, 8-9). Her study is not a comprehensive history of the Hollywood Canteen, but an analysis in which the past and the present meet via the interviews, newspaper articles, earlier studies, memoirs, and archival sources like FBI files and former patrons' unpublished recollections of the Canteen.

Tucker connects her interviewees' memories of life in America during WWII with more recent narratives of living in America during a war abroad and hostile attacks on American soil, specifically recollections of the 9/11 terrorist attack in 2001, which took place around the time she conducted the interviews (8–10). She concentrates on the relationship between the ways "World War II is remembered and memorialized in the US and the ways official memories are recruited to justify national actions globally" (xviii-xix). Her ambitious task is to ask larger questions in addition to merely exploring the dance floor-related cultural struggles of Canteen-goers and its volunteers. Tucker tries to "ask broader questions about relationships between big band [Swing] music, jitterbug, and nostalgia for World War II." (xiii). She asks how the integrated dance floor in the Hollywood Canteen "as a symbol of democracy" is connected with the white dancing couples that dominate the US national memory of World War II? And what is the gap between the memory and battles over integrated dancing (xv)?

To accomplish this task, Tucker compares her interviewees' individual memories to various types of "official" memory, in particular, to three of them. The first is the US national memory of World War II, which she defines evidently as "a story and a soundtrack" and "a style of commemoration of imagined coherence" that is able to "bring the nation to the nation-state," and with which most of those who consider themselves "national subjects" have to deal, every so often (xv). This "national memory," to her, means "a dominant articulation of remembrance and amnesia," a national identity that ignores controversial features like racism and colonialism (20). The definition bears a clear resemblance to a notion of war commemoration that T.G. Ashplant, Graham Dawson, and Michael Roper forward in the introduction to their edited volume, *The Politics of War Memory and Commemoration* (2000), as "a practice bound up with rituals of national identification, and a key element in the symbolic repertoire available to the nation-state for binding its citizens into a collective national identity" (Ashplant et al. 7).

While her interviewees' "war memory" oscillates between past and present wartimes, Tucker is invested in the intersections of "war memory" and "swing memory," which she considers a "dominant soundtrack" of the US World War II national memory. And a key part of this swing memory are narratives about swing musicians and jitterbugs integrating a segregated swing industry and dance floor. She suggests that these narratives have become part of revitalizing "a vigorous and strident form of American exceptionalism" (9–10, 103).

The third of the memories is a state memory. Professor Tucker considers the modern state to be "constitutively 'racial,' and often racist", although the state "represents itself as instrumental or uninterested in social categories such as race" (20). She seems to suggest that the modern state tries to hide its racist inclination. She could have been more definite with this. Her definition of the state memory consists of contradictory elements: the government-related archival sources like FBI files that are "secretly compiled" and include "classified data on racial integration conceived as un-American" (247), and the court records in which alleged wrongdoing is exposed. This more complex and contradictory form of memory stands in opposition to the "national memory" in which wrongdoing might be "smoothed away" to present a purportedly coherent picture of the nation (147–49). Tucker draws a picture of a national dance floor, the context of the Hollywood Canteen, which fed into these three forms of memory and whose memory, in turn, became both shaped by these three types of "official" memory and holds the potential to undermine these narratives, due largely to the fact the Canteen was not as unified as those in power usually claim in national celebrations.

The study is divided into four parts. In the first part, Tucker explains the racial geography of Greater Los Angeles during World War II, in relation to where African American troops were stationed in the city, and practices of segregation and integration in dance and entertainment. Though questions remain that she does not quite answer, we gain a sense of the racial dynamics of the time.

In Los Angeles in this period people of color, African Americans more specifically, were allowed to live only in restricted areas (42–43) despite the US war policy's boasts about national unity (Sparrow 51). However, segregated African American troops were stationed in predominantly white areas like Burbank where they were not usually allowed to enter places of entertainment. Tucker paints a complex picture of the racial tensions, interracial cooperation, and strategic representations that emerged as a result. She documents the ways the African American press celebrated that the citizens of Burbank were feeling much safer with the (African American) 369th Coast Antiaircraft Artillery Regiment keeping twenty-four-hour watch in the area, and she argues that the discourse welcoming the "race members" as "guests" in North Hollywood was "telling terminology" that conveyed the warm and optimistic attitude of the white neighborhood towards the African American troop presence. *Dance Floor Democracy* also retells a story reported in the African American press of a white family feeding African American soldiers in their North Hollywood home when no restaurant in the area could be found to serve them. However, we also learn how this dinner led the white family into conflicts with their neighbors and how the white communities often resented the presence of the African American troops (86, 90–91).

Tucker's descriptions of these dynamics can only offer a general sense of the complexity of race relations in this setting and certain key questions remain unanswered, notably: What were the conditions that motivated the stationing of African American units in these white areas? Though we are left wondering about this missing piece of the puzzle, we learn much about the ways African Americans and their allies organized music and dance events in this context. *Dance Floor Democracy* discusses at length the organizations and persons that provided services and entertainment for African American troops in Los Angeles and who fought against the USO's discrimination against African American soldiers. These included African American YMCA director Dorothy C. Guinn, the USO-YMCA Committee of Negro

Women, and the Negro Sub-Committee of the Hollywood Victory Committee whose members were African American Hollywood actors like Hattie McDaniel, Eddie Anderson, and Leigh Whipper (76–79, 83). She describes how their efforts led to two integrated USO clubs in African American Watts and in the Central Avenue district, which were the USO predecessors to the Hollywood Canteen in Los Angeles (88, 93). Professor Tucker also discusses white Hollywood actress Bette Davis who, with her African American colleagues, provided integrated entertainment for African American troops and defended integration in the Hollywood Canteen but while also upholding racist tropes through her role in the film *In This Our Life* (92). Certain details such as this would have benefitted from being analyzed more than just being noticed; the contrast is clear between Davis' activities for integration, and her acting in a racist movie role. A deeper examination of how seeming contradictions manifested at the time would have been enlightening.

Professor Tucker seems to argue that the dancing bodies in these contexts were partly responsible for postwar changes to the racial geography of Los Angeles and the broader "rules of race" in the United States. However, it remains unclear what exactly the "wartime changes" in Los Angeles were that changed "the rules of race" sufficiently for paving "the way for significant postwar shifts in civil rights" (102). Two particular examples emerge before her conclusion to this section: the case of Amanda Perez and Sylvester Davis, an African American and Mexican American couple, whose legal fight for their marriage ended the anti-miscegenation laws in California in 1948, and the case of ruling unconstitutional racially restrictive housing covenants in 1948, a fight in which those African American Hollywood stars who entertained African American troops participated (101–02). Also discussed is President Franklin D. Roosevelt's executive order for integrating the war industries, which is clearly connected with her "wartime changes" statement, and also paved the way for postwar shifts in civil rights. Tucker could have explained more about the connection between the aforementioned Perez and Davis case and the house covenants case and the postwar development of the civil rights fight. Although the attention to these battles to lift racial restrictions in Los Angeles is enlightening, the battles themselves deserved more research. We are also left wondering which dancing bodies contributed the most to changing attitudes. Were the bodies that participated in the jitterbug contests in the integrated Eastside USO in the Central Avenue district perhaps more significant than those in the Hollywood Canteen? Tucker mentions these contests briefly, but does not discuss them in as much depth as they seem to deserve (96, 117, 133). Delving into these contests might have shed more light on racial integration in the canteens. It is known that an African American couple won a Jitterbug contest in a colored division at the Los Angeles Coliseum in 1939 ("Champion Jitterbug Couple"). So, segregated dancing in canteen contests was not a new development in of the war years; one wonders why more focus was not placed on the role racial integration in the canteen contests played in supporting the idea of genuine racial integration.

In part two, we telescope further into the context of the Hollywood Canteen. An issue with the section is a certain opaqueness in Professor Tucker's ethnographic research: whether the chosen excerpts from the 60 interviews she conducted with Canteen goers are sufficient to represent the full scope of experiences the space afforded, it is clear they are sufficient to challenge the dominant national memory of the Hollywood Canteen. However, she could have explained how and why she chose the excerpts from the interviews. That could have helped her reader to evaluate the representativeness of her analysis.

As the section begins, Tucker enters the Hollywood Canteen figuratively as one of dancers, who, with her interviewees, torques back and forth and ponders the Hollywood Canteen dance floor and its racial and gender relations. She focuses on the memories and narratives of enlisted men who visited the Canteen and young civilian women who volunteered there. A democratic, mainly white, and faultless jitterbugging soldier/hostess dyad is presented as an "idealized image" that helped construct the dominating US World War II-related "national

memory" of the Canteen (xv–xvi, 6, 196). Her interviewees then swing in and complexify the picture. Tucker pairs off narrators who offer different perspectives to the Canteen story, but they are close enough to the “official” story, and those whose story challenges “the official claims of dance floor democracy” at the Canteen, and narrators who either affirm or critique the “official” story, but they make it more inclusive, responsive, and democratic (120). We learn that there were those who danced with people of other races and nations, and those who did not. There were injured parties who fought against the Canteen, and those who fought for or against integration, and there were people who considered the Canteen integrated, and those who did not. By the end of the section, it is perfectly clear that the national memory of the Hollywood Canteen bears little resemblance to many Canteen goers' memories of the space.

The section does, however, make clear that conflicting representations of the space have long been available in the public sphere. The section also focuses on diverse representations of the Hollywood Canteen in the African American press, the Popular Front press, white music magazines like *Downbeat*, and the white mainstream press. Professor Tucker documents how many press voices argued for racial integration at the Canteen and also reported on racist activities there while the white mainstream press avoided representations of race-centered conflicts like the dance floor battles (117–18). She compares the press reports on the Zoot Suit Riots in Los Angeles to the press reports on the integrated dancing at the Canteen (73–74). But Tucker does not delve enough into this, and it is unclear how unambiguous the integration stand was in the African American press, the Popular Front press, and *Downbeat*. For example, on page 162, she presents stories from African American military men that boasted about the racially mixed dancing in the Hollywood Canteen, and she says that the African American press emphasized the inclusion of African American servicemen at the Canteen. On the contrary, she states in the introduction of her study that white Canteen goers considered the dance floor mostly as completely integrated while African American Canteen goers considered it “more often” as segregated (xxi). Another more minor complaint one could make about this section is that the interviews she presents delve deeply into various aspects of the interviewees' lives and at times the reader almost forgets that focus of the study is the Canteen.

In the third section, *Dance Floor Democracy* explores narratives of young civilian men who worked at the Canteen and narratives of military woman who visited the Canteen. Both groups were not part of the soldier/hostess dyad and they usually did not dance because they were restricted from participating in the leisure suit activities (19, 232). Professor Tucker looks first into a gay civilian Canteen worker's published memories and archived notes. He was a busboy who observed Canteen goers, both military men and military women. His story is partly about survival tactics—how he hid his observation from those observed so that his homosexuality was not revealed—but it focuses also on the other Canteen-goers: starlets, stars, and their Canteen activities, particularly military women who were usually discriminated against and not allowed to enter the Canteen dance floor or the Canteen in general. The focus here is on discrimination against white military women, as Professor Tucker could not find any African American military women who went to the Hollywood Canteen, and she cannot answer unequivocally whether there were ever African American military women in the Canteen (215, 239–40).

In addition to the gay busboy, she explores the situations of other young draft-aged civilian men, mainly white, and one African American, who worked in the Canteen, who, for different reasons, were not eligible for drafting. Tucker explains that both military women and the civilian men in the space of the Canteen were often seen as queer, but the military women were constructed as ultra-respectable, and perceived as sexless or hypersexual whereas the civilian men were constructed as ultra-humble and perceived as too young or too old, or lazy, crazy, and they were seen as un-American. This section challenges national memory of the Canteen from a still intersectional but predominantly gender and sexuality-focused

perspective. I was left wanting to hear more about how military women and civilian male volunteers acted differently from military men and civilian women in the Canteen, but the chapter does indeed, as Tucker suggests, “cause a little interference in the powerful torque of national identification with the dancing ‘we’” (239–40), although she could have been more definite with her conclusions about the racial and gender relations in the Canteen. In spite of that, this all shows that the Canteen was not so unified (196).

The final section of Tucker’s study is divided into two parts. In the first of them, *Dance Floor Democracy* delves mainly into the FBI files in which an FBI undercover agent and informants reported on alleged un-American activities in the Canteen. According to the reports, the FBI was worried about attempts to integrate the Canteen dance floor via obliging the Canteen volunteers to dance with patrons of other races. The FBI connected these attempts with communism because they suspected communists, who had supported racial integration already before World War II, had infiltrated the Canteen. Tucker then explains the internal dispute that existed between the Canteen volunteers and leaders over interracial dancing. The dispute between the majority of the Canteen volunteers, who seemed to support integration, and the powerful minority, who did not, led to a compromise in which the volunteers had a right to decide whether they danced with patrons of other races. The threat of communism seemed to diminish significantly after the compromise, and the FBI started to lose its interest in the Canteen. This section reads as the strongest in Professor Tucker’s study, but certain issues remain unresolved. While communists at the time usually supported racial integration, there has been documentation of cases in the US where communists discriminated against African Americans.¹ Tucker’s discussion may have benefitted from consideration of work like Mark Naison’s study about communism in Harlem, in which Naison explains these discriminations and African American Harlemites’ dissatisfaction with communists in the 1930s.²

Dance Floor Democracy could have benefitted, in general, from a greater degree of trans-local comparison. We do learn that the Hollywood Canteen was modeled on the New York Stage Door Canteen (xiv) and Tucker briefly mentions a claim about segregation in the Stage Door Canteen (262), but she does not provide enough information to make a clear comparison. Indeed, she explains hostess supervisor Margaret Halsey’s memos for her hostesses at the Stage Door debunking racial myths (173–78), but she does not explain how racial integration was actually implemented there.

We also do not learn quite enough about the compromise between the volunteers and leaders at the Hollywood Canteen. We come to an understanding that the compromise did not totally erase segregation on the Canteen dance floor, and we are left wondering: who was genuinely in support of this integration, and who did and did not participate?

The final part of this final section analyzes the film *Hollywood Canteen* (1944). Tucker states that in this part she examines relationships between the FBI’s surveillance of the Canteen and the production of the movie (285). As the production of the movie started at the time when the FBI was convinced that the threat of communism had diminished remarkably in the Canteen, the FBI was less interested in it than before (275–76, 282, 286, 300). Therefore, the FBI surveillance plays quite a small role in this part of her study. Indeed, on page 288 she explains that she examines the movie as an actor in the production of the national memory. The Canteen in the movie is depicted as an idealized place in which racial, gender, and even physical problems like an injured leg fade away (309–11).

The production of the movie took place at the time when the NAACP, under the direction of its leader Walter White, negotiated with Hollywood producers for more dignified movie roles for African Americans than mammies and menial workers (293–94), and at a time when the US war policy promoted national unity. African Americans were added to the movie as musical specialty acts and so-called “extras”—which performed a multiracial atmosphere in

the otherwise white Canteen—but they were not allocated to actor roles, and thus their roles did not involve speaking (303–04). While she explores quite thoroughly various production phases of the movie in which ridiculous and racist scenes, and also scenes that probably were considered too interracial, were deleted, and a few positive references to African American soldiers were added to the final cut, she also explains the scenes of the movie at length, in what felt to me like slightly too much detail. The reader is forced to go through details that are not significant for the book's theoretical conclusions. And most of those who are interested in the movie can likely easily view it, so there is no need for the detailed description.

While Tucker states on page 285 that those who were involved in making the movie knew that the movie would impact the “official story” of World War II, she could have analyzed this consciousness and its ramifications much more. She could also have gone further in her reception study to confirm the nature of the film's impact. She does present a few reviews from both the African American and the white mainstream press, as well as letters from GIs who criticized the movie for falsely representing ordinary GIs. However, overall, a deeper examination of the impact, based on the press and other archived comments, would do much to confirm the extent of the film's impact.

Exacerbating my feeling that each of the sections left certain questions unanswered is the fact that *Dance Floor Democracy* contains no conclusions chapter to strictly answer the core questions of the study. The closing portion of this fourth section does reflect somewhat on events and facts from the earlier three sections of the study that deviated from the “official” story represented in the movie, but she leaves it to the reader to form final conclusions.

In spite of the questions I feel the study left unanswered, Professor Sherrie Tucker has conducted a study that is essential reading for those who are interested in racial integration and gender-related jazz, oral history, and memory studies. *Dance Floor Democracy* is an important opening for research on the US military-based racial integration in jazz dance and its relation to the US national memory, and also for research on the intersections of race, gender, war, and the dancing body as they uphold and undermine power's preferred self-image.

Notes

¹ See Solomon, chapters 7 and 8.

² See Naison, particularly pages 45–49, 279–83, 287, 291–93, 313, 296–98.

Works Cited

Ashplant, Timothy G., et al. *The Politics of War Memory and Commemoration*. Routledge, 2000.

“Champion Jitterbug Couple.” *New Journal and Guide*, 1 July 1939.

Naison, Mark. *Communists in Harlem during the Depression*. University of Illinois Press, 1983.

Solomon, Mark I. *The Cry Was Unity: Communists and African Americans, 1917–36*. University Press of Mississippi, 1998.

Sparrow, James T. *Warfare State: World War II Americans and the Age of Big Government*. Oxford UP, 2011.