
H-France Review Vol. 14 (November 2014), No. 184

Edwin C. Hill, *Black Soundscapes White Stages: The Meaning of Francophone Sound in the Black Atlantic*. Baltimore, Md.: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013. x + 178 pp. Illustrations and notes. \$39.95 U.S. (hb). ISBN 1-4214-1059-3.

Review by Rachel Anne Gillett, Harvard University.

Edwin C. Hill's new book makes a valuable contribution to a growing body of work that engages with the Francophone Black Atlantic or the "Atlantic Noir." The understanding of the Atlantic as both a geographic region and a space of rich human experience deserving of scholarly analysis is, by now, well-established. Bernard Bailyn's initiatives in Anglo-American Atlantic studies began nearly three decades ago and the field was expanded both temporally and thematically with the publication of Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic*.^[1] Work on the twentieth-century French and Francophone Atlantic has been a more recent addition to the historiography of the French Empire, particularly the twentieth-century French empire. Edwin C. Hill's book takes its place besides the work of scholars such as Jennifer Boittin, Christopher Miller, Brent Hayes Edwards and Dominic Thomas who collectively show that the role of France and of Francophones in shaping the Black Atlantic was vital.^[2] In *Black Soundscapes White Stages*, Hill analyzes literature, travel narratives, songs and poetry. He argues that sound and sound-making became vehicles for discussions about race, belonging, and the role of music and literature in French and Antillean identity. Hill's compelling analysis shows how the discussion of sound and music has been deeply interwoven both into the formation of the negritude movement and into reactions against it. Another excellent feature of the book is his focus on gender in the debates he analyzes, especially since in the past, as Hill correctly notes, women's voices have been silenced and their contributions to negritude muted.

Edwards' methodological innovation in considering sound as a literary and historical source and introducing the concept of "soundscapes" to French Atlantic history is significant. He is one of the first authors working in this area to come to grips with how sound functions in society and its importance to the people who create it, listen to it, and experience it as constitutive of their understanding of themselves and their place in the world. Antilleans, as Hill shows, related (and still relate) to sound in this way, particularly the dance genre, the biguine. The music they made traveled across and around the Atlantic, it was heard by various audiences, and it shaped and expressed their perception of race. This was a multi-directional process. The second part of the book's title, *White Stages*, acknowledges that the author understands that imperialism and colonialism circumscribed the range of possibilities for black sound.

The introduction, which opens with a burst of dense and dazzling prose, plunges us into a world in which, "from cabaret stages and colonial expositions to negritude screams and doudouist polemics the black African diaspora literally cries out" (p. 1). It then lays out a genealogy of the "soundscape" in French colonial and travel writing, providing a deep historical grounding for the rest of the book. Hill's introduction is shaped by the question: "How do representations of sound inscribed in travel chronicles, ethnographies, and adventure narratives produce an imperial order for the valuable and meaningful mapping of the New World?" (p. 3). He answers by identifying and interpreting scattered references to sound in the work of Chanvalon, Du Tertre, and Lafcadio Hearn, thus taking us from the seventeenth

century to the twentieth. Hill then articulates his conception of a soundscape. Any scholar working on sound or on music in French history will be grateful to Edwin Hill for his engagement with the theoretical literature here and his application of it to generate new insights into the functioning of colonialism.

The first chapter narrows the focus to a particular song, “Adieu Madras Adieu Foulard,” that was first documented in the eighteenth century, but continues to be sung today (often in schools). It depicts a *doudou*—in this context, a “Creole woman of color desperately in love with a French man”—who sings at the port as her lover departs, imploring the captain of the departing ship to let her on board (p. 20). Hill leads us, in reverse chronological order, through a series of close readings of the song in its varied contexts. The chapter doesn’t pursue a concrete argument, but rather seeks to unpack the ways in which the *doudou* is first marginalized by imperial discourse, and then by anti-imperial discourse. Hill’s work on the latter reveals that Antillean intellectuals and anti-colonialists viewed the figure of the Antillean woman symbolized in the song as a submissive collaborator with colonial ideology or, at the very best, weakened by her longing for the white colonizer and thus complicit in the oppressive structures of colonization. However Hill offers a provocative final thought: that through the recognition of her emotional demands and the listener’s exposure to the pain of her abandonment, the “doudou’s performance of lament—which the colonizer cannot not hear—sets the stage for ethical demands” (p. 46).

The implied question about how those demands might be made and met in reality, however, is left open. The combination of ethno-musicological, historic, and comparative literary work here is impressive, although it might have been strengthened by a deeper analysis of the role of “signer and collector” of the folksong. The power relations involved in transcribing and transmitting folk songs offer a corollary to some of the practices of collecting and disseminating information about colonial populations that Hill identified in the work of Lafcadio and Du Tertre, not to mention ethnographers such as Michel Leiris who came to prominence in part due to the *tumulte noir*. I would also have been interested to see Edwin Hill bring the song “J’ai Deux Pays,” by Josephine Baker, into the discussion as it describes a very similar scenario to that of “Adieu Foulards” and Baker inhabited the role of the *doudou* in much of her life and work. That comparison would have provided a thematic link between this chapter and chapter three which deals exclusively with Josephine Baker’s performance in the film, *Princesse TamTam*.

Hill devotes the second chapter to an examination of the biguine, an Antillean dance form that combines African and French musical influences and that has been described by many Antilleans as central to their sense of identity.[3] Hill’s aim, here, is to expose and disrupt the ways in which the biguine was ignored or trivialized in both colonial and anti-colonial discourse and to offer a nuanced appreciation of its “politics of mixing” which served to disrupt the “gendered encoding of Antillean cultural expression and French-Antillean relations” (p. 51). This chapter is one of the strongest and most clearly-written in the book, and it comprises an extended reading of a film, entitled *Biguine* (with a screenplay by Patrick Chamoiseau), alongside an analysis of the biguine as it was actually danced and discussed in interwar Paris. In the rest of the chapter, the author’s attention to physical spaces and historic details richly contextualizes his analyses of work by Leon Gontran Damas and by the Nardal sisters (Paulette and Jane).[4] The chapter showcases Hill’s skill at interpreting and analyzing music and the ease with which his analysis moves between metropole and colony. This analytic work on the biguine clearly illustrates Hill’s contention that women’s voices were silenced and the performance of female sexuality through music was critiqued in mainstream negritude writing. The dance, and the writing about it done by women, constitutes a form of “negritude in the minor” where that concept functions much as it does in music; we hear the central themes at play in the movement but with a muted and melancholic inflection. One highlight of the chapter is Hill’s brilliant (albeit brief) discussion of how music served to express aspects of gay culture in the Antilles. The fraught status of homosexuality in black nationalist and independence movements has affected the visibility of black gay culture in scholarly literature and Hill’s attention to it here is welcome.

In chapter three, the author turns to Josephine Baker and he offers an extended and close reading of the film, *Princesse Tam Tam*. Baker, the legendary dancer, singer, actress, and performer has posed a problem for men and women of color, and for all of us who study them, from the moment she first captured the French imagination with her spectacular European debut in Paris in 1925. Hill asks how we can study her work without reproducing some of the “claims on her that violently mark her as a site of imperial and black Atlantic possession, dispossession, and exclusion” (p. 76). However, I didn’t think the chapter succeeded in preserving Baker’s agency or in convincing the reader that she had agency in the representation discussed. Even the rhetorical move of separating the performer’s work from Baker herself, as creator and dancer, underplays her generative force and the sheer power of her personality.

My sense of unease with this derives slightly from a disciplinary standpoint because Hill’s focus, as a literary scholar, is on texts rather than authors. In a similar vein, the chapter could have benefited from more historical context. The date of film’s release is not mentioned explicitly in the introduction although partway through the chapter we learn it was released in the nineteen-thirties (p. 80). The role of the Exposition Coloniale of 1931 in creating great excitement about cultural representations of empire, and Baker’s enormous success in the show, *Paris qui remue*, a loosely assembled series of overtly “colonialist fantasy skits” (Stovall, p. 90) are not fully explicated, although they help explain the film’s appeal in its moment. [5] Nevertheless Hill’s reading of the film is a great example of cross-disciplinary analysis. The chapter is filled with astute insights like “Josephine’s sound corpus is the ‘product’ and production of French dreams of New World blackness, and black Atlantic freedom dreams of France” (p. 76) which captures the way that Baker helped to spread the black American myth that racial freedom was omnipresent and uncomplicated in France, just as she enacted French ideas about exotic racial others that bore very little resemblance to the truth.

In chapter four, the author launches into a timely, insightful, and well-conceived exploration of the image, sound, and literary representation of the *tamtam* (African drum/sound of the African drum). The meaning of the word has changed dramatically from its first introduction into French and Hill traces these changes brilliantly. The chapter then juxtaposes the work of Frantz Fanon and Léon Gontran-Damas (but perhaps strategically omits Senghor and Césaire), both of whom invoke the tamtam, and the act of beating and striking on the skin that is implied in the act of drumming. Hill makes the point, relevant to the biguine as well, that a prized cultural practice and object can become bittersweet when it becomes popular and thereby a product for expropriation and global consumption. A particular strength of the chapter is the attention Hill pays to the work of Damas. His key interpretive claim here is that Damas realizes that negritude poets themselves appropriate the idea of the *tamtam* as an Afrocentric site of authenticity. While Fanon rejects this kind of romantic imaginary, Damas—in Hill’s words—draws out “the resonance between the musico-corporeal beatings of the past and those of popular culture of the interwar years, and [plays] them through to the postcolonial hangover after the riotous tumult” (p. 115). Edwin Hill’s brilliant explication of “Lamento Esclavo,” a Latin American song that Damas’s narrator hears playing on the crowded dance floor of the colonial club, the Cabane Cubaine, in interwar Paris, shows how scholars can reveal exciting new understandings of the French Atlantic through careful and contextualized readings of poetry and song.

Chapter five enters the realm of technology and considers the impact of radio on the processes Hill describes throughout the book. After examining the impact of the *poste colonial* or French colonial radio transmission and station that was launched as a link between France and her colonies, in association with the Exposition Coloniale, Hill analyzes the way that Fanon and Césaire theorize about the advent of radio, and about technology, empire, and modernity. This chapter is one of the most densely theoretical in the book. Hill yokes technology firmly to modernity, and to imperial mechanisms of control, both in his analysis of the radio and in his interpretation of Fanon and of Césaire. It would have been helpful to see him lay out his understanding of modernity more clearly in the framing of this chapter (or in the introduction to the book) and establish more concretely his conception of the linkage between modernity, technology, and colonialism. The final chapter moves smoothly into a concluding

set of “notes from the soundfield” (the conclusion’s title) in which Hill reflects further on his preoccupations throughout the book. The conclusion articulates the role Hill sees for his work, in opening up our ears to black French Atlantic soundscapes in their problematic entirety.

Black Soundscapes White Stages makes a major contribution to the field of French Atlantic Studies by offering new readings of major works and significant authors who have been under-served by existing scholarly work. Edwin C. Hill’s methodological innovation in taking sound seriously is groundbreaking and his treatment of gender and power in both colonial and anti-colonial discourse is deeply insightful. Throughout the book, the methodology of film and literary criticism take precedence over the historical, which means that, at times, the text is densely laden with theoretical terms, but Hill skilfully puts these in service of his own figuring of black French soundscapes. By the end of the book, it is clear that the French black Atlantic should be understood as a series of soundscapes. The reader gets a sense of the continuities and progressions in literary approaches and sound-concepts through time, but it would be helpful to have a clearer understanding of how the soundscapes Hill describes were positioned in their specific historical moment and – the perennial historian’s question – what changed over time.

As I read, I was forced to confront the issue of how books deal with sound sources—how can the reader truly “hear” the works under discussion and should part of the expectation of reading a book like this be to have access to a related website loaded with multimedia sources? For what it is worth, I did feel it necessary to listen to the works I was unfamiliar with, as I read. Raising this issue could be one of the benefits of reading this book in a graduate seminar. In addition to its contribution to the scholarly field, Hill’s book would combine very well with Jennifer Boittin’s book *Colonial Metropolis* in a graduate methods course to illustrate different methodological approaches to a similar period in the history of the French Black Atlantic, each of which generates useful new knowledge.

NOTES

[1] Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double-Consciousness* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993).

[1] The emerging nature of the field of French Atlantic Studies was the focus of a special issue of *Atlantic Studies*, “Beyond Center and Periphery: New Currents in French and Francophone Atlantic Studies,” *Atlantic Studies* 10/1(2013). Jennifer Anne Boittin, *Colonial Metropolis: The Urban Grounds of Anti-Imperialism and Feminism in Interwar Paris* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2010); Brent Hayes Edwards, *The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2003); Dominic Richard and David Thomas, *Black France: Colonialism, Immigration, and Transnationalism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007); and Christopher L. Miller, *Nationalists and Nomads: Essays on Francophone African Literature and Culture* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 1999). Tyler Stovall opened the field up with *Paris Noir: African American in the City of Light* (Boston, Mass.: Houghton Mifflin, 1996), and Sue Peabody and Laurent Dubois, among others, have made major contributions to the understanding of the early French Atlantic.

[2] Hill accurately represents the strength of this sentiment which emerges clearly in musicians’ memoirs and by musicologists of the Caribbean and in contemporary anthropology. For example both the preface, written by an Antillean politician, and the actual memoir by Ernest Léardée, Jean P. Meunier, and Brigitte Léardée, *La Biguine De L'oncle Ben's: Ernest Léardée raconte* (Paris: Editions caribéennes, 1989); Jocelyne Guilbault, *Zouk: World Music in the West Indies* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 1993); Jacqueline Rosemain, *Jazz Et Biguine: les musiques noires du Nouveau-Monde* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1993); and for an anthropological exploration, see David Beriss, *Black Skins, French Voices: Caribbean Ethnicity and Activism in Urban France* (Boulder, Col.: Westview Press, 2004).

[3] Hill's work here fits into the growing body of work that acknowledges the Nardal sisters as key figures in the Negritude movement. See Emily Musil Church, T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting, and Jennifer Boittin, as well as my article in the Atlantic Studies special issue.

[4] Stovall, *Paris Noir*.

Rachel Anne Gillett
Harvard University
rachelgillett@fas.harvard.edu

Copyright © 2014 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for edistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/ republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172