



American Allegory: Lindy Hop and the Racial Imagination

Black Hawk Hancock

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“Perhaps,” wrote Ralph Ellison more than seventy years ago, “the zoot suit contains profound political meaning; perhaps the symmetrical frenzy of the Lindy-hop conceals clues to great potential power.” As Ellison noted then, many of our most mundane cultural forms are larger and more important than they appear, taking on great significance and an unexpected depth of meaning. What he saw in the power of the Lindy Hop—the dance that *Life* magazine once billed as “America’s True National Folk Dance”—would spread from black America to make a lasting impression on white America and offer us a truly compelling means of understanding our culture. But with what hidden implications?

In *American Allegory*, Black Hawk Hancock offers an embedded and embodied ethnography that situates dance within a larger Chicago landscape of segregated social practices. Delving into two Chicago dance worlds, the Lindy and Steppin’, Hancock uses a combination of participant-observation and interviews to bring to the surface the racial tension that surrounds white use of black cultural forms. Focusing on new forms of appropriation in an era of multiculturalism, Hancock underscores the institutionalization of racial disparities and offers wonderful insights into the intersection of race and culture in America.

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