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*Soundscapes of Liberation: African American Music in Postwar France* by Celeste Day Moore (review)

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## BOOK REVIEW

*Soundscapes of Liberation: African American Music in Postwar France.* By Celeste Day Moore (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2021. 312 pp. \$104.95).

In *Soundscapes of Liberation*, Celeste Day Moore has woven together a compelling book that sheds new light on the Black (American) experience in twentieth century France. Her critical intervention is to show that although the circulation and reception of Black music in postwar France seemed emancipatory, the reality was more complex. Moore outlines the tensions between an idealized rhetoric of racial freedom in France and the real erasures and stereotyping that characterized the transmission and reception of music of the African diaspora. She uses approaches from social and cultural history, popular culture studies, sound studies, and French colonial and postcolonial studies. Moore's nuanced account of the emancipatory and constraining effects of soundscapes is central to understanding the complexity of "race" and racialization in France. She focuses on the time period after the Second World War although, as she points out, these characteristics are typical of earlier periods and continue to this day.

Moore's research on the postwar era adds to a growing field of historical studies of Afro-diasporic sound and music(s) in Twentieth Century France and the Francophone world. She builds on work by a number of scholars of the interwar era and expands on it in several ways. First, temporally, she brings us into the postwar era, where her work sits alongside that of Rashida Braggs and Jonathyne Briggs as defining contributions to our understanding of France, transatlantic exchanges, and "race." Second, she expands the focus geographically, particularly in later chapters, the last of which engages with festivals in Dakar, Algiers and Zaire. And third, in a feature that will be particularly useful for those designing graduate level seminars, Moore's work illustrates how to draw on multiple archives and genres, from radio to sheet music, biography, and memoir to radio scripts, political documents, and popular culture posters and record covers. Moore treats her diverse array of sources with care and assurance and uses them to reveal social processes and cultural transformations. In doing so she exemplifies Christopher Small's understanding that "musicking" constitutes all of the activities and processes that surround the production, performance, and circulation of music in the world. Moore takes the role of cultural

intermediaries, institutions, and market imperatives as seriously as the musical content, context, and actors she studies. This makes her work suitable for teaching social- and cultural-history methodologies.

The chapters move in straightforward chronological order, and yet each one highlights different aspects of Afro-diasporic soundscapes in Postwar France and the Francophone world. The first chapter examines how the U.S. military and various intermediaries selectively and strategically disseminated jazz as a symbol of the freedom Americans brought to France. As Moore states, African Americans played “a limited yet critical role” in this process, sometimes valued as authenticators, sometimes feared and surveilled because of ongoing racial prejudice.

In chapter two, Moore turns to literary depiction of jazz identities that both reproduce and disrupt racialized understandings of the genre. She discusses texts by the white authors “Mezz” Mezzrow and Boris Vian to reveal how they presented “insider” accounts of African American identity. She compellingly engages with the themes of racial “passing” and authenticity and examines the production, marketing and reception of the books, while in chapter three she applies similar analytic lenses to records and radio playlists. In France, as these chapters show, the values of supposed freedom and liberty and Black authenticity, were part of how the French took up jazz in the postwar era.

The fourth chapter moves into a slightly different mode of analysis, although some of the same themes persist. It examines the life and work of Louis-Thomas Achille, a French Martinican teacher and intellectual who was, himself, changed by living and teaching in America. His commitment to establishing the genre in France and insisting on its pan-African relevance is beautifully captured in a chapter that moves seamlessly between biography, sonic analysis, and the transnational politics of pan-Africanism. It is also a refreshing change from narratives of Black intellectuals traveling to Europe to develop as intellectual-activists.

Chapter five returns to the themes of chapter one, in the light of the political changes wrought by the hardening of Cold War geopolitics and the turn to cultural diplomacy as a tool in the American arsenal. Moore does thorough and incisive archival work on the politics of radio in France and Africa. She does this through the life and voice of Sim Copans, who, she argues in evocative writing “ferried ideas, goods, or people through space in the language of empire but with the voice of America” (159). She then finishes the book with a brilliant, too-short chapter on the pan-African arts festivals in Dakar, Algiers, and Kinshasa that takes the readers beyond Europe into a series of cross-cultural encounters and creations that comprised a “soundscape of liberation.” In this chapter Moore draws on visual and filmic sources, and here her close readings and analytic techniques could have been developed further.

The book’s rich source base and multiple analytic modes present Moore with a challenge in continuity and focus. For readers unfamiliar with the context it could take some effort to keep the names and details of actors clear. Moore tackles this challenge by locating her reader in the historical context throughout. She reminds us that listening to and enjoying Black music did not equal a commitment to liberation. Moore’s book is timely, and, like the soundscapes she

analyzes, it is “a critical new space of inquiry and connection” (193). I have used it and recommend it for graduate methods classes. It is also vital reading for upper-level undergraduates studying France, the French Empire, sound, “race” and history, and for colleagues working in these fields.

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