

BOOK REVIEW

Dave Brubeck and the Performance of Whiteness. By Kelsey Klotz. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2023. 320pp. \$29.95.

ALEX W. RODRÍGUEZ

In *Dave Brubeck and the Performance of Whiteness*, author Kelsey Klotz makes a crucial intervention in the historiography of midcentury jazz practice by investigating the career of pianist Dave Brubeck through the lens of his relationship to whiteness. Her work shows how his commercial success and creative choices were overdetermined by his identification as a white man. Klotz also grapples with the contradictions in his career as he navigated the tension between his privileged positionality and his commitment to racial justice. As she puts it, “His position as a highly visible white man in the predominantly Black jazz field, particularly in the 1950s, both helped and hindered his progress” (3) towards aligning his musical career with the goals of the Civil Rights Movement.

Brubeck’s proximity to whiteness is framed through new conversations in whiteness studies, spearheaded by Ibram X. Kendi, Shannon Sullivan, and Robin DiAngelo, in which racialization is understood as a product of systemic racism and incentivized through white privilege—even and especially by those who consider themselves to be politically progressive. Applying this lens to Brubeck, Klotz writes, “His story reveals how whiteness retains its hold on its beneficiaries, even when they intend to reject it.” (5)

Throughout the book, Klotz details how Brubeck’s music was understood to be racially different than that of his Black contemporaries. In the opening chapter, for example, Klotz compares critical debates between Brubeck’s quartet and the all-Black Modern Jazz Quartet (MJQ), demonstrating how critics repeatedly conjured associations with Brubeck’s music to the European classical music tradition while avoiding similar frames of reference when discussing the MJQ—even though the MJQ often adhered more rigorously to classical compositional forms. In the third chapter, she considers his feature on the cover of *Time* magazine in 1954, only three years after starting the Brubeck Quartet. Klotz argues that Brubeck’s appearance—he was the second jazz musician on *Time*’s cover, after Louis Armstrong (1949) and prior to Duke Ellington (1956), Thelonious Monk (1964) and Wynton Marsalis (1990)—differed from the others in that it reflected a racialized recognition between readers and Brubeck.

The book also details the media industry’s preferential treatment of Brubeck. Through a fascinating analysis of Brubeck’s early commercial audience, Klotz

aptly demonstrates how his privileged access to college tours, magazine features, and brand partnerships was structured by a notion of “respectability” that was not available to his Black peers. She shows how a discourse emerged around Brubeck’s movements through these spaces as “evangelical” activities on behalf of jazz, for whom the largely white audiences became “converts.” Klotz’s engagement with Brubeck’s archive surfaces some especially compelling glimpses into the women who made up a large portion of this fanbase. In the aforementioned analysis of *Time* covers, Klotz also argues that the difference in how Brubeck is featured is another example of how his entrepreneurship served to center himself as an avatar of jazz in the eyes of white women. At the same time, she gives a compelling overview of how his growing popularity was met with criticism in the jazz press, who noted disparities between his success and those of his Black contemporaries.

Brubeck’s activist gestures of solidarity with the Civil Rights movement are the focus of the book’s later chapters. Through deep research in the Brubeck archive, Klotz constructs a detailed account of his attempts to tour in the US South with a racially integrated quartet, showing the mixed results of his approach to challenging racist ideology—the same strategies he implemented so deftly in California were unsurprisingly met with active resistance by overt white supremacists. At the same time, Brubeck’s choices in the face of this pressure—shaped by his willingness to risk serious financial consequences—helped him build a national reputation as a principled anti-racist. Klotz also examines Brubeck’s post-quartet career as a composer of long-form symphonic works, specifically *The Gates of Justice*, which was commissioned in 1968 by Rabbi Charles D. Mintz of the Rockdale Temple in Cincinnati, Ohio. Brubeck, who was raised in a nondenominational Christian household, wrote the piece to emphasize the parallel experiences of Black and Jewish suffering in the midst of the crises of racialized violence gripping the country at the time. Through both a detailed musical analysis of the score alongside a thorough sociological analysis of post-World War II racial formations, Klotz offers a thoughtful and nuanced interpretation of the musical work, the fraught racial divisions it sought to address, and Brubeck’s positionality within this milieu. In doing so, she emphasizes the lack of Black participation in the compositional process as a missed opportunity for a more aligned effort towards coalitional politics.

Klotz concludes her book by addressing Brubeck’s late-career claims to Native American ancestry and the 1992 premiere of his choral work, *The Earth is Our Mother*. She reads Brubeck’s claim as part of white grievance politics that are not dissimilar from critiques of Stanley Crouch’s and Albert Murray’s Afrocentric jazz histories by contemporaries such as Gene Lees and James Lincoln Collier. Klotz’s decidedly pessimistic conclusion ends by reminding readers that

disrupting white supremacy “can only happen through relentless, focused critique of the performances of whiteness that surround us.” (280)

Klotz’s razor-sharp critiques bring into relief other approaches that future scholarship could address—in particular, ones that resonate with the glimmers of radical possibility and solidarity that shine through in some the stories she tells of Brubeck’s career. Although her analysis offers a useful corrective to the hagiographic tone of previous biographers, readers are left with few clues as to what inspired the praise Brubeck received from jazz luminaries such as Charles Mingus and Duke Ellington—in other words, Brubeck’s performance of *Blackness*.¹

In any case, further analysis would require deeper engagement with the abolitionist strain of critical whiteness studies.² This approach frames whiteness as a tool of elitist strategy that maintains barriers to solidarity between racialized sectors of the working class; these analyses document the rare instances when this racial calculus has been rejected in order to bring about more just social relations. Such theoretical perspectives leave room to consider, for example, Brubeck’s dis-identification with whiteness towards the end of his life as something beyond revanchist colorblindness—perhaps it could also be read as an aspiration for his music to be a portal towards shared humanity not fractured by racist logic, committed to the abolition of race itself. Analysis of systemic racism along these lines could also lead to deeper understandings of the intersections of jazz, race, class, and activism as well as the relationship between racial ideologies and capitalist value systems that Klotz gestures towards in chapters 2 and 4.

Dave Brubeck and the Performance of Whiteness presents a compelling case for how incisive critiques of white privilege and the systems that buttress it can deepen understandings of jazz’s cultural production. Klotz’s percipient analysis offers a constructive pathway into these thorny issues for jazz scholars and their students alike.

¹ Phil Rubio’s relevant essay in the abolitionist journal *Race Traitor* comes to mind as a useful starting point to consider these possibilities; see Rubio, Phil. “Crossover Dreams: The ‘Exceptional White’ in Popular Culture,” *Race Traitor* 2 (summer 1993): 68-80.

² Ted Allen and Noel Ignatiev, “White Blindspot,” *Revolutionary Youth & the New Working Class: the Praxis Papers, the Port Authority Statement, the RYM Documents and Other Lost Writings of SDS*, ed. Carl Davidson (Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania: Changemaker Publications, 2011), 148-181; David Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class*. London: Verso, 2007; W.E.B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction: an Essay Toward a History of the Part Which Black Folk Played in the Attempt to Reconstruct Democracy in America, 1860-1880* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1935).