

Dance Floor Democracy: The Social Geography of Memory at the Hollywood Canteen, by Sherrie Tucker. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014. 384pp. \$28.95.

Review by Hannah Mackenzie-Margulies

Sherrie Tucker's *Dance Floor Democracy* is, as she describes it, "a long book about a small place," "a small book about a large topic," and "a love letter to the complexity and diversity within a generation too often celebrated as simple, unified, and uncritical" (xvii, 21). The book focuses on the Hollywood Canteen, a night spot that entertained servicemen stationed or on leave in Los Angeles beginning in October 1942. Volunteers from the motion picture industry, led by actress Bette Davis, operated the Canteen. Hollywood personnel—both the famous and the anonymous—made sandwiches, danced with soldiers, and wiped down tables. Every night there was a floorshow, and the most famous bands of the era played from the bandstand.

The established image of the Canteen—a dashing white soldier dancing the jitterbug with a lovely white actress-hostess—continues to pervade national memory. The Hollywood Canteen was often cited as being a particularly democratic place, one where the "big guys were nice to the little guys:" movie stars danced with servicemen, Hollywood producers mopped floors, and serviceman and women of all races and creeds were welcome. Or so the story goes. Tucker calls attention to the cavalier use of the word "democracy" in contemporary parlance, how rarely it is actually defined, and how the idea of swing music and dance as democratic elides more complex relationships between jazz music, swing dancing, racial and gender politics, and national memory of the World War II era (xvi-xvii, 16).

In 2001, not long after Tucker began the research for *Dance Floor Democracy*, the events of September 11th triggered a wave of World War II nostalgia culture that brought images of the Hollywood Canteen and the white "soldier-hostess" dyad back into the spotlight. Responding in part to this resurgence of swing sentimentality, Tucker's research attends to the complex intersections and negotiations of race, gender, and sexuality that underlie the Canteen's "official" script. Tucker dances with established and entrenched memories of the Canteen and the oft-described "greatest generation" that volunteered and visited there. Through both archival materials and oral history testimonies recounted in the living rooms and kitchens of former servicewomen and men, hostesses, busboys, and other Hollywood Canteen attendees, she allows her subjects to lead. As though there were Arthur Murray footprints painted on the floor, detailing the patterns the dance should, or rather might, follow, Tucker looks and listens for the moments when her subjects dance off-script into uncharted territory. She

also keeps her eyes out for the folks that *are not* present, or who may be hidden out of sight or mind.

Tucker's goal in *Dance Floor Democracy* is to complicate the standard reading of the Hollywood Canteen and its inhabitants, and this she accomplishes with aplomb. As she explicitly states, the book is not a history *per se* (she directs the reader to Lisa Miller and Bruce Torrence's book *The Hollywood Canteen: Where the Greatest Generation Danced with the Most Beautiful Girls in the World*, 2012). Rather, Tucker goes beyond traditional narratives, bringing new stories and previously unheard voices up onstage. *Dance Floor Democracy* makes it clear that "national memory" of the Hollywood Canteen is neither unified nor coherent.

Much like her first book, *Swing Shift: "All Girl" Bands of the 1940s* (Duke UP, 2000), Tucker situates her study at the junction of American, dance, jazz, performance, and memory studies. Her acute awareness of her own positionality, voice, and body is present throughout *Dance Floor Democracy*. She takes on the role of choreocritic, imagining her own embodied experiences alongside those of the women and men she meets throughout the course of her research. As most of the oral histories in the book come from octogenarians nearing the ends of their lives, Tucker clearly feels a strong obligation to tell their stories, especially those that grate against established visions of the Hollywood Canteen. Fully aware of the mutability of memory, she simultaneously questions and accepts, taking her subjects' *memories* of what happened at the Hollywood Canteen just as seriously as what may or may not have "actually" happened.

Throughout *Dance Floor Democracy*, Tucker makes use of the concept of "torque." She describes torque as "a balanced pattern of tension and release," "a kind of force that causes a rotation," a sort of weighted friction. What makes a good lindy hop or jitterbug dance, according to Tucker, is the presence of torque, the sense of tread and slide that sends the shared movement between two partners swinging. As a conceptual framework, the idea of torque serves Tucker well. In *Dance Floor Democracy*, she searches for torque both on and off the dance floor, or rather, treats the archive and the give-and-take of the interview as a dance floor. Tucker doesn't identify herself as a practiced dancer, which by no means invalidates or limits her work. As a long time lindy hop dancer, I sometimes found myself pausing over her movement descriptions, which at times created their own sort of torque against my own embodied dancing experiences. However, if anything this friction only further validates Tucker's point. At the end of the book, she describes her attention to torque as a methodology "in which bodies of different weights practice their inevitable effects on one another." Thinking about a dance that I am so intimately familiar with in a new way gave

me a fresh appreciation for the negotiation inherent in any kind of embodied scholarship.

Dance Floor Democracy is divided into four parts, and Tucker is attentive to geography, both physical and social, throughout. In Part I "On Location," Tucker unpacks the multi-faceted idea of Hollywood as a place, description, and an ideology. She details and maps the geography of Hollywood and the greater Los Angeles area as neighborhoods and the location of other soldier entertainment venues, particularly those created specifically for African American and Mexican American service-people. She traces and recounts the bus routes, carpools, and highways that Hollywood Canteen volunteers and attendees took to and from the club, demonstrating the many challenges involved just to arrive at the door of the building.

In Part II, "Patriotic Jitterbugs," Tucker enters into the Canteen itself, narrating the experiences of servicemen and civilian women, those that embodied the standard vision and narrative of the Canteen in popular culture and those that diverged. Tucker is particularly attentive to the memories of former junior hostesses, whose function at the Canteen was to entertain servicemen. Under pressure to entertain, these women were well aware that any day their temporary dance partners might lose their lives in combat. Tucker also identifies the particular challenges faced by African American hostesses, who were often called in at the last minute to entertain black soldiers on leave for the evening. Though the venue was hypothetically integrated, Tucker illuminates the ongoing battle waged by the Canteen's organizers and sponsors over interracial dancing. She also attends to the stories of Mexican American soldiers and hostesses, who were rarely guaranteed admission to the Canteen. Sometimes they were allowed to enter without comment, sometimes they "passed" their way inside, and sometimes they were turned down at the door.

Turning from the soldier-hostess dyad, in Part III, "Women in Uniforms, Men in Aprons," Tucker tells the stories of women and men who visited and worked at the canteen outside of these established roles. Many men, due to religious or ethical convictions, sexual orientation (or the military's perception thereof), age, or various medical conditions, did not serve in the armed forces. Some of them, in addition to working in the motion picture industry, volunteered at the Hollywood Canteen. They existed on the periphery of the Canteen's cast, and those who appeared healthy and able-bodied often aroused suspicion. Tucker also attempts to describe the experience of servicewomen at the Canteen but runs up against a brick wall. While the club was supposedly open to all military personnel, few attendees remember seeing women in uniform and the few WAVES Tucker was able to track down recall either being relegated to a balcony above the dance floor, or barred from entry all together. Tucker

recounts her struggle to illuminate the experience of servicewomen at the Canteen, and I found this section particularly fascinating. Clearly, a particular fear of gender-role nonconformity was present at the Canteen and persists in many contemporary World War II representations.

The final section of *Dance Floor Democracy*, Part IV, “Swing Between the Nation and the State,” examines representations of the Canteen in FBI files and in the blockbuster 1944 film *The Hollywood Canteen*. In chapter ten, Tucker ruminates on the 1966 Freedom of Information Act that granted her access to the FBI files concerning the Hollywood Canteen. These files, many of them highly redacted, illuminate the presence of FBI probes at the Canteen. The bureau was intensely anxious about the possibility of Communist infiltration at the hall and monitored it closely. In chapter eleven, Tucker discusses the film *The Hollywood Canteen*, emphasizing the torque created in the space between the happy multiculturalism presented by the film, the extensive FBI surveillance of the hall, and the lived experiences of Canteen volunteers and visitors who did not fit squarely within the vision of the soldier-hostess dyad.

Tucker doesn’t include a separate conclusion to *Dance Floor Democracy*. The book is long, and in many ways, the juxtaposition between the first three-quarters of the text and the last two chapters serves to prove her point: there is more to the story of the Hollywood Canteen than we are used to hearing and seeing. She goes further, suggesting that only by listening and attending to those memories that torque against established narratives can we reframe the sticky, nostalgic visions of the World War II era that continue to pervade popular culture. In the last two pages, Tucker sets up a brief outline for an alternative *Hollywood Canteen* scenography, one that in many ways mirrors the choreography she enacted throughout the book itself. Perhaps I just wasn’t ready to leave the dance floor and hand off my spot to the next GI waiting in line outside, but I wanted to hear more, to keep dancing on the Hollywood Canteen floor.

ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTOR

HANNAH MACKENZIE-MARGULIES is an independent scholar residing in Oakland, California. She graduated from Reed College in 2016 with a thesis discussing jazz dance and American diplomacy during the 1950s. A dancer and musician, Hannah has trained at the Joffrey Ballet School and with the Vertigo Dance Company in Jerusalem and has appeared at the Spoleto Festival USA, the Philly Fringe Fest, and the Boston Summer Arts Festival.