

BOOK REVIEW

Lesley Nicole Braun. *Congo's Dancers: Women and Work in Kinshasa*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2023. xiii + 201 pp. Illustrations. Notes. Bibliography. Index. US \$79.95. Cloth. ISBN: 9780299340308.

Congo's Dancers is an extensive and innovative study on dance in Kinshasa. The book is based on important fieldwork, including the written and video notes taken by the author. Throughout her narrative, Lesley Braun writes about her experiences as an inhabitant of a *parcelle*, a fenced courtyard including several housing units shared with other women in Kinshasa, and about her own experience as a dancer in medium and large bands in Kinshasa. One of the most compelling episodes in the book includes the author's own participation as a dancer in a Pentecostal church service.

A complex theoretical framework is woven throughout this precisely written study. The writing on performance, for example, nods to the works of Nietzsche, as well as to Judith Butler, highlighting the fact that performances may change according to their audiences. Kinshasa itself appears through this narrative as a theater-city, the megalopolis being a stage for its inhabitants, dancers, and others. Theoretical works include conversations about the techniques of everyday life, often described as getting by or *débrouillardise*, for which the writings of Michel de Certeau, for example, are mobilized in the narrative. Most importantly Lesley Braun uses the works of Gregory Bateson and the Palo Alto school about the double binds to define the intertwined relations, or knots, in which women find themselves. Mobility on the stage and society means for the Congo's Dancers having to find their own strategies between contradictory injunctions, each realization of these injunctions potentially being met with various forms of backlash. The skills that women must deploy include the ways to navigate such injunctions, to form supportive networks of solidarity, and to perform various kinds of work, including affective and unpaid labor.

Dance is researched and presented throughout this book in a holistic manner, taking place at home, in concerts, in church, in funerals, in rehearsals, and in the micro-credit associations called *moziki* (or *tontines*). From the onset, Lesley Braun mentions that she encountered double binds herself, for example when finding a place where to live in Kinshasa. Double binds are then a recurring presence in the book, especially in the context of dance performed mainly at concerts and in church, but also in other forms of women's work. Social practices of patronage or *encadrement* are the topic of special attention. The author shows well the historical depth of the concepts employed, for example when discussing moral panics about dance, that are to a large extent inherited from the colonial

period—a colonial authority characterized by the trinity of church, state, and commerce.

Congo's Dancers is structured in five chapters. The introduction presents the topic and the main lines of the theoretical toolbox chosen by the author, as well as glimpses into her fieldwork. Chapter One discusses the position of female dancers in Congolese society and traces historical roots, allowing to see the role of the colonial rule in building anxiety around dance and gender relations. Chapter Two focuses on dance practices in various venues in Kinshasa, from concert halls and bars to wakes and Pentecostal churches. The variety of places for performance complicates the reading of dance and the roles invested by women dancers. Chapter Three shifts to the dancers themselves, their work on stage, reputation management, and the assertion of individualities. Chapter Four zooms in on the mythical figure of Mami Wata, a river goddess who through many histories told in the Congo, channels narratives of ambition, greed, sexuality, and the threat of ruin. This chapter links dance to practices of occultism that are numerous and diverse in present day Kinshasa, thus pursuing the examination of the links between dance and spiritualities. In Chapter Five, the author returns to the careers of women, departing from her observations on dancers to study other professions, notably journalism, politics and international trade, thus examining how double binds encountered by dancers are present in other careers often considered to be more respectable. In so doing, the chapter places the experiences of dance in the broader landscape of occupations that each, in one way or another, generate public exposure. Notions of patronage and getting by create a broad arc between the forms of labor discussed in the book. The book ends with a coda that brings together such relational knots, addressing the negotiation of social relations and boundaries between genders in Kinshasa.

The dancers are the most visible people in the Congolese rumba, omnipresent as they are in concerts and rehearsals, but mostly ignored in scholarship, maybe because their contribution is also mostly only paid for informally. Lesley Braun's book is an important contribution to dance studies, and her work also matters to multiple scholarly fields. *Congo's Dancers* adds a major piece to the puzzle of music studies on Central Africa. It makes another contribution to scholarly work on practices of spiritualities and of religion in present day Kinshasa. The book also sheds new light on the study of informal economies, discussed in the associative forms of *moziki*, in the more or less formal networks of churches and cults, in the structures of patronage, and in the side hustles, strategies, or *mathématiques* that the inhabitants of Kinshasa deploy to get by with daily life.

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