

The Subjectivity of Soul: Music and Racial Hybridity in Jim Crow Houston

Alex Nuñez

Step toe, Tyina. *Houston Bound: Culture and Color in a Jim Crow City*. Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2016.

Tyina Steptoe is an Associate Professor of History at the University of Arizona whose award-winning book, *Houston Bound: Color and Culture in a Jim Crow City*, traces the ways in which Houstonians of diverse backgrounds created a unique culture that blended their various ethnic traditions despite Jim Crow segregationist status quos. Following the American project of Reconstruction, government officials in the South enacted a series of laws intended to subjugate the recently-emancipated African-American population into traditional hierarchies of racial superiority. As Black Texans adjusted to the Jim Crow status quo, those in Houston established their own communities, institutions, and cultures that aligned to the black/white racial binary thrust upon them towards the turn of the twentieth century.¹ The realities of a rapidly developing Houston proved to be much more complicated than this simple black/white dichotomy. Over time, throngs of new migrants arrived, such as: Creoles, Tejanos, and ethnic Mexicans, who did not fit into this rigid racial structure.² The infiltration of different shades and nuances of multiethnic peoples, their interactions with Jim Crow categorizations, and the emergence of shared musical practices as a result of spatial relationships is the subject of Steptoe's stunning and groundbreaking work.³

Steptoe's ability to deconstruct notions of race and race identity is situated in how notions of racial subjectivity, is malleable and socially constructed. She argues that racial construction or, "the premise of *who one is* is neither essential nor fixed but is continually shaped and reshaped in human social exchange," did not always conform to understandings of race enforced by the color line.⁴ Creoles and ethnic Mexicans interacted with the racial divide very differently from Black Texans. For instance, Creoles migrated from Louisiana with their francophone history and did not share the same constructions of racial blackness as Black Texans due to their mixed heritage, but under Jim Crow, were legally classified as

¹ Tyina L. Steptoe, *Houston Bound: Culture and Color in a Jim Crow City* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2016), 30.

² Steptoe, *Houston Bound*, 5.

³ *Ibid.*, 4, 11.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 7.

The Subjectivity of Soul

black.⁵ Ethnic Mexicans, a population legally classified as white, were still not immune to episodes of discrimination, as their language, religion, and cultural practices served to distance themselves from acceptable notions of whiteness.⁶ As a result, beneath the macrolevel of the codified Jim Crow binary, racial hierarchies and social divides existed among these communities due to their relationships to the racial boundary.⁷

As Houston grew and its communities developed, music stood out as an important dynamic that both “reified and rejected” the black/white racial binary.⁸ As these ethnic groups interacted with each other, they were exposed to each other’s musical styles, including Texas tenor jazz, orquesta, and la-la, which were rooted in Black Texan, ethnic Mexican, and Creole cultures.⁹ What each style and genre had in common was that these Houstonians from different racial and ethnic backgrounds all shared space while cultivating their musical interests, which began to blur the imposed racial hierarchies. In other words, music became a foundation of dialogue between groups.¹⁰ This blending of sound led to a blending of peoples: kinships formed between groups that merely decades ago considered themselves separate from each other.¹¹ The continuing interethnic and interracial contact between Creoles, ethnic Mexicans, and Black Texans facilitated the development of cultural music styles, which served as a vehicle to give these communities a shared space to formulate meaningful relationships and transform racial identities.¹²

Out of the many ways in which race and identity can be analyzed, Steptoe wisely chooses to use the lens of music to examine notions of racial subjectivity among her chosen populations. She explains that she focuses on this cultural element because expressions like music can help to reveal hidden histories of people and communities, as seen in *Houston Bound* with race formation.¹³ Steptoe’s approach to analyzing the untapped culture of underrepresented agents can be twofold. First, where historical literature emphasizes so heavily upon African-Americans, Anglos, and the black/white binary, the stories of other peoples and ethnicities can become lost. The inclusion of “other” ethnic groups, let

⁵ Ibid., 71.

⁶ Ibid., 93.

⁷ Ibid., 97.

⁸ Ibid., 157.

⁹ Ibid., 155 (Texas tenor jazz), 176 (orquesta), 197 (la-la).

¹⁰ Ibid., 185.

¹¹ Ibid., 201.

¹² Ibid., 230.

¹³ Ibid., 2, 23.

alone framing her focus upon them, grants more agency to Creoles and ethnic Mexicans, affirming their active role in the shaping and development of not only musical styles, but also of Houston itself. Second, these groups all shared subaltern identities, whose perspectives were disregarded or dismissed by dominant members of the social hierarchy. In these circumstances, authentic accounts of experiences seen in underrepresented populations can only be located in accounts created by those populations themselves – in Steptoe’s case, the music of Black Texans, Creoles, and ethnic Mexicans. The analysis of music as a meeting space of these various cultural boundaries presents an alternative narrative to understanding the racial experience of Houston’s denizens, and allows readers to see the transformation of racial identity and racial subjectivity as fluidly as they see the development of the very musical styles and genres that fostered it.

In the same vein, it would be interesting to apply Steptoe’s notions of racial subjectivity and community formation to other contexts. Music is certainly not the only form of cultural expression that can be used to measure the construction of diverse populations and their interactions with each other. Other media, such as art, food, and even sport, can provide an equally valuable lens to analyze how communities form, demographics merge, and old world collide to form new ones. Utilizing the city of Houston during Jim Crow provides another useful model for historians to emulate; other urban areas in other time periods have certainly experienced similar developments and growing pains. The opportunities to apply Steptoe’s historiographical framework to other contexts can provide historians with new ways and perspectives to approach the study of race formation, how the construction of race impacts communities, and understanding why racial identity is a fluid and dynamic phenomenon.

Alex Nuñez is a first year MA student at the University of Arizona studying race, culture, and sport in United States history. He graduated from UA in 2013 with a BA in History and in 2015 with a M.Ed. in Teaching and Teacher Education. His current research project explores early professional baseball, racial fluidity, and identity formation among Mexican Americans during the Jim Crow era, particularly during the career of Vincent Nava, the first Mexican-American professional baseball player (1882-1887). He is also the recipient of the 2018 Joe Arbena Latin American Sport History Grant, awarded by the North American Society for Sport History.