

William T. Dargan. 2006. *Lining Out the Word: Dr. Watts Hymn Singing in the Music of Black Americans*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press; Chicago: Center for Black Music Research, Columbia College.

Reviewed by Kiri Miller

William T. Dargan's methodologically diverse and elegantly written book engages with numerous musical genres, historical moments, and modes of social analysis, but it revolves around a single core idea: that we can trace the development of all African American music back to the productive tensions between lined-out hymnody and the ring shout. Dargan argues that the "lining out–ring shout continuum" provides the key to understanding the historical provenance, functional efficacy, and cultural distinctiveness of black spirituals, the blues, jazz, R&B, and rap. A thesis of such all-encompassing scope can only be supported through considerable speculative theorizing, as Dargan acknowledges; he states at the outset that *Lining Out the Word* will not lead to "semantic certainty" about the traditions and theories under discussion (14) but will remain "open-ended and inconclusive" (19). Nevertheless, the depth and complexity of his historical and musical analysis have a significant persuasive impact over the course of the book, gradually retuning the reader's ear through repeated explication of a particular theoretical vocabulary. When it comes time to apply the lining out–ring shout theory to several well-known recorded jazz performances near the end of the book, Dargan's nuanced assessment demonstrates the power and flexibility of his meticulously assembled critical apparatus.

While Dargan gives lined-out hymnody and the ring shout equal importance as ritual and aesthetic "polarities" in his theoretical model, it is lining out that receives the lion's share of his attention. In the book's preface he explains how lined-out "Dr. Watts" singing made its imprint on his own ear during his 1950s childhood in the South Carolina sandhills. (African American practitioners of lined-out hymnody often refer to this tradition using the name of the hymn-text author most prominently represented in their repertoire, the English Dissenter Isaac Watts [1674–1748].) Dargan recalls, "I could hear in these hymns the gestures and intonations that would mark my developing sense of rhythm and blues and black gospel," and he draws attention to the grandeur, stability, solemnity, soulfulness, "gorgeous familiarity," and "unhurried yet gracious movement" of this music, which instilled in him an "awe of the sacred" (xii). One goal of this book seems to

be the inculcation of this same awed and respectful response to this tradition in his readers, in compensation for long neglect.

Dargan suggests that Dr. Watts singing has been sidelined or dismissed by music scholars, many African American worship communities, and some prominent black intellectuals (e.g., Zora Neale Hurston) because of a widespread perception that the tradition is not authentically African American and has persisted as a legacy of the enforced illiteracy of the slavery era. The line-by-line intonation of British hymn texts, with each line followed by a drawn-out, heterophonic congregational response, has been stigmatized as backwards, unmusical “barbaric chant” (171, Hurston’s term). Anglo-American lining out has also borne these stigmata throughout its history; its apparent disorderliness helped to inspire various movements to regularize and improve American church music, including the development of shape-note hymnody and gospel (each figured as modern and progressive in its early years). But African American lining out carries additional ideological baggage, not only because of racist stereotypes of illiterate, primitive, and “barbaric” musicality, but because of the origins debate that has beset the study of black American sacred music over the years. Faced with syncretic New World worship practices, scholars obsessively parsed various musical features as either African or European in origin, seeking to identify the official progenitors of various American vernacular traditions. (Dargan discusses George Pullen Jackson’s major contributions to this debate, as well as Dena Epstein’s criticism of Jackson; interested readers might also consider consulting Garst [1986] and Bealle [1997] on this subject.) In the course of these quests the ring shout has been embraced as authentically African-derived; lining out, by contrast, has the taint of white domination, the words of the master repeated in the mouths of the enslaved. Dargan shows how Dr. Watts singing has been regarded as both too *black*—indeed, “so utterly black . . . that few middle class or well-educated blacks care to contemplate it for long” (238)—and as insufficiently *African*.

In dealing with this legacy, Dargan invokes both Du Bois’s concept of “double consciousness” and Kwame Anthony Appiah’s discussion of the “myths and lies” at the roots of cultural identities (3). The “lining out–ring shout continuum” refers not only to musical features but to entrenched mythological dichotomies between adaptation and assimilation (7), African retentions and European impositions, and “black self-determination” and “white control” (2). With these foundational myths and lies always in view, Dargan sets out to demonstrate “the primacy of the Dr. Watts tradition” in the long cultural transition from African to African American musical identities (4). Where Hurston saw evidently distasteful “Negroized white hymns” (171), Dargan sees a complicated “blackening” process of fundamental importance to African American cultural history, in which Dr. Watts

singing comes to represent Houston Baker's "mastery of the mask" and the ring shout represents a "deformation of mastery" (280n4).

Lining Out the Word is divided into two parts, designated as "the proverbial trees" and "the proverbial forest." Dargan's "trees" are the musical and textual styles that constitute Dr. Watts singing. The subsequent "forest" section presents several different takes on broader "webs of significance in African American music making" which are informed by Dr. Watts singing and the lining out–ring shout continuum. Both parts of the book continually return to five themes identified in the introduction: the "unified diversities" of regional and local styles; processes of cultural adaptation; musical change and continuity; slavery-era language contact as a generative source of African American musical styles; and black music as ritual (4–13).

The first two chapters of the book introduce the congregational worship ethos and diverse regional performance practices that constitute Dr. Watts singing, identifying it as "both an in-the-moment creative interaction and a received tradition with African and European sources" (25). Dargan chooses to focus on Missionary Baptist contexts, in which a local lining-out repertoire typically consists of about ten hymn texts and a similar number of tunes. (He appears to be referring to contemporary practice in making this assessment; it is unclear whether local repertoires were larger in the past.) While lining out is both more common and more integrated into the entire worship ritual among Primitive Baptists than among Missionary Baptists—owing to Primitive Baptist doctrinal proscriptions against the use of musical instruments in worship—Dargan focuses on Missionary Baptists because they have historically constituted "the largest black church body" (28). When Dr. Watts singing takes place in Missionary Baptist contexts, it occurs during "devotions" or "the devotional," a period of congregational worship that precedes the formal preaching service. This binary worship format lies at the heart of Walter Pitts's two-frame model for Afro-Baptist ritual practices, in which a relatively contemplative and private/secret/esoteric devotional frame is followed by an expressive, celebratory, service frame that employs repetition, percussive rhythm, and body movement to inspire possession trance states. Dargan builds on Pitts's model throughout *Lining Out the Word*, initially by associating these two mood frames with "moaning" and "shouting" styles in hymn-singing. Moaning styles employ a rich palette of vocal timbres, heterophonic textures, and flexible rhythms; shouting styles have an urgent rhythmic pulse accentuated by syncopated or cross-rhythmic hand-clapping and body movement. These fundamental stylistic distinctions represent "the two ends of the continuum between relative reflection and relative intensity" (35), which in turn underpins the "lining out–ring shout continuum" that Dargan explores in later chapters.

Dargan's second chapter introduces a corpus of thirty-three recorded performances that serve as exemplars in a regional typology of rhythmic styles and ensemble textures in Dr. Watts singing. Most of these recordings appear on a twenty-one-track compilation produced by the author, which presumably was meant to accompany the book. For reasons left unreported, this did not come to pass; instead, Dargan's *Dr. Watts Hymn Singing among African Americans* is listed in the discography as an "unpublished recording available at the Center for Black Music Research, Columbia College, Chicago." Chapter 2 includes twenty-eight pages of transcriptions of the performances included on the compilation recording. Prefatory comments on these transcriptions indicate that they are intended to walk the line between prescriptive and descriptive notation, clarifying "constituent elements of melody and harmony" while occasionally including more detailed representation of a lead singer's intricate melismas and uses of vocal color (61). However, the transcriptions were made by three different people (Dargan is responsible for eleven, Judith Gray for eight, and Jeff Todd Titon for two) and they demonstrate different approaches to the task. Moreover, the transcriber is not always the person who made the field recording—and since the recordings were made in the 1940s, 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, it is difficult to ascertain whether differences in style represent regional distinctions or historical shifts. All this makes chapter 2's stylistic typology hard to assess, although the central idea that different regional styles might be likened to speech communities is effectively articulated.

Chapters 3 and 4 work as a pair, addressing the history of Dr. Watts singing in English and African historical perspective, respectively. Dargan lays out some basic historical information on Isaac Watts and his contemporaries, describing Watts's verse style as "deeply invested in the mastery of language as a godly yet practical form of social empowerment for a dispossessed religious minority" (93). This description has obvious resonance for the subsequent adoption of these texts by African Americans. Similarly, Dargan's discussion of "sweeping movement . . . balanced by a complementary depth of perspective" (98) in Watts's verse recalls his description of the musical qualities of the Dr. Watts singing he heard as a child. These subtle thematic connections keep this chapter from feeling like an obligatory rehearsal of Watts's biography; instead, Dargan establishes stylistic continuities between Watts's texts and American black Baptist worship, including the importance of plain-spokenness, biblical symbolism, and "the new personal voice of experiential religion" (100).

Chapter 4 fleshes out these continuities, addressing the historical development of African American Dr. Watts hymn singing from a culture-contact perspective. Dargan focuses on African-derived orientations to

ritual, celebration, and vocal performance (e.g., “the African preference for speechlike singing and variegated timbres,” 105) and on how these orientations might have shaped slaves’ performances of Standard English hymn texts. In this way Dargan develops the argument that Dr. Watts singing played a pivotal role in the transition from “African to slave to American,” describing black lining out as a “genotype” that was phenotypically expressed in diverse singing styles and subsequent musical genres (104; a note clarifies that Dargan does not intend any association “between physical genetics and a certain way of making music,” 271n1). He uses scholarship on Bantu language influence in the southeastern US to support speculations about links between African language areas and African American singing styles, acknowledging that considerable additional research would be required to substantiate these claims. Dargan also suggests that slaves acquired a taste for iambic, ballad-form English texts from their experience with the Watts repertoire, and he tentatively links the unaccented-to-accented iambic stress pattern of the hymns to the “backbeat feeling” in much African American music, with its “dominant emphasis on two and four” (118). Here I feel Dargan may be asking too much of Dr. Watts, since so many of the tunes employed in both black and white lining-out traditions clearly place the iambic stresses of the texts on the strong beats of the measure. However, I am more sympathetic to his broader conclusion that slaves in the southeastern US were uniquely positioned to “develop a range of forms and a rhythmic style associated directly with neither Africa nor England but with the plight of how to sing what became their Lord’s song in a strange land with its own tongue” (119).

Chapters 5 and 6 go into considerable analytical detail about the nature of this acculturation process, focusing on the relationship between speech and song as demonstrated in Dr. Watts, other congregational songs, blues, and (briefly) rap. Dargan suggests that “hymn singing is the primordial form of speechlike song in African American culture,” noting important parallels between his own work and Kofi Agawu’s research on Northern Ewe speech and song rhythms (122). This claim is bolstered by the presentation of an abstract typology of rhythmic categories represented in Dr. Watts singing, termed the “speech-movement continuum.” As Dargan explains, this continuum ranges from “subtlety of rhythm to extreme emphasis,” employing four categories: portraiture sound, poetic rhythms, speech rhythms, and percussive rhythms (125). Space does not permit a thorough explanation of this system here, but Dargan’s analysis of specific examples does much to affirm its usefulness. Speech rhythm and percussive rhythm are relatively straightforward; they are strictly measured rhythmic styles derived from metrical texts or from body movement, such as clapping. The two categories

of freely measured rhythm draw more attention to the distinctive expressive qualities of Dr. Watts singing. Portraiture sound refers primarily to timbral effects (used not only in singing but in preaching and prayer) and to liquid pitch inflections (e.g., “bent” notes and portamento). Poetic rhythm refers to formulaic melismas, the repetitive licks that “shape the rhythmic contours of song to implicate speech” (127). Dargan links all four rhythmic concepts to West and Central African musical phenomena, including the time-line concept, dirge singing traditions, and musical speech surrogates (e.g., drum languages) (133). These two chapters should be of great interest to scholars who work on theories of rhythm and/or text-music relationships.

The remaining three chapters make up what Dargan calls “the proverbial forest,” but they strike me more as individual buildings constructed from the aforementioned trees. Chapter 7 presents the life history of the preacher and songwriter C. J. Johnson, told mostly in his own words. This portrait, which includes some sociological context and a brief analysis of recurring themes in Johnson’s narrative, is the only part of the book in which a singer of Dr. Watts hymns speaks for him- or herself about the significance of this tradition; it is a refreshing interlude that left this reader wanting more first-person accounts throughout the book. Chapter 8 returns to a theoretical orientation, laying out the lining out–ring shout continuum as a model of complementary expressive polarities that can account for “all the musical genres and styles developed by African Americans in North America” (198). Here Dargan returns to Pitts’s binary frame system for Afro-Baptist worship, which he overwrites with a “five-key sequence” of progressive ritual stages: inspiration, rapport building, momentum, quickening, and ecstasy-freedom (202–5). Chapter 9 applies the five-key sequence, the lining out–ring shout continuum, and the speech-movement continuum of rhythmic categories to several blues performance styles and three classic jazz recordings: Billie Holiday’s “Strange Fruit” (1945), Charlie Parker’s “Parker’s Mood” (1948), and Ornette Coleman’s “Free Jazz” (1961). (While many of Dargan’s chapters work well alone, the piecemeal reader should not attempt chapter 9 without also reading chapter 5 and chapter 8.)

One might expect this final musical analysis to feel forced, being so weighed-down with newly coined terminology, but in fact chapter 9 shows Dargan at his best. Evocative description and careful integration of the book’s key ideas work together to bring the music to life. Inevitably, Dargan’s critical interpretation of these performances sometimes has the flavor of self-fulfilling prophecy; for example, it seems a little unfair to hold up the five-key sequence as the benchmark of “aesthetic ‘success’” in African American music and to fault Ornette Coleman for failing to complete its stages (232). Nevertheless, Dargan’s theoretical models present a persuasive account of how music can “make extraordinary things happen” (232) in both

sacred and secular contexts, and of how the “unified diversities” of African American musical expression have developed since the slave era.

While Dargan accomplishes much in *Lining Out the Word*, it is the reviewer’s duty to identify some things that he does not accomplish (or chose not to attempt). First, this book is not an ethnography. The personal, reflexive preface, the references to “fieldwork” in the introduction, and the early historical chapters all led me to expect on-the-ground accounts of specific contemporary Dr. Watts performances around every corner—if not among the “trees,” then surely in the “forest.” But only a single ethnographic moment of this kind presents itself in the entire book: chapter 8 closes with a description of a song performance that perfectly exemplifies Dargan’s five-key sequence. (Even here, the account seems more like allegory than ethnography: the lead singer is identified only as “Brother Unknown,” a man whose appearance was “odd and out of joint” but who nevertheless brought the congregation to redemptive “ecstasy-freedom” by the end of his song.) The life story of C. J. Johnson does something to close the gap between theory and lived experience in *Lining Out the Word*, but one wonders why Dargan could not have included more voices like this one. In introducing Johnson’s story he notes that “it is beyond the scope of this book to closely examine the dynamics of personal interaction within communities,” and instead offers this individual narrative as a paradigmatic example (169)—fair enough. Still, given this book’s emphasis on aesthetic and religious values, creative agency, and collective musical improvisation, Dargan’s argument might have been considerably strengthened through the inclusion of more specific evidence of how these communities interact and why they continue to sing Dr. Watts. While his conclusion outlines his reasons for undertaking a genre study rather than investigating “a specific ethnographic instance” (235), I feel that these two approaches are eminently compatible within a single volume.

A second line of “what’s missing” criticism might revolve around the community of scholars that is brought together between the covers of this book. Dargan does a beautiful job of drawing on important research about both African and African American music and culture to develop his own arguments: along with Pitts, Appiah, Agawu, and Baker, notable influences include Samuel Floyd, Dena Epstein, Jacqueline Cogdell DjeDje, Gerhard Kubik, Geneva Smitherman, and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. But as the author notes several times, *Lining Out the Word* was substantially completed by 1997, and the gap between that year and the 2006 publication date is sometimes noticeable. Only a handful of citations in the bibliography reach into the new millennium. For example, Ronald Radano’s *Lying Up a Nation* (2003), which has many themes in common with Dargan’s book, came out too late to be addressed. More surprisingly, *The Black Atlantic* (Gilroy 1993) makes

no appearance, though one Gilroy article is cited. In general, diaspora is somewhat under-theorized throughout, considering its central importance to the topic at hand. The continuing “hemispheric turn” in American studies, which has brought significant attention to African diaspora communities outside the United States, does not play a role in *Lining Out the Word*; Dargan rarely strays from the West African–southeastern US geographical axis. As an ethnomusicologist, I would also like to know what Dargan thinks about some theories of rhythm, aesthetics, and text-music relationships that are often cited in my own discipline, such as Keil’s concept of participatory discrepancies (e.g., 1987), Feld’s work on “aesthetics as iconicity of style” (1988), and Turino’s application of Peircian semiotics to music (1999).

All this is not meant to imply that the book is dated, nor to castigate Dargan for failing to mention my favorite authors. It is rather to affirm that *Lining Out the Word* could be read side-by-side with any of this other scholarship to productive effect. The syllabus-designers among my readers would do well to pull chapters from this book for a wide range of courses—surveys of American music and African American music, obviously, but also courses on historical ethnomusicology, music and ritual, theories of rhythm, language-music relationships, transcription methodologies, musical acculturation, and the history and sociology of religion, among other topics. I have provided a fairly detailed chapter walk-through to encourage readers in this direction, because this book deserves to be read and to be used in the classroom. Dargan has given long overdue attention to a musical practice that “has often been perceived as a regressive if not expendable cultural expression, of which race men and race women have often been ashamed before the bastions of the larger society” (240). In his book the complex, compelling, and deeply influential practice of Dr. Watts singing takes its rightful place beside the ring shout in the history of American music.

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