

This is How We Flow: Rhythm in Black Culture

Angela M.S. Nelson

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An often quoted and accepted belief in both musical and cultural studies is that African culture places a great importance upon rhythm. Unfortunately, all too often this descends into caricature, as once this belief is stated, it is then assumed to be true without any backing scholarship. The statement “they’ve got natural rhythm” is extremely close to being a racist cliché. This selection of essays, edited by Angela M. S. Nelson, goes a long ways toward providing real insights into the meaning and importance of rhythm in black culture, both as a natural view of the world and as an artistic concept.

The book is comprised of ten essays that dissect rhythm as an artistic concept found in both poetry and music, as a kinship between speech and music, as a liberating force and in political discourse. The essays highlight the unique ways in which rhythm in black culture is distinguished from rhythm in western culture. The majority of these essays are illuminating and provocative, well written and very insightful. A few are brilliant. The essay by Richard Lischer, “The Music of Martin Luther King, Jr.,” which analyzes the rhythmic practices of black oratory as created by Dr. King, is alone worth the price of the book. This book should be required reading for every multicultural course in the country.

PETER TERRY (July / August 1999)

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