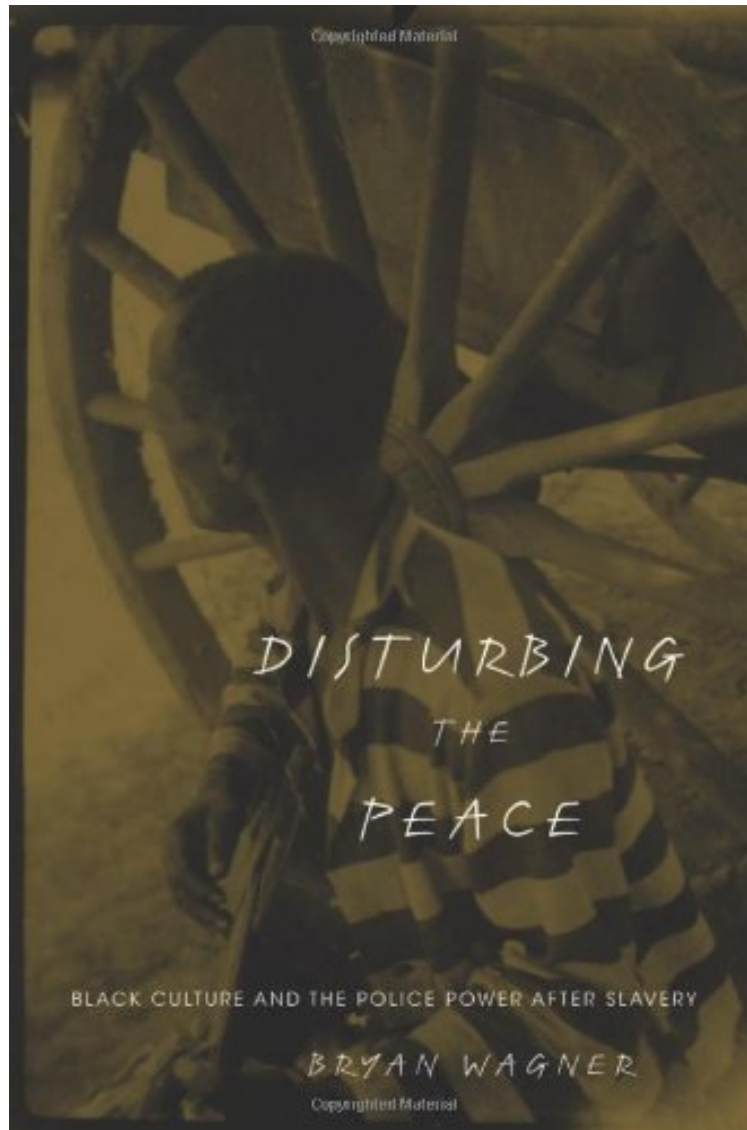


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Disturbing the Peace: Black Culture and the Police Power after Slavery

Bryan Wagner

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Bryan Wagner : Disturbing the Peace: Black Culture and the Police Power after Slavery before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Disturbing the Peace: Black Culture and the Police Power after Slavery:

9 of 11 people found the following review helpful. Lucid and compelling--highly recommendedBy AJThis is a wonderful book. Right off the bat, it's noteworthy at the level of style: the book is not only lucid and---strikingly,

given the strength of its intellectual commitments---jargon-free, it is actually (gasp!) engaging, and not only for the specialist. In fact, the prose achieves that rarity in academic writing: it is a pleasure to read. Each chapter begins with a compelling historical narrative that also rethinks existing historical narratives (about the place of vernacular writers like Joel Chandler Harris, about the role of ethnographic collectors in "preserving" black culture, about the supposedly uneven development of police institutions in the postbellum South). However it is in the literary readings that follow and draw out these histories that the book is most impressive. Considering texts that range from song lyrics and ethnographic interviews to newspaper articles and autobiographies like Sidney Bechet's *Treat it Gentle*, Wagner's readings are recursive and inductive, moving across history and proceeding by way of slow and subtle revelation that often doubles back on itself. In this regard, however, they have something in common with the musical traditions the text describes: the meditative quality of Wagner's close readings, and their resulting capacity to surprise, is in fact underwritten by an incredibly precise and thoughtful concern with the complexities of language and form. The book also, if often implicitly, engages a number of theoretical issues whose relevance are not limited to the particular academic specialties to which the book is explicitly addressed. The claim that the law depends on the strange temporality of threat in order to justify preemptive self-defense, for instance, is clearly germane to the present-day doctrine of preemptive military strike, while the description of an outlaw too dangerous even to speak in court cannot help but remind us of the current debate around how to try terrorism suspects. The book is an exemplary model of an interdisciplinary literary scholarship for which a wide range of fields and inquiries---from media and music theory to legal criticism, from critical race theory to ethnomusicology, from literary history to the philosophy of natural law--are not simply ancillary concerns, but are rather interdependent and overdetermined at their very origins. In its style, its method, and in the scope and significance of its intellectual claims, it is both impressive and compelling.

W. C. Handy waking up to the blues on a train platform, Buddy Bolden eavesdropping on the drums at Congo Square, John Lomax taking his phonograph recorder into a southern penitentiary--some foundational myths of the black vernacular remain inescapable, even as they come under increasing pressure from skeptics. In *Disturbing the Peace*, Bryan Wagner revises the history of the black vernacular tradition and gives a new account of black culture by reading these myths in the context of the traditions ongoing engagement with the law. Returning to some familiar examples (trickster tales, outlaw legends, blues lyrics) central to previous studies of the black vernacular expression, Wagner uses an analytic framework he has developed from the historical language of the law to give new and surprising analyses. Wagner's work draws both on his deep understanding of history and on a wealth of primary sources that range from novels to cartoons to popular ballads and early blues songs to newspapers and court reports. Through his innovative engagement with them, Wagner gives us a new and deeper understanding of black cultural expression, revealing its basis in the relational workings of African Americans in the social world.

Bryan Wagner's *Disturbing the Peace* is a great book. I am enriched and fundamentally challenged by its erudition, its attention to detail and the force of its extremely powerful arguments. It is my sense that anyone working in black studies has to contend with this work--but not only that. Anyone who contends with this work will find their own work richer for having done so. (Fred Moten, Duke University) An audacious and path-breaking history of legal terror... If the police power criminalized blacks in the New South, the invention of the vernacular tradition sugared over this onslaught of violence. Wagner exposes the fantasy of folklore. After *Disturbing the Peace*, it will be impossible to hear Leadbelly or read Uncle Remus without knowing what it means to market emphatic inequality as universal culture. (Colin Dayan, author of *The Story of Cruel and Unusual*) About the Author Bryan Wagner is Assistant Professor of English, University of California, Berkeley.