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Bulldykes, Pansies, and Chocolate Babies

Performance, Race, and Sexuality in the Harlem Renaissance

by

James F. Wilson

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Theatre in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

2000

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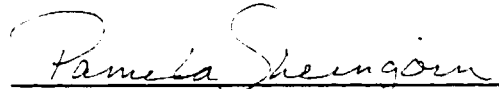
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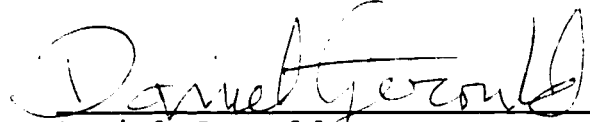
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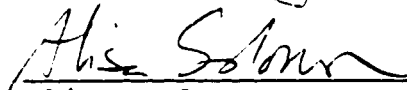
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Daniel Gerould



Alisa Solomon

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THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK

*For John and Mary Wilson,
who nourished and endured my
passion for theatre,
and without whose support this
dissertation would have remained
the elusive pipe dream of a
high school English teacher*

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As I find myself in the long-awaited denouement of my graduate school career, I am suddenly thrust back to the beginning. This dissertation began as a germ of an idea in Professor James Hatch's "African-American Theatre History," one of the first courses that I took at CUNY Graduate Center. In that class I first met and was immediately enchanted by Florence Mills and her work in the black musical revues of the 1920s. With Professor Hatch's encouragement, the idea soon became a paper, subsequently a conference presentation, and finally the basis for a chapter in my dissertation. My association with Florence Mills soon led to intense archival relationships with Ethel Waters, Gladys Bentley, and a host of supporting figures of the Harlem Renaissance. But such intimacy with my new soul mates would not have been possible without the generous support, guidance, and occasional intervention of numerous people who saw me through this project.

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INTRODUCTION

“It’s Getting Dark On Old Broadway”

It’s getting dark on Old Broadway,
You see the change in ev’ry cabaret:
Just like an eclipse on the moon,
Ev’ry cafe now has the dancing coon.
Pretty choc’late babies
Shake and shimie ev’rywhere
Real dark-town entertainers hold the stage,
You must black up to be the latest rage.

“It’s Getting Dark on Old Broadway” from
the Ziegfeld Follies of 1922¹

“The Dirty Decade”

In February 1927, Elder M.C. Strachan, a pastor at Harlem’s Second Seventh Day Adventist Church, railed against New York’s popular theatre, blaming it for the rampant wickedness and depravity in the Harlem neighborhood. Referring to the playhouse as the “Vestibule of Hell,” he led a vigorous congregational campaign to vote for expulsion of any church member who frequented the theatre or the movies. Strachan claimed that “the devil runs every theatre.” and he told his parishioners:

The popular playhouse of today has become the nursery of vice and the seminary of crime. As an institution it is training the rising generation to be experts in vicious degeneracy. The chief and most popular themes presented are wild and frenzied love, base and meaner passions, male lust and female shame, thrilling madness and murder.²

The rise in the immoral subject matter presented in the popular theatre, according to conservative ministers and lay folk, seemed to be directly responsible for the wave of lawlessness and moral laxity that took hold of Harlem in the 1920s. Indeed, Strachan was not the only Harlem clergy to denounce the theatre as a breeding ground of immorality and spiritual corruption. John Haynes Holmes, a black minister at Harlem’s Community Church, surmised that at the end of the century historians would look back on the 1920s

and regard it as "the dirty decade." "As I walk the streets of the city," Reverend Holmes preached to his Sunday congregation, "I find them filled with dirt. I ride in the subways and find them filthy. I stroll through the public parks and find them littered and neglected and unclean." But the defilement of the city was nothing, exhorted Holmes, compared with the immorality evident on the stage, screen, and streets of Harlem. He sermonized. "The filth of our subways is no worse than the filth in our theatres, and the ugliness and disorder of our public parks is no worse than the chaos of our social life."³

But by the end of the decade, the problem did not appear to be the fault of an ostensible loosening of morals among the community's black residents, who made up the overwhelming majority of the neighborhood's population. Nor could the ills of the neighborhood be directly assigned to the theatre's noxious influence. On the contrary, the preponderance of illegal liquor, speakeasies, homosexuality, and prostitution was apparently the result of the swarms of white visitors, or "slummers," who went to Harlem nightly "for a moral vacation."⁴ In 1929, the Committee of Fourteen, a council organized to investigate vice and corruption throughout the city, concluded that the situation in Harlem was the result of outsiders who descended upon the neighborhood in large numbers "looking for picturesqueness" and "thrills."⁵ Nevertheless, in some ways the theatre could be held partly responsible for the atmosphere of lawlessness that pervaded the neighborhood. Many of the expectations white people had originated in, and were cultivated by, the popular theatre and literature of the period. Harlem was as much a product of the white imagination as it was a safe haven for migrating African Americans.

Jervis Anderson documents the transformation of Harlem from a "virtually all-white neighborhood" in 1900, to an established black community by 1919, and then a mecca for pleasure-seekers by the early 1920s. He explains that the Blacks who first moved uptown from the middle West Side at the turn of the century had not envisioned that the multitudes would follow: "They were satisfied just to have found themselves a refuge, away from the violence and the horrid tenement conditions of the West Side."⁶ Objections and protests

from white Harlemites did not deter other Blacks from joining them. Whites, eventually realizing they were powerless to halt the incursion, fled and left deserted houses for more enterprising (usually white) realtors to buy at ridiculously low prices.⁷ Soon there were churches, businesses, and, of course, places of entertainment catering to African Americans. As word about this "city within a city" spread, and its reputation as one never-ceasing party was "proclaimed in story and song," white New Yorkers and people visiting New York from all over the world clamored to experience Harlem's particular brand of exoticism, color, and sensuousness.

A chief attraction of black cultural life in New York was the burgeoning ethnic theatre and performances, which reinforced this image of Harlem. Practically overnight, Harlem became identifiable by its raucous entertainment and nightlife. Indeed, although there were pockets of African-American theatre activity throughout the United States in the 1920s--James Hatch describes the era as "the Little Theatre Movement in Black" and black vaudevillians continued to traverse the country⁸--the locus of the New Negro Movement, as the Harlem Renaissance is often called, remained New York City. George Hutchinson attributes this to the "relative weakness of traditional elites" in contrast to the cultural monopoly the gentry held in other major urban areas. Because the elite did not hold an artistic stranglehold over New York, the black literati (whom Zora Neale Hurston sardonically referred to as the "Niggerati"), and entertainers were able to find their way into their respective fields more easily. Compared to Philadelphia or Washington, for example, New York provided a more tolerant and supportive interracial and interethnic atmosphere for its intelligentsia and creative pool. In addition, a congregation of publishers, cutting edge theorists, cultural critics, and artists resided in New York, which made the city more amenable to "the experimental development of new forms of 'racial' expression."⁹

Jazz Age Harlem of the 1920s and early 1930s was a veritable playground for individuals interested in sampling and observing the free-spirit that uptown New York represented. Recent studies, including those by George Chauncey, Lillian Faderman, Eric

Garber, and David Levering Lewis, examine the liminality and carnivalesque quality of Harlem as a place whites could frequent and where they could temporarily abandon their rigidly defined bourgeois attitudes toward race, sexuality, gender, and class.¹⁰ While mingling among the Harlem lower class, which was defined not only by economic status but also by racial and sexual identities, middle- and upper-class whites effectively transgressed their strict social taboos regarding sexual orientation and race. The nightclub acts, catering to predominantly white audiences, often included transvestites, openly gay performers, and extremely ribald material, and reflected the fascination for performances that challenged white, middle-class decorum. In the clubs, speakeasies, and rent parties of Harlem, inhibitions were discarded as whites experimented with the socially unpermissible.

The epicenter of this thriving black community was located between Lenox and Seventh avenues on 133rd Street, a stretch known as “Jungle Alley.” Many of the nightclubs, such as Barron’s Exclusive Club, one of Harlem’s oldest (it opened in 1915), Connor’s, and the Clam House, were found on this block. The most popular nightclubs as well as the most extravagant, including the Cotton Club (which was on 142nd Street) and Connie’s Inn, were mob-owned and strictly segregated except for the black waiters, kitchen staff, and entertainers. These clubs offered gaudy, nightly floor shows centered around a featured performer, such as Ethel Waters, Cab Calloway, or dancer Earl “Snakehips” Tucker, and a chorus line of light-skinned black women (or as they were sometimes referred to, “light, bright, and damn-near white”¹¹). Wealthy white patrons could watch a “Ziegfeldesque” show and eat over-priced fried chicken or barbecued spareribs in an ersatz jungle atmosphere all the while maintaining a comfortable distance from the social reality outside.

The more intrepid tourist to Harlem, however, might go to one of the hundreds of basement speakeasies, such as the Sugar Cane, which attracted a primarily black working-class clientele. Tucked away on one of the sidestreets, this “lap joint” catered to fewer

white patrons, and the music was less priggish than in the more extravagant clubs. The particularly adventurous, however, might go to a speakeasy or nightclub that accommodated the “pansy trade.” There were several such places in and around Jungle Alley, and these often attracted mixed crowds (i.e., hetero-/homosexual, black/white, and upper/middle/lower classes). The most notorious haunt for lesbians and gay men, however, was Harry Hansberry’s The Clam House, “a narrow, smoky speakeasy” in Jungle Alley.¹² Vanity Fair described it as “a popular house for revelers but not for the innocent young,” and it was a gathering spot for well-known personalities. As Steven Watson reports, “Downtown celebrities went on bisexual sprees--among them were Beatrice Lillie, Tallulah Bankhead, Jeanne Eagels, Marilyn Miller, Princess Murat from Paris, and--dressed in matching bowler hats--came chanteuse Libby Holman and her heiress lover Louisa Carpenter du Pont Jenney.”¹³ Like the Clam House, the Ubangi Club offered “pansy entertainment,” most famously, a female impersonator named the Sepia Glora Swanson, who shocked conservative black theatre critics with her rendition of “I’m a Big Fat Mama with Meat Shaking on My Bones.”

For even more diverse and boisterous entertainment, someone with twenty-five cents and a night to kill might attend a rent party. Begun by resourceful black tenants as a means of raising rent for their exorbitantly-priced apartments,¹⁴ these nightly affairs became a Harlem institution. Langston Hughes wrote poems about them and collected invitations, which were scattered about a neighborhood prior to a party. In addition to announcing the party’s particulars, these cards contained tantalizing exhortations such as: “We got yellow girls, we’ve got black and tan. Will you have a good time?--YEAH MAN!”¹⁵ Although the music and dancing were the central features, a variety of acts played the rent party circuit. Daniel Hurewitz recounts the particular talent of one performer who was famous for lighting a candle, getting undressed, and miraculously making it “disappear” by sitting down on it.¹⁶ Rent parties were also a means for artists to experiment with and develop new material. Composer and pianist Thomas “Fats” Waller, for example, often played such

parties, and comic skits devised for rent parties sometimes made their way into mainstream musical shows.¹⁷

While most Harlemites in the 1920s and early 1930s had never stepped foot in a nightclub, would have shunned the numerous illegal speakeasies, and only infrequently might attend a neighborhood rent party,¹⁸ this was the image of African Americans whites emulated and romanticized. In fact, Mel Watkins traces the changes in societal representations of African Americans up to the 1920s. The late nineteenth century conception of recently-freed slaves as "childish, inept darkies," switched to the notion of Blacks as "carefree, stylish exotics."¹⁹ In the clubs, parties, and legitimate theatres of the 1920s and early 1930s, African Americans conformed to these societal expectations because the entertainment offered the possibility of international success and, more importantly, economic stability.²⁰

"Bulldykes, Pansies, and Chocolate Babies" will document black entertainment in the Harlem nightclubs, speakeasies, rent parties, and on the Broadway stages to unravel the tightly woven strands of identity categories such as race, gender, class, and sexuality. Of course, these categories cannot be separated completely, because a discussion of a performer's race already includes assumptions about that performer's gender, class, and sexuality. A black woman in the 1920s, for instance, was presumed by the predominant culture as lower class and sexually voracious. Yet I will also demonstrate moments of potential disruption at these culturally constructed sites that reflected the construction of these categories. For example, while popular performers such as Gladys Bentley, Ethel Waters, and Florence Mills variously portrayed the black "exotic" and "primitive" associated with white fantasy, embodying, and sometimes parodying the popular stereotypes of their race, they found openings to critique these images and subsequently show them not as "authentic" images, but culturally ascribed.

An examination of the entertainment of the Harlem Renaissance must inevitably begin with the legacy of minstrelsy. In his foundational book The Harlem Renaissance,

Huggins blames the "failure" of an effective theatre of the Harlem Renaissance on the inability of African Americans to assail the traditions established by minstrelsy and create a new form of expression. Depictions of lazy, shiftless Blacks, "darkey" humor, chicken-stealing scenes, the comic use of razors, and malaprop-ridden language persisted throughout the 1920s in black popular entertainment. Huggins contends that minstrelsy was "crippling" to the establishment of a black ethnic theatre for two reasons: "It provided a ready avenue to commercial success for those blacks willing to accommodate themselves to it. And the very powerful hold it had on American imagination and emotion narrowed the limits of social tolerance for black deviation."²¹ Eric Lott takes up this argument and pushes it further, claiming that blackface performance "offered a way to play with collective fears of a degraded and threatening--and male--other while at the same time maintaining some symbolic control over them."²²

Rebecca Schneider pursues a similar line of logic in her discussion of the "primitive." Through an explanation reminiscent of Lott's, she links "primitivity" with race and gender: "Like the feminine, the primitive stands as emblematic of the vanishing point of knowledge and provokes a related terror and fascination that tangle race and gender in significant ways. 'Primitivity' is an attribute historically ascribed to 'lower' races just as 'femininity' is ascribed to the 'second' sex."²³ Race, gender, class, and sexuality become both containable and suppressible through representations of the primitive, as in minstrelsy. Hence, according to Lott and Huggins, the combination of "fear" and "fascination" the minstrels evoked, accounts for the dominion minstrelsy had over popular entertainment of the mid to late Nineteenth Century.

Houston Baker agrees with the potency of minstrelsy in its influence on African-American entertainment, but perceives the artistic possibilities inherent in the "mastery of the minstrel mask."²⁴ He cites Bert Williams and George Walker, the great black entertainers at the turn of the century, who "convert[ed] nonsense sounds and awkwardly demeaning minstrel steps into pure kinesthetics and masterful black artistry."²⁵ This

concept of "mastery" corresponds to Henry Louis Gates's discussion of literary "mimicry" in The Signifying Monkey (1988). Gates disagrees with the perceived notion that mimicry and imitation are equivalent to unoriginality and the concealment of one's own voice (an assertion Zora Neale Hurston postulated in "Characteristics of Negro Expression" in 1935). Imitation, he posits, is not a "denial of identity," but a method of opening a space for "modification" and "revision." "Signifyin(g)," or employing the recognizable form with a slight difference, is a technique of creating this space ("echoing and revising"), which Gates tracks through jazz performance and black literature. Artists create within certain known or acknowledged parameters, paying homage to--which Gates distinguishes as "unmotivated Signifyin(g)"--or parodying--"motivated Signifyin(g)"--their predecessors in the field while making a slight modification. The modified content, or "revising texts," enables new forms to emerge. He explains:

Writers Signify upon each other's texts by rewriting the received textual tradition. This can be accomplished by the revision of tropes. This sort of Signifyin(g) revision serves, if successful, to create a space for the revising text. It so alters fundamentally the way we read the tradition, by defining the relation of the text at hand *to* the tradition. The revising text is written in the language of the tradition, employing its tropes, its rhetorical strategies, and its ostensible subject matter, the so-called Black Experience.

This mode of revision, of Signifyin(g), is the most striking aspect of Afro-American literary history.²⁶

In his discussion of the black musical theatre of the early twentieth century, David Krasner traces the subversive possibilities of motivated Signifyin(g). By parodying familiar black images and epithets, performers assumed ownership of these and potentially evacuated them of their racist meaning.²⁷

This project will extend the argument about Signifyin(g) to the performances of the Harlem Renaissance. Through the analysis of existing scripts, recordings, interviews, and

popular criticism of the Harlem Renaissance, one may trace instances of African-American playwrights and performers Signifyin(g) on white presumptions of black authenticity by imitating, mastering, and revising the forms of "serious" drama and black musical traditions. In plays and musical revues of the period, playwrights and performers found ways to open spaces--however small--for black expression while working in the margins of white commercial theatre.

Two successful Broadway plays, Lulu Belle (1926) and Harlem (1929), which portray similar aspects of Harlem life, will serve as central sites of inquiry and will help contextualize the dissertation's historical, cultural, and theoretical points of departure. Wallace Thurman and William Jourdan Rapp's Broadway melodrama, Harlem, is particularly noteworthy because it was one of only three full-length dramas presented on Broadway in the 1920s written by an African American--Thurman--(but co-written by Rapp, a white playwright).²⁸ It was also the single commercial success of the three, which included Garland Anderson's Appearances (1925) and Frank Wilson's Meek Mose (1928). Thurman and Rapp called their work an "educational drama," and they deliberately intended to assail the stereotypes traditionally associated with blacks on stage, such as the Mammy figure, the slow-witted, superstitious "darkie," and the cunning, but malaprop-spouting trickster. Indeed, Thurman and Rapp strove to "present the [N]egro as he is" in a veritable, starkly naturalistic environment, and they even included a "Glossary of Harlemissms" in the playbill so that Broadway audiences could understand the authentic African-American dialogue spoken on stage.

Similarly, Edward Sheldon and Charles MacArthur's earlier play Lulu Belle depicts a raucous, libidinous view of Harlem, and it was produced with typical lavishness by theatre impresario David Belasco. The play's Carmen-like plot involves a scheming black woman who betrays the love of her devoted fiance and moves from Harlem to Paris to become a wealthy (white) count's mistress. Several years later, her rejected beau, now released from prison after a fight over the shameless Lulu Belle, tracks her down.

confronts her, and kills her. The play is historically noteworthy for its use of a racially integrated cast, which was a rarity on Broadway in the 1920s. Lenore Ulric, a white actress, performed the part of Lulu Belle in blackface, but many of the supporting roles and supernumeraries, were played by African Americans. Many of the black critics objected to the base depiction of Harlem life, but they applauded its efforts to provide greater theatrical prospects for Blacks in the theatre.

Lulu Belle also raises important issues about representations of black women. In the play, Lulu Belle uses her feminine wiles to seduce and then destroy the black men she encounters. The image forcefully enacts the familiar trope of the black woman as a sexual snare, or in Hazel V. Carby’s words, as “a rampant sexual being.” In Ain’t I a Woman, bell hooks outlines the historical significance of this idea, specifically in the “competition” engendered between black and white women entering the the work arena early in the century. She writes: “White women saw black women as a direct threat to their social standing--for how could they be idealized as virtuous, goddess-like creatures if they associated with black women who were seen as licentious and immoral?”²⁹ According to hooks, white women workers enforced segregation so that they wouldn’t catch a “private,” “Negro” disease, which was a result from their sexual promiscuity.³⁰ The common recourse for black women (particularly in literature), argues Carby, has been “on defending their morality,” or “on displacing their sexuality onto another terrain.”³¹ In this dissertation, I will discuss the responses from the black community about Lulu Belle, which employed this tactic.

The play and the community’s response to it demonstrate the ways in which race, gender, sexuality, and class inflect one’s reading of a work. Lulu Belle’s destruction is a direct result of her trying to transcend the boundaries of her station as a lower-class, black woman. Forced to contend with both racism and gender oppression, black women were confronted with a particularly fraught situation. Thus, establishing a distinctive voice in American popular entertainment in the 1920s could be nearly impossible. As Michele

Wallace writes about the difficulty of black women writers to gain acceptance: “If you happen to have more than one feature disqualifying you from participation in the dominant discourse--if you are black and a woman, and perhaps lesbian and poor, as well--and you insist on writing about it, you’re in danger of not making any sense, because you are attempting speech from the dangerously unspeakable posture of the ‘other’ of the ‘other.’”³² Many current race, feminist, and queer theorists argue that creating a space for the “other’s” voice can only be effected by destabilizing the conflated categories of race, gender, sexuality, and class.³³

Lulu Belle, the central character and the play, appeared in a variety of forms during the late 1920s. For example, on Broadway Ethel Waters parodied the play in a musical sketch in the musical revue Africana. This parody invoked and poked fun at the criticism and rumors directed at two of the most famous black women entertainers of the time, Josephine Baker and Florence Mills, who were sometimes regarded as “real-life Lulu Belles.” In her autobiography, Ethel Waters describes Baker’s rise to fame that parallels Lulu Belle’s. She writes, “Josephine ended up with a château, an Italian count, and all Paris at her feet permanently.”³⁴ And Ruth Dennis states in an Amsterdam News editorial that there was continual speculation that Florence Mills’s own ascent from obscurity to international success and wealth provided the model for Sheldon and MacArthur’s play. Additionally, in the margins of the Harlem nightlife, the homosexual subculture adopted the image of the insolent, melodramatic heroine and opened a nightclub on Lenox Avenue called “Lulu Belle’s,” which was notorious as a “hangout for female impersonators.”³⁵

The “Signifyin(g)” on Lulu Belle points to the way in which the performers resisted cultural inscriptions and potentially emptied them of their meaning. As contemporary race, feminist, and queer theorists point out, by calling attention to these racial representations *as* representations, they confirm the *ina*uthenticity of the images. Aldon L. Nielson explains, “Racial signifiers, like all other signifiers, point away from themselves and slide over one another in their rush to an elsewhere. There is no localizable, essential point of origin in

either blackness or whiteness for any single racial signification for the reason that there is no locatable, essential race in America."³⁶ Yet because of the interconnectedness of race, gender, sexuality, and class, one cannot simply probe one of these signifiers while ignoring the others. As a performance strategy, by "Signifyin(g)" on one of these categories, the reception ideally becomes an inquisition of each.³⁷ Kate Davy, for example, argues that an identity category such as "whiteness," is always already "saturated" (to use Hortense Spiller's terminology) with associations marked by gender, class, and sexuality. In "Outing Whiteness: A Feminist/ Lesbian Project," Davy focuses on the construction of "white womanhood" and shows how historically it is aligned with middle-class "respectability." She argues that foregrounding "respectability" in performance by exaggerating and parodying it becomes a means "of making visible the politics of race and open[ing] spaces for further exploration and intervention."³⁸

Conversely, the black woman's body represents the opposite of "respectability": hers is marked by "primitivism." It is not surprising, therefore, that the most enduring images of African-American women in performance during the Harlem Renaissance are in jungle-like costumes: Banana headdresses, grass skirts, and African sarongs were fairly typical of both the Broadway musical revues and nightclub floorshows. For instance, in Dixie to Broadway, a black musical revue of 1924, Florence Mills performed a number called "Jungle Nights in Dixie Land," which she danced with her female ensemble, the "Plantation Chocolate Drops." In Africana (1927), Ethel Waters "Signified" on this tradition when she danced the "Africana Stomp" with her chorus of "Banana Maidens." When dressed in elegant evening gowns or stylish cocktail dresses, the performers were accused of trying to "pass"; the same accusations were leveled at Lulu Belle, who was justly punished. The pleasure of the performances for the mostly white audiences then derived from the primitivism presented on stage. According to Rebecca Schneider, this pleasure, which is comprised of "fascination" and "terror," is aroused by the woman and the primitive and their ability to be both looked at *and* "unseeable." She writes: "On the

surface of the body the woman and the primitive became infinitely observable but (and here's the twist) that visibility (the markings female, black) became the visible insignia of their unseeable dark mysteries."³⁹

Parody, mimicry, and excessiveness are some of the tools available to black women performers to destabilize racist conventions and disrupt preconceived notions about their authentic "primitivism." As current race, feminist, and queer theorists contend, in order to accomplish this, the performers must resist traditional mimesis, which privileges "mere copies" and perpetuates the white, masculine model. Parodic mimicry, or as Elin Diamond terms "mimesis-mimicry," makes it possible to open up the "prisonhouse of otherness" and reveal the "truth" behind the original models as "always already repetition," or pure illusion.⁴⁰ In a manner very similar to Gates's use of motivated Signifyin(g), mimesis-mimicry offers the possibility of disrupting the way in which black women's bodies are read by exaggerating the familiar images (primitive and wanton, for example). Overhauling the conventional representations of the female body with excessive counterimages, argues Teresa de Lauretis, an individual creates openings for reimagining gender categories.⁴¹ The possibility of a "disruptive excess" within identity categories is theoretically effective because it undermines the truth of representation and reflects the slipperiness at the base of the codified binaries.⁴²

The clearest indications of these disruptions are evident in the development of a drag subculture in Harlem. The neighborhood's gay and lesbian private and public performances will in fact be a major focus of this dissertation. While historians have recently begun to rescue these communities from the margins of cultural studies, I would like to chronicle the impact gay and lesbian performances have had on American popular entertainment. Perhaps the most visible and spectacular manifestations of this subculture were the huge drag balls regularly held in Harlem. At these balls, hundreds of people crowded the elegant staircases of the Rockland Palace to marvel at the sumptuousness of the lavish costume parties, which awarded prizes to the most fabulously dressed participants. Women dressed in loose-fitting

men's suits, and the men appeared in an array of feminine finery. In her autobiography, Ethel Waters recalls loaning out her own gowns to her gay male friends on occasion. She relates an incident in which she "lent [her] black velvet dress, trimmed with ermine, to one of those he-she-and-what-is-it types," but had difficulty getting it back. At the ball, the young man had a fight with his "husband," and was put into jail for the night.⁴³ Examining the spectacle of these drag balls, I will analyze the ways in which the participants mimicked and parodied the cultural assumptions about black femininity.

There were other places in Harlem that spotlighted the performances of lesbian and gay men. Besides the drag balls, particularly adventurous tourists might go to a speakeasy or nightclub that accommodated the "pansy trade." The most notorious haunt for lesbians and gay men was Harry Hansberry's Clam House, which Vanity Fair described as "a popular house for revelers but not for the innocent young." The Clam House was also a gathering spot for well-known personalities, such as Tallulah Bankhead, Langston Hughes, and Beatrice Lillie. The most popular entertainer to appear at this speakeasy was Gladys Bentley, a 250 pound black blues singer. Bentley was notorious for wearing a tuxedo on-stage and off and publicly marrying a woman in a New Jersey civil ceremony. Although she was a talented piano player and balladeer, Bentley is generally remembered for her "ad libbed" lyrics of Broadway and popular songs. That is, she converted the sweet words of a love ballad into the fithiest song imaginable. As Wilbur Young wrote in 1939, "Gladys, not content with merely singing them herself would encourage the paying guests to join in on the chorus which they did willingly. At this stage, it was just a matter of time before the house got raided."⁴⁴ Bentley's aggressive attack on conventionality was her chief attraction, yet at clubs like the Clam House, whites only temporarily transgressed social and cultural boundaries of decorum. Racial and sexual boundaries were often crossed while tourists "slummed" in Harlem, but stereotypes were resolutely perpetuated in the popular culture.

Because of the stereotypical and base depictions of black people in the mainstream entertainment of the 1920s, and because "texts" of many of the performances were not published, there have been no full-length investigations that specifically address popular entertainment in connection with the forging of diverse African-American identities during the Harlem Renaissance. Through a careful analysis of eye witness accounts, newspaper reports, songs, and playscripts, I hope my dissertation will fill this gap in theatre and performance studies. In addition, I intend to counter the widely-held belief that the prescribed forms of black show business of the Harlem Renaissance prohibited the emergence of a unique African-American voice. The limitations placed upon the performers, particularly in mainstream venues, were undeniably oppressive, but they yielded creative and subtle measures to subvert racial stereotypes.

"Bulldykes, Pansies, and Chocolate Babies" will trace and develop this theoretical premise. In an effort to reflect the overlap and cross-influences of the mainstream and marginalized entertainments, the chapters will not follow spatial or chronological order. Instead, they will develop thematically and bear the possible pattern of a New York pleasure-seeker "out on a lark." That is, in the course of a week, a presumably middle-class or wealthy white wayfarer might attend a Broadway show or two, listen to blues in a little-known Harlem nightclub, applaud a congregation of "pansies" dressed to kill at a drag ball, and perhaps even engage in a "sexual experiment" of his or her own at a private rent party while listening to Bessie Smith croon "Sissy Blues." As jazz and the blues are an important motif throughout the project, each chapter title derives from a song of the period.

Chapter I, "'Harlem on My Mind': New York's Black Belt on the Great White Way," will be a historical and theoretical overview of Harlem as a contested space for representation during the Harlem Renaissance, and will include an examination of Wallace Thurman and William Jourdan Rapp's Broadway melodrama, Harlem, as an enactment of that contestation. In Harlem, Thurman and Rapp consciously recycled many of the conventions of popular Broadway melodrama, which they applied to (and profitted from)

the white attraction for Harlem’s nightlife. The final product is a hybrid play that also includes elements of black folk drama, musical comedy, and social realism. This “hybridity” reflects “real life” 1920s Harlem as a fragmented site of identification, and demonstrates the impossibility of determining an “authentic” African-American identity of that era. As Homi Bhabha theorizes, locating and analyzing the “in-between spaces” within these composite forms and probing representations of “cultural diversity” reveal the ludicrousness of a presumed fixed or essentialist subject position. Instead, the gaps point to a fluid, transformative community in which one can see “political identities in the process of being formed.”⁴⁵

The famous dramatization of a rent party in Harlem will provide the link to Chapter 2. “‘Gimme a Pigfoot and a Bottle of Beer’: Marginal Performances and Saturday Night Rent Parties.” A typical rent party was a cultural swirl of activity, not only as a place where performers “tried out” material, as Wallace Thurman pointed out,⁴⁶ but it was also a place where people from all walks of life interacted. Willie “the Lion” Smith, for instance, reported: “You would see all kinds of people making the party scene: formally dressed society folks from downtown, policemen, painters, carpenters, mechanics, truckmen in their workmen’s clothes, gamblers, lesbians, and entertainers of all kinds.”⁴⁷ This chapter will explore the rent party phenomenon as a “locus” of merging performance styles and identity border-crossings.

Chapter 3. “‘That’s the Kind of Gal I Am’: Drag Balls, ‘Sexual Perversion,’ and David Belasco’s Lulu Belle.” will look at the ways in which the homosexual community embraced one of the most popular plays of the 1920s. Sheldon and MacArthur’s Lulu Belle has been credited by several historians as one of the instigating factors of the surge of tourists uptown. David Levering Lewis, for instance, writes: “If the sociology of vogues teaches that single events have complex antecedents, it was, with this qualification, Lulu Belle that sent whites straight to Harlem in unprecedented numbers for a taste of the real thing.”⁴⁸ I intend to probe the various ways that the play was received, especially by the

white Broadway audiences and the urges it aroused in them; the African-American community and its subsequent castigation of black women; and finally the homosexual subculture and its camp adoption of the title character as reflected by Harlem's drag balls.

Chapter 4. "'Hottentot Potentates': The Irreverent Performances of Florence Mills and Ethel Waters" will examine the careers of two of the most famous black women entertainers to emerge from the Harlem Renaissance. At times reinscribing the stereotypical representations of black women and at others reversing or parodying these images, Mills and Waters managed to find voice within the oppressiveness of the black musical revue form on Broadway. Responses to Mills's performance in Dixie to Broadway (1924) and Waters' in Africana (1927), their most significant Broadway appearances in the 1920s, indicate that while working within the genre, they occasionally disrupted and critiqued the expectations of black women on the New York stage, and potentially opened a space for new representations.

Chapter 5. "'Gladys Isn't Gratis Anymore': The Spectacle of Gladys Bentley." will serve as both a coda and an epilogue for the project. In addition to documenting Bentley's performances and her reception in the Harlem clubs and theatres of the late 1920s and early 1930s, the chapter will show how her career reflects the changing attitudes toward the "exotic" other. That is, the "excessiveness" of Bentley's persona, while celebrated in the free-spirited 1920s and 30s Harlem, was evidently regarded as threatening in the early 1950s. In an article written for Ebony Magazine in 1952 called "I Am a Woman Again," she renounces her previous identity and "the sex underworld in which [she] once lived," presumably to resuscitate a moribund career. The way out of the "no man's land" between the two sexes for Bentley was through the "unselfish" love of a "real" man and the "miracle" of science, which consisted of regular female hormone injections that might counteract the excess of male hormones her body produced. The combination of these two elements allowed her to reciprocate the man's love, as well as enjoy "the awakening . . . of

the womanliness she tried to suppress.”⁴⁹ Rather than reflecting a fixed notion of self, I will show how Bentley’s dramatic shift is indicative of the fluid nature of one’s identity.

Instead of focusing on the movement’s failure to produce a lasting entertainment tradition that might have toppled the supremacy of racist, sexist, and homophobic imagery to create a new African-American theatre, my dissertation will highlight the occasions in which the performers challenged and even transcended the assumptions surrounding race, gender, class, and sexuality. I intend to explore, as well as celebrate, the contradictory images of the Harlem Renaissance. On the one hand, stereotypical and oppressive, and on the other masterful and liberating, the performances of the 1920s and early 1930s may be regarded as either embarrassing or exhilarating. But at the end of the dissertation, I want to leave the reader with the same defiant attitude summed up in a 1934 Ethel Waters’ song: “You’ve had your money’s worth/ You’ve seen Harlem at its best.”

ENDNOTES

¹ Quoted in Allen Woll, Black Musical Theatre: From Coontown to Dreamgirls (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989), 76.

² “Harlem Church Votes Expulsion From Membership of Any Member Given To Attending Movies Or The Theatre.” New York Age (February 19, 1927), 1.

³ “The Dirty Decade.” The Negro World (February 26, 1927), 2.

⁴ “White Slummer Hit Blow in Report Depicting Conditions in Harlem District.” New York Amsterdam News (October 16, 1929). Clipping in Alexander Gumby Scrapbook Collection, Columbia University.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Jervis Anderson, This Was Harlem: A Cultural Portrait, 1900-1950 (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1981), 3.

⁷ Describing this white exodus out of Harlem, James Weldon Johnson in Black Manhattan (New York: DaCapo, 1990; orig. 1930), writes: “They took fright, they became panic-stricken, they ran amuck. Their conduct could be compared to that of a community in the Middle Ages fleeing before an epidemic of the black plague, except for the fact that here the reasons were not so sound” (150).

⁸ “Introduction” in Lost Plays of the Harlem Renaissance, 1920-1940 (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1996), 15. Hatch’s most recent collection includes numerous anti-lynching plays, “folk” plays, and closet dramas. These were often written as part of a

competition and possibly performed once or twice in a church or college. Helen Armstead-Johnson discusses the links between black vaudeville, minstrelsy, and the black musical revue on Broadway, and describes the careers of key performers in the industry in "Blacks in Vaudeville: Broadway and Beyond" (in American Popular Entertainment: Papers and Proceedings of the Conference on the History of American Popular Entertainment. Matlaw, Myron, ed. Westport: Greenwood Press, 1979, 77-86).

⁹ The Harlem Renaissance in Black and White (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1995), 6.

¹⁰ See George Chauncey, Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay World, 1890-1940 (New York: BasicBooks, 1994); Lillian Faderman, Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers: A History of Lesbian Life in Twentieth-Century America (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991); Eric Garber, "A Spectacle in Color: The Lesbian and Gay Subculture of Jazz Age Harlem" in Hidden from History: Reclaiming the Gay and Lesbian Past, edited by Martin Baum, Duberman, Martha Vicinus, and George Chauncey, Jr. (New York: NAL Books, 1989); and David Levering Lewis, When Harlem Was in Vogue (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981).

¹¹ Brown Sugar, video. Matthew Pook, producer, and Donald Bogle, screenplay. Ebony Productions, Inc., 1986.

¹² As Eric Garber explains in "A Spectacle in Color," this club was the basis for the Lobster Pot, a fictional speakeasy in Strange Brother, Blair Niles' 1931 gay novel (324).

¹³ Steven Watson, The Harlem Renaissance: Hub of African-American Culture, 1920-1930 (New York: Pantheon Books, 1995), 129.

¹⁴ David Levering Lewis explains: "In its 1927 report on 2,326 Harlem apartments, the Urban League found that 48 percent of the renters spent more than twice as much of their income on rent as comparable white New Yorkers. [. . .] That a fourth of Harlem's families had at least one lodger (twice the white rate) and that an unknown number of householders practiced a 'hot bed' policy--the same mattress for two or more lodgers on different work shifts--was as inevitable as the existence of rent parties to relieve the fear and trembling of the first of the month" (When Harlem Was in Vogue, 108).

¹⁵ From The Big Sea (qtd. in Nathan Irvin Huggins, ed., Voices of the Harlem Renaissance New York: Oxford University Press, 1976, 373).

¹⁶ "When 'The Life' Was in Vogue: Touring the Harlem Renaissance" in Stepping Out: Nine Walks through New York City's Gay and Lesbian Past (New York: Henry Holt and Company, Inc., 1997), 253.

¹⁷ Samuel Floyd mentions the use and importance of rent party skits in black musical revues of the 1920s: "The rent-party skits, reflecting the always operative struggles and fulfillments of black culture, were surely quite meaningful and effective for the black spectators since such affairs were a regular part of the real-life social scene in Harlem" (Black Music in the Harlem Renaissance: A Collection of Essays, New York: Greenwood Press, 1990, 12).

¹⁸ For example, Langston Hughes writes in The Big Sea: "The ordinary Negroes hadn't heard of the Negro Renaissance. And if they had, it hadn't raised their wages any" (qtd. in Huggins, Voices of the Harlem Renaissance, 373). And David Levering Lewis states:

“People rose in Harlem each day to go to work, many of them before the last white revellers had careened homeward. The great majority never saw the interior of a night club. Many would have spurned a free night on the town from religious or moral certainty that the devil himself was the club proprietor. Like any young immigrant community, most of Harlem was sober and hardworking. Those with money and inclination to roam Lenox and Seventh avenues or The Jungle until the crack of dawn probably represented well under 10 percent of the total” (When Harlem Was in Vogue, 211).

¹⁹ Mel Watkins, On the Real Side (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994), 210.

²⁰ Describing the employment of possibilities of the nightclubs alone, James Weldon Johnson writes in Black Manhattan: “There are hundreds of musicians and hundreds of performers connected with the night-clubs of Harlem. The waiters, cooks, coat-room girls, doormen and others make up several more hundreds. It has been estimated that there are something like two thousand Negroes employed in these clubs” (180).

²¹ Nathan Irvin Huggins, Harlem Renaissance (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), 248.

²² Eric Lott, Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 25.

²³ Rebecca Schneider, The Explicit Body in Performance (London: Routledge, 1997), 126.

²⁴ Like Huggins, Baker recognizes the stronghold of minstrelsy throughout the twentieth century: “The mask, for generations on end, has been so persuasively captivating, so effectively engaging in its seeming authenticity, that an astute intellectual like Constance Rourke can actually take it as an adequate and accurate sign of a ‘tradition’ of ‘Negro literature’ predating the ‘cult’ of Afro-American expressivity she found so wearying in the 1940s” (17).

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 33.

²⁶ Henry Louis Gates, The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 124.

²⁷ David Krasner, “Parody and Double Consciousness in the Language of Early Black Musical Theatre” in African American Review 29:2 (Summer 1995), 317-323. He writes: “If African Americans call themselves ‘coon,’ ‘darky,’ ‘Sambo,’ or ‘kinky-head,’ it will not be long before the words themselves lose their racist impact.” (320).

²⁸ I will analyze Thurman and Rapp’s unpublished manuscript Black Belt: A Melodrama of Negro Life in Harlem in Three Acts which was later produced as Harlem on Broadway. The script includes revisions and notes in Thurman’s handwriting and is contained in the Thurman Collection in the Beinecke Rare Books and Manuscripts Library, Yale University Library. Based on the reviews of the play, the script, originally penned in 1927, changed little from what appeared on opening night, February 20, 1929.

²⁹ bell hooks, Ain’t I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism (Boston: South End Press, 1981), 131.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 133.

³¹ Hazel V. Carby in "The Quicksands of Representation: Rethinking Black Cultural Politics" in Reading Black, Reading Feminist, Henry Louis Gates, ed. (New York: Meridian, 1990), 87.

³² Michele Wallace, "Variations on Negation and the Heresy of Black Feminist Creativity" in Henry Louis Gates, Jr., ed., Reading Black, Reading Feminist: A Critical Anthology (New York: Meridian, 1990), 60.

³³ Laura Alexandra Harris, for example, says: "It just doesn't prove enough to add the themes--here's race, a bit of class, and a touch of sexuality--without allowing them to disrupt the system in ways that reconstitute it. A dialogue on race is a feminist dialogue is a queer dialogue already" ("Queer Black Feminism: The Pleasure Principle" in Feminist Review 54, Autumn 1996), 25.

³⁴ Ethel Waters with Charles Samuels, His Eye is on the Sparrow (New York: Da Capo Press, 1992; Orig. 1950), 186.

³⁵ Garber, "A Spectacle in Color," 324.

³⁶ Aldon L. Nielson, Writing Between the Lines: Race and Intertextuality (Athens and London: The University of Georgia Press, 1994), 7.

³⁷ As Laura Alexandra Harris says, "Once a system of knowledge is in place, once gender oppression is under scrutiny, the focus should include not only disrupting the stability of the category but finding methods of making one category always a discussion of another" (25).

³⁸ Kate Davy, "Outing Whiteness: A Feminist/ Lesbian Project," Theatre Journal 47 (May 1995), 204.

³⁹ Schneider, 137.

⁴⁰ Elin Diamond, "Mimesis, Mimicry, and the 'True-Real'" in Acting Out: Feminist Performances, Lynda Hart and Peggy Phelan, eds. (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1993), 370-6.

⁴¹ Teresa de Lauretis, "Sexual Indifference and Lesbian Representation" in Performing Feminisms, Sue-Ellen Case, ed. (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), 27.

⁴² Luce Irigaray, for example, writes, "The issue is not one of elaborating a new theory of which woman would be the *subject* or the *object*, but of jamming the theoretical machinery itself, of suspending its pretension to the production of a truth and of a meaning that are excessively univocal. [. . .] They should not put it, then, in the form 'What is woman?' but rather, repeating/interpreting the way in which, within discourse, the feminine finds itself defined as lack, deficiency, or as imitation and negative image of the subject, they should signify that with respect to this logic a *disruptive excess* is possible on the feminine side" (This Sex Which Is Not One, tr. Catherine Porter with Caolyn Burke, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), 78.

⁴³ Ethel Waters' anecdote appears in His Eye is on the Sparrow (149-50).

⁴⁴ Wilbur Young, “Gladys Bentley.” from Biographical Sketches: Negroes of New York (Schomburg Collection, New York Public Library: WPA Writers Program, 1939), 1.

⁴⁵ Homi Bhabha, The Location of Culture (New York: Routledge, 1994), 252.

⁴⁶ Wallace Thurman, “Where Jazz Was Born.” Birmingham (England) Sunday Mercury (October 7, 1928). Clipping in Carl VanVechten Scrapbook Collection, New York Public Library.

⁴⁷ Qtd. in Lewis, 107-8.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 164.

⁴⁹ Gladys Bentley, “I Am a Woman Again.” Ebony (August 1952), 96.

CHAPTER 1

“Harlem On My Mind”

New York’s Black Belt on the Great White Way

Harlem...Harlem
Black, black Harlem
Niggers, Jigs an’ shiney spades
Highbrowns, yallers, fagingy fagades
“...Oh say it, brother,
Say it...”
Pullman porters, shipping clerks an’ monkey chasers
Actors, lawyers, Black Jews an’ fairies
Ofays, pimps, lowdowns an’ dicties
Cabarets, gin an’ number tickets
All mixed in
With gangs o’ churches
Sugar foot misters an’ sun dodgin’ sisters
Don’t get up
Till other folks long in bed...

--“Harlem” by Frank Horne

Chant another song of Harlem.
Not about the wrong of Harlem
But the worthy throng of Harlem.
Proud that they belong to Harlem:
They, the over-blamed of Harlem
Need not be ashamed of Harlem:
All is not ill-famed in Harlem.
The devil, too, is tamed in Harlem.

--“Harlem” by Andy Razaf¹

“Go Harlem”

In March 1926, Anita Handy edited a new magazine called A Guide to Harlem and Its Amusements, in which she planned to lead tours to Harlem’s most popular attractions. When her inspiration was denounced in the black press for focusing only on the neighborhood’s lurid side, she responded that she only intended to satisfy the curiosity of those who had recently seen David Belasco’s Broadway production of Lulu Belle and read

Carl Van Vechten's controversial novel, Nigger Heaven. She claimed that these two works had "caused a great number of people, especially white people, to visit Harlem," but regrettably, in her opinion, these crowds did not know "how to see the community intelligently."²

The highlight of Handy's tour would include a trip to the epicenter of this thriving nightlife, a stretch known as "Jungle Alley," which was located between Lenox and Seventh avenues on 133rd Street. Many of the nightclubs, such as Barron's Exclusive Club, one of Harlem's oldest (it opened in 1915), Connor's, and the Clam House, were found on this block. In her publicity, she also promised that she would not show just the "night side life," but also "the better side of Harlem," including its churches, schools, and modest homes. Admittedly, she indicated that "the night side life is the only side the white tourists care to see, as it is the only side they have heard about."³ For those wishing to experience the "real thing," Handy's guide presumably offered an invaluable service to visitors who only knew Harlem from what they saw on the stage and read in popular fiction.

As the above account indicates, white fascination with Harlem was fueled in large part by its representations in the popular literature and entertainment of the 1920s. Plays, novels, and songs depicted an idealized, exotic, and rather risqué view of life among New York's black denizens above 125th Street, and the images lured white people to encounter the authentic milieu on their own. New nightclubs and speakeasies could not open fast enough to oblige the hordes of white tourists. Writers, entertainers, and producers capitalized on the newest vogue and aroused further interest in Harlem's seamier side by continuing to simulate it on stage and in fiction. Practically over night, these simulations of Harlem became the basis for how the "real" Harlem would be seen and experienced by white visitors. Concurrently, however, the black community leaders attempted to counter these representations by publicizing the high moral standards of the residents and arguing

that the decadence was a result of "the hundreds of downtown white people" who go to Harlem for a "moral vacation."⁴

In the 1920s, Harlem was a contested space for representation, and one of the clearest enactments of this contestation was depicted in a Broadway melodrama by Wallace Thurman and William Jourdan Rapp, pithily titled Harlem (1929). The production is historically significant because it was the first commercially successful Broadway play written by an African American--Thurman (although it was co-written by Rapp, a white playwright). In Harlem, Thurman and Rapp consciously recycled many of the conventions of popular Broadway melodrama, which they combined with (and profited from) the white attraction for Harlem's nightlife. The final product is a fascinatingly hybrid play that also includes elements of black folk drama, musical comedy, and social realism. The drama, which was billed as a "Thrilling Play of the Black Belt," demonstrates what George Hutchinson calls "the cobbling together of traditions out of heterogeneous elements and a babel of tongues."⁵ This "hybridity," which paralleled the contemporaneous divisive public debate inside and outside the black community, reveals that "real life" 1920s Harlem was a fragmented site of identification, and demonstrates the impossibility of determining an "authentic" African-American identity for that era. As Homi Bhabha theorizes, locating and analyzing the "in-between spaces" within these composite forms and probing representations of "cultural diversity" reveal the ludicrousness of a presumed fixed or essentialist subject position. Instead, the gaps point to a fluid, transformative community in which one can see "political identities in the process of being formed."⁶

The Harlem playwrights called their work an "educational drama," and they deliberately intended to assail the stereotypes traditionally associated with blacks on stage, such as the Mammy figure, the slow-witted, superstitious "darkie," and the cunning, but malaprop-spouting trickster. Indeed, Thurman and Rapp strove to "present the [N]egro as he is" in a veritable, starkly naturalistic environment, and they even included a "Glossary of Harlemissms" in the playbill so that Broadway audiences could understand the authentic

African-American dialogue spoken on stage. The play contains a cross-section of a black community, which includes licentious, unrestrained young women: barbaric, sexually out-of-control party-goers; gun-shooting, handsome gangsters; as well as displaced, pious, southern folk; and idealistic, male, social-climbers. Yet trapped within these shifting and contradictory conceptions of the emerging black identity in the 1920s, in their, as David Krasner suggests, "representation of 'authentic' blackness," the playwrights "fashioned a mask of dissemblance and indeterminacy."⁷ The conflicting images within Thurman and Rapp's play forcefully dramatize the community's real struggle to establish a cultural identity under the powerful gaze of white spectators and tourists.

Thurman and Rapp's Harlem is a culmination of the exotic view of the neighborhood reproduced in the popular fiction and in the dramatic realism prevalent on the Broadway stage of the 1920s. In fact, one may argue that the mainstream drama and literature of the period effectively recreated, indeed, *created* the "real" Harlem as an embodiment of a "black and tan fantasy"--if I may borrow Duke Ellington's song title--in which whites could temporarily abandon their rigidly defined bourgeois attitudes toward race, sexuality, gender, and class. Harlem in the 1920s was a playground of infinite possibilities for downtowners and tourists. As Lillian Faderman writes, white people "believed Harlem gave them permission--or they simply took permission there--to explore what was forbidden in the white world. They could do in Harlem what they dared not do anywhere else."⁸ This was precisely the view presented by many playwrights and authors of the era, and their sensationalized portrayals signalled the beginning of the white invasion of Harlem. Just as Oscar Wilde argued that "Life imitates Art far more than Art imitates Life,"⁹ Harlem itself, as encountered by white visitors to the neighborhood, was a product of the supposedly "realistic" fiction and plays of the time. In many respects, these forms, imbued with "actual" locations, dialect, and activities, conditioned (or more precisely, "educated") readers and audiences how to see and experience its real counterpart. As Elin Diamond asserts, "Realism is more than an interpretation of reality passing as reality; it

produces 'reality' by positioning its spectator to recognize and verify its truths."¹⁰ That is, simulations of reality—like the ones posited by 1920s writers and theatre producers about Harlem—are capable of shaping one's consciousness and becoming the basis of that reality. For as Sally Banes asserts, simulations can "throw the entire process of representation and even the ontology of the 'real' or 'original' into question."¹¹

Many in the black community resented the transformative effect that these depictions, with their accent on sex and crime, had on the neighborhood. In 1927, for instance, the New York World printed the conclusions from the annual report of Harlem's Committee of Fourteen, a community anti-vice organization established in 1905. The report states that portrayals of Harlem on stage and in fiction "have aroused a harmful curiosity among white people," who regard Harlem as "a paradise for cheap sport, sensational and scandalous activities and the like."¹² Two years later, the Amsterdam News (in articles spanning two consecutive weeks) announced the findings of a more extensive study from the Committee of Fourteen. In this report, the Committee countered the popular assumption that Harlem was a "hotbed of inherent and indigenous vice," and argued that the criminal element was a result of white infiltration and promotion, and this had given the residents a bad name. The editor of the Amsterdam News claimed: "No other place in the world, except Paris, has been more viciously and unfairly advertised. In newspapers, in books and by word of mouth the Harlem Negro has been pictured as an ogre who destroys his own young and lures white women from the other parts of the city."¹³ After an exhaustive scrutiny of the nightclubs, speakeasies, and "houses of perversion" in Harlem, the Committee concluded that the condition was not "a 'Negro problem' but largely one that has been imposed upon Harlem by outside influences."¹⁴ Furthermore, it claimed that the most vile accusation, the assault on white women's virtue, was not the fault of blacks either, for, as the committee reported, "many of the white women 'lured' to Harlem by Negroes are really sent here by their white masters to ply their dirty trade among Negroes."¹⁵

Other black cultural leaders protested that plays and novels containing derogatory images focused only on small and unsavory aspects of Harlem, maliciously selected and exaggerated, and these portrayals did not give an accurate indication of the larger, up-standing community. Walter White, speaking on behalf of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, stated that

the nightclubs do not begin to tell the story of Harlem. The great bulk of Harlem residents sleep while the night clubs blaze forth in all their glory. Working people must have rest and Negroes must be up early and prepared for a vigorous day's work. You won't find real Harlem frittering away its time in these places.¹⁶

But this was not the story that continued to be told during the Harlem Renaissance, and the complimentary elements of "real Harlem" rarely made their way into the popular culture. As Oscar Wilde might also have argued, however, this method of aesthetic discernment in which novelists and playwrights selected their "sordid," "degrading" details to represent Harlem is precisely the manner in which Art creates the model for Life. For as he explains in "The Decay of Lying," "Art itself is really a form of exaggeration; and selection, which is the very spirit of art, is nothing more than an intensified mode of overemphasis."¹⁷ Regardless of the counter efforts to depict the neighborhood and its residents as moral, noble, and exemplary, the "selective," "overemphasized" public Harlem of the stage and popular fiction became ingrained in the imaginations of tourists visiting the neighborhood, and they demanded that the community live up to their expectations. Tourists packed nightclubs and dance halls that replicated the Harlem they knew from melodramas, musicals, and novels, and they turned their heads to the side forwarded by black community leaders.

Thurman and Rapp's play epitomized a genre in the 1920s that depicted ignoble scenes from Harlem life. Harlem joined company with a host of others that included wildly popular, but now mostly forgotten works, such as Edward Sheldon and Charles

MacArthur’s melodrama Lulu Belle, Carl VanVechten’s controversial book Nigger Heaven, the musical revues Deep Harlem and Hot Chocolates, as well as more enduring novels such as Charles McKay’s Home to Harlem and Thurman’s The Blacker the Berry.... These representations of Harlem in fiction and theatre, which nearly always portrayed a raucous, non-stop party atmosphere, initiated and perpetuated the attention that white tourists had shown the neighborhood beginning in the mid-1920s. Thus, fiction informed the construction of Harlem and vice versa, and as a consequence, Harlem became in the 1920s what Michael Taussig calls a “mimetic vertigo.”¹⁸ Everyone, it seems, had different claims as to what actually comprised the “real” Harlem.

“Fantasy in Black and Tan”

The fascination with Harlem was generally directed at the new nightclubs that seemingly sprouted up daily. What had previously been a rather quiet neighborhood became the hub of activity for late-night revelers, and black nightclubs, which had once been regarded as socially taboo for well-to-do white people in the 1900s and 1910s, became all the rage in the 1920s. As Lewis A. Erenberg explains in Steppin’ Out, his treatise on the history of New York’s nightlife of 1890-1930, there were clubs throughout the city patronized by an interracial clientele, or “Black and Tans” as these clubs were called, since the turn of the century. Black and Tans were regarded not much better than brothels, for police officers, the public, and urban reformers looked upon these clubs as nefarious dens of iniquity. The most notable of these clubs were in New York’s Tenderloin, located around Thirtieth Street on Manhattan’s West Side, where whites commingled with Blacks. This dangerous interracial mixture was deemed the cause of riots, which erupted in the district in 1900 and 1910. As the police began to focus on these cabarets as enclaves for vice and racial tension, the owners began relocating to Harlem by the mid-1910s, when African-Americans were also migrating there. The white clientele at the Tenderloin clubs, however, did not immediately follow.

In the late 1910s and early 1920s, it was actually Greenwich Village, with its bohemian reputation, that attracted New York's smarter set. As Erenberg reveals, "Bohemian areas often pave the way for more conventional nightlife," and after dark, the Village had become a major tourist area by 1917. Greenwich Village offered an "area of fantasy" for respectable white New Yorkers. He writes:

As a bohemian section, the Village became a playground where uptowners could indulge in wilder forms of sensuality. The Village's overtones of free sexuality attracted uptowners and out-of-towners, for in the village they could see people apparently uninterested in success, caring little about money, desiring only to live the good life without responsibilities. Beyond that, the Village, then as now, had the reputation for homosexuality, and conventional whites could see lesbians and homosexuals on the streets.¹⁹

After World War I numerous gay and lesbian hangouts, such as The Flower Pot, Trilby's, and the Jungle, opened in the Village. And not unlike our own "theme-park" restaurants, several of the nightclubs exploited the bohemian image of Greenwich Village and fabricated environments that conformed to straight tourists' expectations of the neighborhood. The Montmartre, for example, was decorated as what one would expect of a typical bohemian café. Red tablecloths covered "rough-cut" tables, customers sat on wooden benches, and carefully-placed spiderwebs hung in the corners. Similarly, restaurant impresario Don Dickerman attempted to infuse "an atmosphere of lawless pleasures" in his 1920s club, the Pirate's Den. Patrons entered through a heavy wooden door, and after traipsing through a long, constricted passageway, they found themselves in an ornately embellished room. Painter N. C. Wyeth wrote to his father that the cavernous chamber contained "ropes, tackle of all description, boarding irons, culverines, brass cannon, cages of parrots and monkeys—all lighted with ships' lanterns!"²⁰ More and more proprietors began to apply a theatricality to their restaurants and nightclubs to lure visitors who longed for unique dining experiences in which the quality of the food was secondary. But as was often the case,

when a neighborhood became overrun by tourists, the smart set tired of the old haunts and began looking for less mainstream and unconventional places to explore.

With the success of Shuffle Along, the all-black musical revue of 1921, black-themed cabarets began to appear throughout midtown Manhattan, and they became quite popular among white socialites. As Erenberg explains, these clubs were realizations of theatrical and literary antebellum southern plantation scenes that had been propagated in such entertainments as minstrel shows, Uncle Tom's Cabin productions (or the "Tom Shows" that traversed the nation), and "all black" Broadway musical shows. In fact, the clubs were an extension of the northern evocations of southern plantations that developed at the turn of the century. One of the earliest records of this kind of reconstruction for entertainment was in 1895, when Nat Salisbury, Buffalo Bill Cody's manager, built a "Negro Village" in Brooklyn's Ambrose Park. His "Black America," as he billed it, included log cabins, hen yards, hay wagons, and mules, and he employed 500 Blacks who lived and worked (and sang and danced) on the plantation setting. He advertised it as "an ethnological exhibit of unique interest," with its "genuinely southern negroes direct from the fields of Virginia and the Carolinas." The exhibit was a powerful manifestation of cultural stereotypes and affirmed the history of slavery that was being rewritten and restaged in popular fiction and in the theatre. Robert Toll asserts that "Black America" was a commercial success because "it embodied the ultimate in white fantasies about southern Negroes and brought the living proof to Northerners."²¹ The exhibit, like the southern-flavored nightclubs that followed gave whites the opportunity to, using David Krasner's phrase, "go Othering."²²

Like the Pirate's Den of Greenwich Village, these clubs were filled with numerous faux artifacts to give the impression of an authentic recreation of a nostalgic place and time, although they were clearly based on popular conceptions. The clubs denote what Stephen Fjellman calls an "authenticity inside inauthenticity."²³ That is, they adroitly captured the essence of a time and place that was already based on two-dimensional models of a highly

conjectural "real" South. But inside the restaurants and clubs, customers could take a respite from the complicated and hectic urban world of 1920s New York City and experience the simple and carefree existence of southern life about which they had read or seen on stage. Pocketed in the middle of a shifting and transforming landscape, where immigrants flooded daily and technological advances sprang forth at a dizzying pace, the clubs promised a familiar, stable, and insouciant environment. Social advancements, especially for women and African Americans, were gathering momentum at this time, and the tide of change seemed unceasing. The southern clubs and their harkening back to a romanticised, pre-slavery, genteel America offered a space for the possibility of, in Guy Debord's terminology, "suppressing history as history continued."²⁴

One of the first and most successful of these new clubs was Lew Leslie's Plantation Club, which previously had been the Folies Bergère restaurant above the Winter Garden Theatre on 50th Street and Broadway. Leslie bought the club, removed the French-style trappings, infused it with a southern plantation motif, and included a nightly floorshow. His goal was to provide a showcase for the talents of black vaudevillians, many of whom were currently playing in Shuffle Along on Broadway and attracting the admiration of white theatregoers. As patrons entered the Plantation Club, according to a description in Variety, they encountered a nostalgic "plantation and levee scene" that captured a similar vision of black life as Nat Salisbury's "Black America," except on a much smaller scale. Leslie's Plantation Club was furnished with log cabins, a picket fence surrounding the dance floor, a large watermelon moon hanging in a "twinkling summer sky," and inside one of the log cabins was a "special waffle counter" in which Aunt Jemima herself could regularly be seen "flipping flapjacks."²⁵ As Lewis Erenberg points out, the Plantation Club strategically coincided with the white fascination for black entertainment and indeed "anticipated the rise of Harlem as a nightlife zone for whites."²⁶

The club was an immediate success mostly as a result of Leslie's nightclub promotion schemes. Because of the numerous places competing for largely the same

crowd, Leslie needed to supplant a desire among club-goers to visit the Plantation Club over other, more-established nightclubs in the area. Shrewdly accommodating the rules of capitalism, Leslie recognized that for his product to sell--in this case the experience of his nightclub--he had to create a public demand for it. If the club were to find a clientele, then he had to market it as an instant hot-spot and assure itself a strong public opinion. As Daniel Boorstin writes, "Even if there [is] no opinion spontaneously expressed," then "elaborate new devices" must be effected to create a public demand.²⁷ Leslie effected this brilliantly by playing on New Yorkers' need to be at the forefront of the latest rage.

Jimmy Durante amusingly describes Leslie's marketing tactics in Nightclubs, his recounting of New York's late night entertainment of the 1920s and 1930s, and he demonstrates the cunning lengths Leslie went in order to assure the club's prosperity. As Durante indicates, Leslie, who later achieved fame on Broadway for his all-black revues, was the consummate showman. For several nights in a row after the newly de-Frenched Plantation Club's highly publicized "transformation," Leslie hung a thick velvet curtain just inside the doorway. Patrons wishing to gain entrance to the club could hear from where they stood on the street the torrid sounds of a jazz band and loud applause within, but they were told by imposing doormen that the room was already filled to capacity. Actually, though, there was not a single customer in the place, only the staff and entertainers. When the customers inquired about making reservations, they were informed that nothing was available for well into the future. This continued for a week or so, and naturally the ploy developed a huge curiosity among those who had been refused entry, and even more importantly, it created a need within New York's trendiest to be a part of that which they had been disallowed. Finally, Leslie opened the reservation list and the place was packed with people eager to find out what the supposed excitement was all about. Durante explained that, "Broadway has time only for a winner, and the Plantation looked like a knock-out to the people outside before a dollar had been rung up on the register."²⁸ The success of the club was sealed.

Other clubs in New York City followed suit, capitalizing on the southern-flavored fad Leslie developed. Like Leslie's Plantation Club, these Midtown nightclubs offered floorshows that featured black entertainers culled from vaudeville and Broadway shows. For instance, one of the most enduring was the Club Alabam, which opened in January 1924. The Club Alabam, a basement supperclub, was in the heart of the theatre district at 44th Street, between Seventh and Eighth Avenues. Its revue, called the "Creole Follies," was quite popular among the after-theatre crowd, and it helped make renowned black bandleader Fletcher Henderson a major attraction. Similarly, Duke Ellington found his way into show business via an ersatz southern nightclub. He was only 24 when he got his start in a 49th Street basement café called the Club Kentucky. Previously known as the Hollywood Cafe, and adopting a southern motif in 1925, the Club Kentucky had its own revue, and Fats Waller often played there.²⁹

It seemed, however, that within just a few years these Midtown clubs would become too "touristy" and lose their "exoticness" for well-to-do white New Yorkers, and they would look for true "black and tan" nightclubs. With time and the encroachment of the masses, they apparently recognized the fabricated quality of these southern-styled clubs that were nestled in the middle of Manhattan. Hence, they sought a more "authentic" experience elsewhere in the City. As Erenberg writes, "Just as whites had looked to the Village as a place to experience real life while keeping it at a distance, they did the same in Harlem, but with more dedication."³⁰ Places that could offer an even more exciting and undiluted adventure, which appeared in representations on the Broadway stage and in best-selling novels, could be found on any given night in Harlem. Even more attractively, these clubs, situated in the middle of a black neighborhood, promised the ultimate authentic experience. Yet as Daniel Boorstin paradoxically explains, "The tourist seldom likes the authentic (to him often unintelligible) product of the foreign culture: he prefers his own provincial expectations."³¹ What whites saw and experienced in Harlem corresponded with their own preconceived notions of an essential blackness. Spurred on by the increased visibility of

Blacks on stage and in literature, whites flocked to Harlem to see their particular fantasy embodied.

Rudolph Fisher, a notable black writer and physician, recounted the suddenness in which white New Yorkers invaded Harlem. In 1926 when Fisher returned to Harlem after living in Washington, D.C. for five years, he was shocked by what he encountered. Before leaving New York to pursue his studies in medicine, Fisher was a frequent visitor to the uptown clubs in the years immediately following World War I. He vividly recalled the countless nights he spent in the cafes and cabarets: drinking fifteen-cent bottles of illegal hooch at Connor's on 135th Street; hob-nobbing with the black war heroes and their radiant Brooklyn dates at the Lybia on 138th; dining at the Oriental on 136th Street with Bert Williams and Paul Robeson (then planning a career in law and not in the theatre); and gathering with his black cronies to hear Ethel Waters (before she was a star on Broadway) sing, "Tryin' to Teach My Good Man Right from Wrong." Occasionally he'd spot a small group of white people "out on a lark" at one of the clubs, but such occasions were rare. There were already a few nightclubs that catered to the "white trade," such as the Cotton Club, which Owen Madden opened for strictly white business in 1923, and Connie's Inn, originally named the Shuffle Inn after the famous revue, but the patrons generally did not venture beyond these locales and infiltrate the local establishments. In fact, whites were as likely to be seen in a black nightclub in Harlem as a black person was at the Plantation Club on top of the Winter Garden at 50th Street.

In the five years Fisher had been away, the setting remained largely unchanged: Most of his favorite clubs, albeit many with new names, appeared the same and still advertised lowdown blues and jazz. But inside, the clientele had mysteriously transformed. Returning to one of his favorite nightspots, Fisher quipped in "The Caucasian Storms Broadway":

I drew a deep breath and looked about, seeking familiar faces. "What a lot of 'fays!" I thought, as I noticed the number of white guests. Presently I

grew puzzled and began to stare, then I gaped--and gasped. I found myself wondering if this was the right place--if, indeed, this was Harlem at all. I suddenly became aware that, except for the waiters and members of the orchestra, I was the only Negro in the place.³²

As Fisher's account denotes, by 1926, the white attraction to Harlem was at its peak. It was the pinnacle of the era--to use Langston Hughes's description--"When the Negro Was in Vogue."³³

David Levering Lewis credits the origin of this trend with the opening of David Belasco's Broadway production of Lulu Belle. He writes: "If the sociology of vogues teaches that single events have complex antecedents, it was, with this qualification, Lulu Belle that sent whites straight to Harlem in unprecedented numbers for a taste of the real thing. Their arrival was so sudden that Harlem had to gallop in order to live up to its expectations."³⁴ Lulu Belle, which will serve as the basis of Chapter Three, was written by Edward Sheldon and Charles MacArthur, and it opened on Broadway on February 9, 1926. Although it proved to be one of the biggest Broadway hits of the decade, Lulu Belle, with its lusty heroine and "prurient" dances, disgusted several critics and prudish theatregoers. The play depicts the social ascent and then ultimate death of a black cabaret singer named Lulu Belle, and it developed a large following both on Broadway and on tour. Unquestionably, the highlight of the play was its third act reproduction of a Harlem cabaret. The act featured jazz numbers, dancing, and characters drinking plenty of bootlegged gin. Scrupulously recreating the atmosphere and physical layout of a "basement café," Belasco allowed the mostly white audiences a voyeuristic view of Harlem's thrilling nightlife. This version of "Negro community life" on-stage, as he called it, excited whites with the sense of abandon Belasco's fictional world promised, and they travelled uptown to experience the thrills for themselves. While in the nightclubs, they embodied and acted out the fantasies that were given form in the theatre downtown, and they subsequently

transferred upon the Harlem night life an authenticity derived from what they had seen in the theatre.

This fantasy of Harlem, as indicated by the Committee of Fourteen's subsequent reports, quickly assumed precedence over the actual circumstances of people who lived and worked in the neighborhood, as well as the image the community board tried to forward. The efforts in the press to reclaim Harlem's "realness," which itself was based an over-emphasized conception of an up-standing, Americanized, black middle-class community, were unavailing. Harlem had already become what Jean Baudrillard refers to as "hyperreal."³⁵ The effect was a funnyhouse of mirrors in which the popular representations of Harlem, the lived experiences of its residents, and the community's self-promotion continuously reflected back and forth upon each other and finally blurred the boundaries between the imaginary and the real.³⁶ Later in the year that Lulu Belle opened on Broadway, the process appeared to spin out of control with the release of one the most controversial works about black life ever.

In August 1926, Nigger Heaven³⁷ by white novelist and socialite Carl Van Vechten appeared in book stores across the country. The novel was an instant bestseller, and within just a few months, it went through nine printings. In addition, the novel's subsequent international success helped make Harlem an obligatory stop for tourists visiting New York City. Although the book was never adapted for the stage or film, its relationship to popular entertainment is not at all tangential. Its depiction of black life in Harlem had a tremendous impact on the way in which images of race were presented, perceived, and discussed in the era. As a result, nearly all of the African-American performers on Broadway and in the nightclubs of the 1920s were influenced, arguably both positively and adversely, by this novel. More importantly, the arguments it raised about cultural difference laid the groundwork for public discussions over African-American representations performed in a variety of venues.

In brief, the melodramatic plot concerns the tempestuous romance of two young African Americans, Byron Kason and Mary Love. Naive, beautiful Mary is a librarian and Byron a struggling writer, and the two develop a wholesome, deep love for one another. Byron, however, grows increasingly caustic from a lack of success selling his stories, and as his failure becomes more and more debilitating, he considers Mary's love smothering and patronizing. Soon after, he falls for the impetuous and exotic Lasca Sartoris who shows him the pleasures of the flesh and material wealth (as well as introducing him to Harlem's raucous night life). Eventually Lasca tires of Byron and dismisses him for Harlem's numbers king, or who now would be known as a "bookie," Randolph Pettijohn. When Pettijohn is killed in a nightclub by a Harlem "sheik" who is also angry at his taking Lasca away from him, Byron is circumstantially linked to the murder. Seeing no way out of this turn of events, Byron unloads his own pistol into the corpse of Pettijohn and succumbs to the law and his own fate. Thus ends the story of an idealistic young black man who comes to the Big City, but is destroyed by its callous indifference.

The responses to the book culminated in perhaps one of the most contentious debates over black representation in American history and demonstrated the deep divisions within the community that had been brought about by the advancing white invasion. The driving force had splintered the community along class and racial lines, and it seemed to be unstoppable. If Baudrillard is correct when he states that "*it is now impossible to isolate the process of the real, or to prove the real.*"³⁸ the opponents of Van Vechten who tried to stave off the invasion and forward their "true" version of black life in Harlem were doomed from the beginning. Public impressions of an authentic black identity, already a site for de-essentializing debate, were calcifying under the effects of the imbroglio. The battle that ensued, mostly in the press, was an attempt to negotiate and redefine the black identity, all sides holding claims on the definition of the "real." The participants in this identity and literary war wished to banish the stereotypical way in which they were represented and

viewed by whites, and replace these images with an actualization of their own imagined identities.

It should be noted that some Blacks in the community did not object to the book nor its contents. They appreciated the publicity the book provided and thought that negative, or at best, patronizing attention, was better than none at all. Of course, those who made careers from or capitalized on the white attention to Harlem, such as entertainers, wait-staff, busboys, and others who found employment in the clubs, did not object to the notoriety it brought to the community. A large vocal black contingent, however, was incensed by the book's publication. This did not, as Stephen Watson points out, stop some from reading the novel surreptitiously, which they did by covering it in paper "as if the book were pornography."³⁹ They believed their community had been betrayed and exploited by Van Vechten, whom they had treated with the greatest hospitality as he did his "research."⁴⁰ In fact, Andy Razaf pokes fun at Van Vechten's methodological explorations in his tongue-in-cheek song, "Go Harlem." The lyric includes the line: "So, like Van Vechten./ Start inspectin' /Go, Harlem, go Harlem, go."⁴¹ Harlemites scorned Van Vechten's sensationalized portrait of their community, and unsuccessfully tried to ban him from visiting Harlem.

The anger engendered by the book tended to stem from the offensiveness of its title. Yet Van Vechten vociferously claimed that he did not intend the term to offend--perhaps he wished for it to shock--but he used "Nigger Heaven" ironically, both as a theatrical allusion and as a metaphor for Harlem. The metatheatrical and metaphorical references actually point to and perpetuate Harlem as a cultural hall of mirrors. Embedded within it are the numerous possibilities of a "real" Harlem. On a literal level, the term refers to the second balcony in downtown theatres, where blacks were relegated when they attended a Broadway show. The packing of black people into the gallery, requiring them to use separate doors and unadorned stairways, which contrasted with the ornate passageways leading to the orchestra and mezzanine sections of Broadway theatres, was a powerful social reminder of

their status (incidentally, these characteristics are still evident in the existing Broadway theatres built around the turn-of-the-century). Even when the whites in the orchestra and mezzanine below were joyously applauding an all-black show like Shuffle Along, the theatrical spaces dictated, or better yet, "disciplined" in Foucauldian parlance, the great racial divide.⁴²

On another level, Van Vechten's title points to the neighborhood as a segregated section for Blacks, situated geographically at the top of Manhattan Island. Although the title suggests an empyrean quality of this community and its separation, in Van Vechten's binary, from the bland, "colorless," life of a monolithic white middle-class populating the rest of Manhattan, the novel ironically presents Harlem as an over-crowded enclave for its black residents. The central character of the novel, Byron, articulates this in an oft-quoted passage from the novel:

We sit in our places in the gallery of this New York theatre and watch the white world sitting down below in the good seats in the orchestra.

Occasionally they turn their faces up towards us, their hard, cruel faces, to laugh or sneer, but they never beckon. It doesn't seem to occur to them that Nigger Heaven is crowded, that there isn't another seat, that something has to be done.⁴³

Unfortunately, Van Vechten's social commentary is lost within the melodramatic proceedings of the book. Overpowered by the exciting and vibrant nightclub scenes, which include the exploits of black gangsters, loose women, and dedicated revelers, Byron's rant seems more like sour grapes than a social indictment. This point is particularly obvious when Lasca Sartoris, the hedonistic harpy, tells Byron that black people have no reason to complain about their circumstances. In fact, she argues that they should take advantage of the fawning attitudes of whites when she says: "Negroes aren't any worse off than anybody else. They're better off if anything. They have the same privileges white women had before the bloody fools got the ballot. They're considered irresponsible like children

and treated with special fondness."⁴⁴ According to Lasca, claims for social equality merely bring about increased responsibility. In her view, the protective subjugation and sweet condescension of the white patriarchy should be capitalized on, not disturbed.

Because the novel accommodated and justified the social status quo of 1926, it is not surprising that the white critical responses to Nigger Heaven were generally favorable. The Saturday Review, for instance, praised the book, calling it a "frontier work" for its honest and true depiction of African Americans. The International Book Review concurred, complimenting Van Vechten's ability to go "beneath the skin of another people" in his portrayals.⁴⁵ Incidentally, several cities, including a notoriously puritanical Boston (which also prohibited a production of Lulu Belle because of its "pornographic" content), banned the book for its emphasis on vice. Nevertheless, white critics on the whole generally applauded Van Vechten's essentialist and "authentic" depiction of a black identity, which was characterized as exotic, predatory, and primitive. This representation is most strongly enunciated by the civilized, virginal Mary Love, who has the ability to suppress her "primitive birthright." Because of this she is tragically an outsider within her own race as she expresses: "This love of drums, of exciting rhythms, this naive delight in glowing colour that exists only in cloudless climes--this warm, sexual emotion, all these were hers only through mental understanding. . . . We are all savages, she repeated to herself, all, apparently, but me!"⁴⁶ Mary's particular tragedy is that she is a black woman who does not know how to be black, and she is always on the margins of the astonishing events that occur. The good, decent, "civilized" black characters are overwhelmed by the sensationalism at the book's core. As Nathan Irvin Huggins rightly argues, "the novel became a best seller precisely because it pandered to the sensationalism demanded by the white vogue in black primitivism."⁴⁷

In his defense, Van Vechten never intended to exploit nor insult his black hosts: in fact he had envisioned "taking up the Chinese and the Jews" in future fictional exposés (he never did).⁴⁸ He was a patron to several black artists, including Langston Hughes, and he

championed black causes in his Vanity Fair columns. But the side of Harlem about which he chose to write was the only side he felt he could record. As Leon Coleman writes:

[Van Vechten] was completely uninterested in examining the life and values of the urban middle classes whether white or black. He once remarked that he found middle-class life to be as dull in fiction as it is in reality. [...] Also Van Vechten had few contacts with ordinary members of the conservative Negro middle class, who did not enter into the orbit of his social activities either at parties or in cabarets. When he left Harlem in the morning, middle-class wage-earners were preparing to go to work. In not attempting to portray them, Van Vechten was faithful to his own exhortation; he did not write about a subject with which he was unfamiliar.⁴⁹

Yet in an era when black identity was being forged, and positive images were at a premium, Van Vechten must have known that his unflattering portrayal would arouse the ire of many in the community. At this time when writers, philosophers, and entertainers were attempting to wage battle against black exotica, Van Vechten reinvigorated these images and stirred the imaginations of white tourists.

The black intelligentsia of the era effectively tried to arrest what W.T. Lhamon, Jr. describes as "the white control [over] the power of racial definition."⁵⁰ but the characterizations and narrative threatened a cycle of representation that Harriet Beecher Stowe's Uncle Tom's Cabin had put into play in the previous century. Just as the cultural stereotypes of that book were recycled on stage and in the popular imagination, the representations in Nigger Heaven were personified in the nightclubs, musical shows, and plays in New York and other cities across the United States. A blunt example of the circulation of the title and its images is in George S. Oppenheimer and Alfred Nathan Jr.'s jaunty song "Nigger Heaven Blues," which appeared in two different musical revues of 1927, Odds and Ends of 1927 and The Manhatters. In each case, the song was set in a cabaret scene and performed by whites in blackface, submerging even further black agency

within its representations. The lyrics capture the rag-tag, seductive spirit of the novel, and include the line, "High yaller girls, choc'late and buff/ Doing their stuff, doing it rough/ Oh boy, I got the Nigger Heaven Blues."⁵¹ As I will explore in later chapters, black entertainers also performed these exceedingly racialized and sexualized stereotypes on the popular stages. Yet as Homi Bhabha argues, this reinscription of such stereotypes allows an opportunity for intervention that can effectively empower a transforming community, such as Harlem of the 1920s.

According to identity theorists, debates surrounding "cultural difference" may actually open up spaces for negotiating identifications. In The Location of Culture, Bhabha emphasizes the necessity "to focus on those moments or processes that are produced in the articulation of cultural differences." He explains, "These 'in-between' spaces provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood--singular or communal--that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself."⁵² The controversy surrounding Nigger Heaven reflects the splits and fragmentation of the minority culture. It is a clear manifestation of what deconstructionists have called the "decentering" and "fractionating" of the psyches of marginalized individuals.⁵³ Rebecca Schneider, for example, says that the "racism inherent in primitivism" contributes a direct "reference to the fragmentation of identity," in that racial stereotypes call immediate attention to the dichotomy of "self" and "others."⁵⁴

Even more relevant to this discussion, however, is the way in which the split subjectivity of black minorities is rehearsed in W.E.B. Du Bois's definition of African Americans' "double consciousness." He writes:

It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness,--an American, a Negro: two souls, two thoughts, two

unreconciled strivings: two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.⁵⁵

Du Bois's notion of the cleft African-American subject coincides with a divided Harlem of the 1920s. While critics and reporters of the era attempted to depict it as a community united by racial commonalities, the response to Nigger Heaven attested to the depth of the fissures with which it was bisected.

The site for the battle took place in the black journals and newspapers, and the black intelligentsia and religious figures were its main warriors. On one hand, some derided the novel for its emphasis on the exotic, primitive, and devil-may-care lifestyle of the Harlemites; while on the other, some claimed that its propagandistic and generally sympathetic portrayal of African Americans provided much appreciated visibility to the black community. Two of the most vocal participants in this debate were James Weldon Johnson, a statesman, lawyer, songwriter, and novelist, and essayist and intellectual, W.E.B. Du Bois, the acknowledged leader of the Harlem Renaissance.

Johnson, a good friend of Van Vechten's, championed the novel in the black journal Opportunity, and he pointed to the multi-faceted presentation of Harlem in the novel. In his review, he applauds Van Vechten as the first white novelist to portray Harlem life not as a single experience, and he says the author presents "the components of that life from the dregs to the froth." Johnson sees the book as a truthful, non-manipulative narrative and a genuine documentary of Harlem, but at the same time, one which is literary and artful. Commenting on Van Vechten's treatment of Harlem's less wholesome elements, Johnson writes:

The scenes of gay life, of night life, the glimpses of the underworld, with all their tinsel, their licentiousness, their depravity serve actually to set off in sharper relief the decent, cultured, intellectual life of Negro Harlem. But all these phases of life, good and bad, are merely the background for the story, and the story is the love life of Byron Kasson and Mary Love.⁵⁶

Johnson maintains that the book is surely going to be "widely read," and will undoubtedly "arouse much discussion." Understanding that some people will have difficulty getting beyond the title and try to talk knowingly about the book anyway, he concludes: "This reviewer would suggest reading the book before discussing it."⁵⁷

In his scathing review in the Crisis (also a black journal), Du Bois never mentions James Weldon Johnson by name, but he responds to Johnson's appraisal point by point. He refers to the book as "a blow in the face" to the black community. Although he objects to the title, he says that that is the least of the novel's offenses (he asserts, "But after all, a title is only a title"). In particular, Du Bois condemns the book for being an unflattering and false representation of Harlem. Assuming the opposite of Johnson's position, he calls the work's portrait of black life a "caricature" which "is worse than untruths because it is a mass of half-truths." He explains: "Probably some time and somewhere in Harlem every incident of the book has happened; and yet the resultant picture built out of these parts is ludicrously out of focus and undeniably misleading."⁵⁸ He defiantly refutes any allegation that the depiction of Harlem is fair and balanced, and he posits a critique of the white, one-sided perception of Harlem, which focuses only on its scandalous images. He writes:

[Van Vechten] is an authority on dives and cabarets. But he masses this knowledge without rule or reason and seeks to express all of Harlem life in its cabarets. To him the black cabaret is Harlem; around it all his characters gravitate. [. . .] Such a theory of Harlem is nonsense. The overwhelming majority of black folk never go to cabarets. The average colored man in Harlem is an everyday laborer, attending church, lodge and movie and as conservative and as conventional as ordinary working folk everywhere.⁵⁹

In a conclusion that seems to answer Johnson's appeal for people to read the book, Du Bois says: "I read Nigger Heaven and read it through because I had to. But I advise others who are impelled by a sense of duty or curiosity to drop the book gently in the grate and to try the Police Gazette."⁶⁰

Du Bois's argument that the title was not a metaphor for Harlem, as Van Vechten posited, but rather a synecdochical archetype, was reiterated by community and religious leaders, who mourned the adverse effect it had on the neighborhood. They viewed such works as Lulu Belle and Nigger Heaven and their depiction of Harlem as a "paradise for cheap sport" with dismay. This was a small element of Harlem life, they argued, and the more dominant "good" and "decent" side of their neighborhoods was ignored. Reverend William Lloyd Imes, a pastor of St. James' Church, asked:

Would white folk like to be judged by their cheapest and vilest products of society? Do they feel flattered by the sordid, degrading life brought out in our courts? Those who really know Negro Harlem find its good, decent homes, its schools, its churches, its beginning of business enterprises, artists, musicians, poets, and scholars, influential civic organizations, modern newspapers and magazines published and controlled by the race, all of which is a veritable romance in itself.¹

And in an amusing and ironic piece for the Messenger, George S. Schuyler wrote that Harlem had very recently earned a degree of respect for its growing number of intellectuals, writers, and poets. But he claims that these achievements have been nearly forgotten due to the interest in the vulgar nightlife. Facetiously, he states that Carl Van Vechten and David Belasco would soon be participating in a public debate to determine who is "most entitled to be known as the Santa Claus of Black Harlem, a community described as the Mecca of the New Negro but lately called 'Nigger Heaven.'" Poking fun at Belasco and Van Vechten's capitalization on black life and their self-serving "support" of black literary and cultural life, he concludes, "both contestants are well known for their contributions to the Fund for the Relief of Starving Negro Intelligentsia and for their frequent explorations of the underground life north of 125th Street."²

If Baudrillard's dictum that "the definition of the real becomes: *that of which it is possible to give an equivalent reproduction*"³ is accurate, then the images of the

"underground life north of 125th Street" perpetuated by Van Vechten were absolutely real and infinitely reproducible. The difficulty lay in the ability to make each subsequent reproduction more authentic than the previous. People wanted to partake of the community as it was represented in such works, but ironically, many tourists wanted it to seem as if they were discovering an authentic, non-white inflected version of the community (i.e., a non-touristy rendition). As evident in society pages and international travel accounts, they insisted on penetrating an exotic and unexplored black Harlem that most whites had not yet discovered.

An article from 1929 printed in the Jamaican Mail, a Kingston, Jamaica newspaper, offers one of the most powerful evocations of this desire to experience the real, untainted Harlem. The author of the piece, Viscountess Weymouth, writes that since reading Nigger Heaven, she has wanted to experience Harlem. "this colourful Mecca of jazz, high spirits and drama." Fortuitously, she met Carl Van Vechten at her first party in New York, and he "promised that he himself would unlock the ebony gates of Nigger Heaven" to her and her unidentified travelling companions. Their first stop was Connie's Inn where she saw a not very satisfying musical revue. Her disillusionment with Connie's arose from the fact that except for the waiters and entertainers (she was quite impressed in particular by "a beautiful negress" who performed "an exotically barbaric dance"), there were nearly no "coloured people in the room." She states sadly: "I was disappointed; the whole atmosphere was so obviously faked to lure the tourist." The club lacked the authentic environment that typified her reading of the novel. Her spirits rose, however, with their arrival at the Sugar Cane, which figures prominently as the model for Van Vechten's fictional "Black Venus" speakeasy in Nigger Heaven. Upon entering, she thought the place empty, but then "realized that black faces were beginning to extricate themselves from the dark background." She recounts the scene with a cinematic detachment, almost as an ethnographer recording her observations on the behavior of her black subjects: "All of them dance beautifully, but violently, keeping quite still about the shoulders and swaying from

the hips. When the band stopped they again faded quietly into darkness.”⁶⁴ All in all, she was more than satisfied by her trip to this club because the speakeasy lived up to the expectations established by Van Vechten’s novel.

Her evening concluded at an unnamed, carefully secluded pub. At first she was anxious and afraid as she entered the dimly lit club. She notes, “It was crowded with dusky faces; ours were conspicuous as the only white ones. I do not think we should have been admitted had Mr. Van Vechten not been there.” Her initial fright enacted Georges Bataille’s description of the terror that accompanies the encountering of the “overly real.”⁶⁵ In her description of the cave-like space, she descended into the locus of primitive black signification. In fact, she regarded the club as so covert and genuine, she was careful not to disclose its name or exact location. Publicizing it in her account would destroy the ineffable dark secrets she had learned. The sense of excitement and lawlessness of the scene was heightened by the “well-stocked bar” that greeted her upon entering, for as she reminded her readers, the United States at this time was “the land of prohibition.” Her fear finally dissipated and her sense of security returned later in the nighttime when a white policeman strolled in, “had a drink,” and left “happy.”

To Weymouth, this club was the most educational and pleasing of all her stops, as she could also watch black people interacting in an environment untainted by white intrusion (except for Van Vechten’s guided party, of course). She recalled listening to “St. Louis Blues” “wailing” around her, and within the music she detected an essential black spiritual quality that Alain Locke poetically referred to as “an epic intensity and a tragic profundity of emotional experience.”⁶⁶ Weymouth described the music as, “the broken, melancholy chant of a race of slaves, alive with a throbbing rhythm running through it, and breaking free at the close, dominant and virile.”⁶⁷ Her tour concluded with a breakfast of waffles and fried chicken at the speakeasy, and she and her small party of whites left the club after dawn. Cynical observers, as well as a significant segment of the black

community, referred to this particular version of Harlem as "Van Vechtenland," one that was created and strengthened in the white imagination.

Yet whites were not the only ones to plumb Harlem for its exotic and sensational narratives. Black authors including Wallace Thurman and Claude McKay sparked the indignation of some in the Harlem community for perpetuating and capitalizing on the images whites expected from the neighborhood. When Thurman and Rapp's Harlem opened on Broadway in 1929, for example, Variety reported that the actors were concerned that the "real Harlem" would be upset with the play, especially "the better class people." The article also points out, though, that "No objection is expected from the people . . . who run the nite clubs and black and tans." The play, which did not contain any scenes in a nightclub, did focus on the raucousness of the neighborhood after dark, especially in its depiction of a rent party.⁶⁸

Before examining Thurman and Rapp's play, brief mention should be made of other works that prominently featured Harlem as its setting. In 1928, the year before Harlem opened on Broadway, poet and novelist Claude McKay's Home to Harlem became the first bestseller by an African American.⁶⁹ The novel, which concerned a black man's quest for romance and personal fulfillment in New York City, drew mixed praise and also questioned its depiction of "real" Harlem. White critics applauded its accurate delineation, calling it, "the real thing in rightness. . . the lowdown on Harlem, the dope from the inside." And black poet, novelist, and playwright Langston Hughes considered it a milestone for black writers telling McKay, "Undoubtedly it is the finest thing 'we've' done yet. . . Your novel ought to give a second youth to the Negro Vogue." But conservative black critics such as W.E.B. Du Bois were much more critical. Du Bois objected to the novel, claiming that the emphasis on Harlem's nightlife and the protagonist's numerous accounts of trysts with loose black women reinscribed racial stereotypes. As he pithily explained in his review, Home to Harlem made him "feel unclean and in need of a bath."⁷⁰

Yet the novel's raw, youthful energy and the fascinating journey of the troubled, anti-heroic protagonist retain their power even today.

On stage, Harlem was also the setting for numerous sketches and musical numbers from black musicals and revues on Broadway. In 1929 alone, the same year that Thurman and Rapp's play opened, three such shows appeared. The first, Deep Harlem, with a score by Joe Jordan, Homer Tutt, and Henry Creamer, and a libretto by Tutt and Salem Whitney (all of the creators were black, incidentally, a rarity on Broadway at the time), was an ambitious musical chronicle of black life. In a parade of songs, dances, and short dramatic sketches, Tutt and Whitney attempted to trace the history of African Americans from "ancient Abyssinia, the African desert, the jungle, the slave ship, the slave market" through 1920s Savannah, Georgia to "the cabarets and streets of Harlem." Audiences and critics disliked the "grotesque mumbo-jumbo" of the Africa scenes, but responded favorably to the much more jazz-infused Harlem numbers that did not arrive until late in the second act. In a review that pointed to the blurred boundaries between Broadway's version of Harlem and the Harlem encountered by white tourists, Variety reported: "What follows is typical Harlem, with some of the gals from Connie's [Inn] to speed and color it up and give it authenticity, and there the show is always at home--as Harlem is always at home in Times Square and Times Square is always at home in Harlem."⁷¹ The segment was not enough to guarantee the show an audience: Deep Harlem barely ran a week.

Later in the same year, Hot Chocolates, subtitled "A New Tanskin Revel," came to Broadway after a successful run at Connie's Inn night club (where the show was called Hot Feet). With a score by Thomas "Fats" Waller, Andy Razaf, and Harry Brooks, the revue boasted such hits as "Ain't Misbehavin'," "Black and Blue," and "Sweet Savannah Sue." The show's lengthy opening sequence recreated the famous Connie's Inn environment, complete with head waiter, doorman, waiters, audience, musicians, and entertainers. The critics were somewhat divided in their responses to the show; one referred to it as the "Best Negro Revue Since Blackbirds" [the popular Lew Leslie revue Blackbirds

of 1928], another called it "childish prattle," and although the above-mentioned songs are now considered pop and jazz standards, one critic wrote that it was "woefully lacking in tunes."⁷² Nevertheless, audiences loved it, and the show helped establish an international reputation for Connie's Inn, Harlem's other premier white-trade nightclub (or one which disallowed black patrons)--the first being the Cotton Club. The third show, Bamboola, fared poorly, whimpering through just three weeks on Broadway. The libretto of the show centered around a young woman from Savannah who arrives in New York to appear in a musical revue. The highlight, according to the New York Post, was its reproduction of a Harlem rent party in which residents threw a party, charged admission, and paid the landlord with the proceeds.⁷³ Otherwise, the flimsy plot and songs were generally trite, unnecessary, and lackluster. Yet, the novelty of presenting a rent party, a Harlem institution in the 1920s, on stage would figure prominently, and to much greater advantage, in Thurman and Rapp's play.

"City of Refuge, City of Refuse"

When Harlem opened on Broadway on February 20, 1929, Whitney Bolton, a critic for the New York Telegraph, called the play "the most unretouched and, therefore, the most accurate of the photographs made at Seventh avenue and 132d street." To Bolton, the photographic accuracy of the play extended to the treatment of its socially realistic characters as well: "The dark man of Manhattan Island and his girl of tantalizin' tan receive here the consideration and study that no play which touched them has had before this work of William Jourdan Rapp and Wallace Thurman was written."⁷⁴ Other New York critics also praised the production's veracity within its dramatic framework. One critic found the muddled melodramatic plot rather contrived, but said that "it is the many bits of authentic [N]egro life and Harlem color that make it humanly novel and interesting." Similarly Alison Smith pointed out that even when the "feeble and disjointed" plot lagged in spots, "there [was] always the sense of an authentic picture" of black life, and Brooks Atkinson of the

New York Times wrote, "As [N]egro melodrama, Harlem has a ring of authenticity that comes from the negro influence in its authorship."⁷⁵ The generally mixed reviews of the play notwithstanding, most of the responses in the press pointed to the impressive skill in which the neophyte, white director Chester Erskin and the playwrights, one black and one white, recreated Harlem life on the Apollo stage on 43rd Street (which was distinct from Harlem's Apollo Theatre on 125th Street, which opened in 1934).

Although it was not the phenomenal success that Lulu Belle had been in 1926, Harlem turned a profit in the nine months that it ran on Broadway, and it spawned a national tour. The play was the brainchild of Thurman, a black author and major literary voice in the Harlem Renaissance and who is best-known today for his novels The Blacker the Berry... (1929) and Infants of the Spring (1932), both of which also depict Harlem life. Because he considered himself primarily an essayist, short story writer, and novelist, Thurman enlisted the help of writer and friend William Jourdan Rapp when he decided to write a three-act play about the experiences of a representative black family in Harlem. Rapp, a former feature writer for the New York Times and editor for True Story Magazine, had written two novels, a play called Osman Pasha (1925), and collaborated on several others. The basis for the play is Thurman's short story "Cordelia the Crude," which he wrote for the 1926 black journal Fire!!⁷⁶ After a difficult time finding backers for their play, Rapp and Thurman finally had it produced on Broadway by twenty-five-year-old and first-time white producer, Edward A. Blatt. It was directed by Chester Erskin (spelled "Erskine" in several of the reviews), who was also twenty-five years old.

The physical production received generally favorable reviews, but the script was certainly not hailed as a masterpiece of craftsmanship. Many critics remarked that it was serviceable, but its tone and style were inconsistent and seemed to go in several different directions at once. Indeed, as indicated by the snippets from the reviews quoted above, Harlem is a "cobbling together" of familiar dramatic genres, including melodrama, social realism, and black folk play. But the awkward merging of these forms did not prohibit

spectators from perceiving an "authentic" image of black Harlem. As evidenced by the reactions in the popular press, in between the structural junctures of these dramaturgical forms there were flashes—or ephemeral photographic snapshots—of presumably "natural" black behavior, "authentic" Harlem sights and sounds, and "real" black Harlemites (as opposed to actors) at work and play. Indeed, judging by the reactions in the popular criticism of the play, there were moments when the audience believed it had been transported to the heart of Harlem while sitting comfortably in a Broadway theatre in the heart of Times Square. For this reason, Broadway's Apollo Theatre on 43rd Street where Thurman and Rapp's play ran became what Jane Desmond refers to as a "transitional space."⁷⁷ That is, the production reconstructed the "authentic" milieu and allowed a privileged view of the Harlem community outside of its geographical borders for the education and entertainment of its mostly white audiences. The effects of this reconstruction reaffirmed the "truth" of those images for Broadway theatregoers, but at the same time, they also potentially pointed to the constructedness of those images in the "real" Harlem.

In brief, the plot of Harlem centers around the Williams family, a poor and struggling black family in Harlem, and the tumultuous events that arise from a raucous rent party in their home one Saturday in late November. The play also includes a hard-boiled, young black woman who will stop at nothing in her quest for wealth and fame, gun-shooting gangsters, the murder of an oily gambler, the subsequent frame-up of a hard-working, young black man, and proper justice as generated by a shrewd white detective.⁷⁸ But at the core of the melodramatic maelstrom and musical mayhem is a modest black family trying to eek out a life in this strange, new neighborhood. The audience learns within the first few minutes of the play that the family is new to Harlem, having only recently come north. The idealistic oldest son, Jasper, had recognized the numerous job opportunities that New York's industrial center promised, moved there with his own wife and children, and shortly afterward summoned his extended family to this "City of Refuge"

from their economic and racial oppression in the deep South. Of course, the promises of a better life have been unfulfilled, as articulated by the family’s matriarch, referred to only as “Mother,” who calls Harlem a “City of Refuse.” She proclaims:

City of Refuge! Dat’s what you wrote an’ told us. Harlem is de City of Refuge. Is yo’ shure you don’ mean City of Refuse? Dat’s all dere is heah. De people! Dese dark houses made out of de devil’s brick, piled up high an’ crowdin’ one another an’ smellin’ worse dan our pig pen did back home in summer. City of Refuge! You--I--God, have mercy on our souls.⁷⁹

From the outset, this ambivalence toward Harlem is at the heart of the play and recalls the situation in the real-life neighborhood. But the tension between the “actual” conditions and the presumed conditions, or those that whites knew through familiar images, is defused onstage for theatregoers as it was for tourists visiting the district after-dark. On the one hand, the economic and social situation of the family is rather miserable, but on the other, the sensational and riotous atmosphere belies this attitude. Similarly, as Gilbert Osofsky writes about thrill-seekers exploring the neighborhood in the nighttime: “Had these people arrived at noon and inspected a rat-infested tenement, their image of the gay Negro might have been changed; yet American racial consciousness refused to recognize any but the supposedly joyous side of Negro culture.”⁸⁰

Subtitled “An Episode of Life in New York’s Black Belt,” Harlem intended to present an authentic view of the neighborhood from an inside perspective. As responses in the black press confirmed, however, this “view” catered to that of its mostly white spectators. According to a report in the New York Age, an African-American publication, the play’s press representative said that no advance publicity nor opening night tickets were sent to the black press because the “show was primarily for ‘white consumption.’”⁸¹ It was presumably intended to give whites an insider’s view of Harlem that black people would not need to see since they lived it. The black press did attend, however, and the criticism surrounding the play echoed that which greeted Nigger Heaven three years before.

Reactions to Harlem in the black press once again stimulated the debate over visibility-at-all costs versus the propagation of positive black images. For example, Theophilus Lewis remarked on the equality of the play’s black representations, presented within a dramatic form typically reserved for whites. That is, the play presents melodramatic black characters the same way in which white characters would be presented in a similar kind of play. Rather than addressing an essential black difference in the drama, which plays about “exotic” black life tended to do, Lewis believed that the playwrights fashioned a play around “ordinary” individuals. He wrote, “Its characters are not abnormal people presented in an appealing light but everyday people exaggerated and pointed up for the purpose of melodrama.” Salem Tutt Whitney of the Chicago Defender, on the other hand, descried the exaggerated quality as harmful to developing racial attitudes. In an argument similar to Du Bois’s about Van Vechten’s novel, he said:

There is no denying the fact that “Harlem” possesses dramatic value. It moves swiftly. Events take place in rapid succession that sometimes thrill and always entertain. But it is impossible for us to like the story. It is the Race situation that furnishes the ground for my objection. Most of the white people who see “Harlem” say, and are anxious to say, that it is a true portrayal of Race life. They do not say one phase of our Race life. To me it is not realism, it is exaggeration. And thereby we are condemned as a race.⁸²

Yet as these reviews depict, the most fascinating aspect of the play is the way in which it combines both “exaggerated” and “realistic” images of black life. The play’s varied dramaturgical approaches reflect the constantly transforming terrain of Harlem and the futility of defining an “authentic” blackness. Instead, it points to the fragmentation and hybridity of a black identity shifting and buckling under the weight of excessive conflicting representations. Employing Bhabha’s terminology, examining the “in-between spaces” of

the extremes of "realism" and "exaggeration" shows the impossibility of claiming a "truth" for a particular race of people.⁸³

"Chant Another Song of Harlem"

Framed by a rather hackneyed melodramatic structure, the underlying motive for the play is undoubtedly its presumed presentation of naturalness and unfettered scenes from black life. To this end, the play celebrated difference, but it also reaffirmed white superiority. This was accomplished in a few subtle ways. First, it evoked the often squalid conditions in which many of the residents lived, attempting to arouse the social consciousness of its mostly white audiences. Second, whites could sit in their orchestra seats and study the customs and behavior of the Blacks on-stage, but at the same time, they also maintained a comfortable social distance in the theatre. The play allowed whites an opportunity to penetrate black life, but within a conventionally controlled environment. The proscenium framed and focused their observations, and they did not need to fear that their gaze would be returned. The segregated theatre conditions also ensured a safe distance from the social reality. The irony of this is evident in a letter that Wallace Thurman wrote to his Harlem collaborator William Jourdan Rapp: "Five different times I have bought seats for myself to see Harlem--including opening night--and tho I asked for center aisle seats (as much as a week in advance) not yet have I succeeded in not being put on the side in a little section where any other Negro who happened to buy an orchestra seat was also placed."⁸⁴ Audiences could gawk at the black actors on-stage, but they were not compelled to come into contact with them from their unobstructed and comfortable positions in the socially hierarchical Broadway theatres. Under these circumstances, Harlem on Broadway offered a privileged view of Harlem that few audience members would have had the opportunity to see in real-life.

Most of the play occurs in the Williams' household, a five-room, 132nd Street railroad flat, which the family shares with several tenants. The setting's careful attention to

physical and atmospheric detail, as described in the stage descriptions, pictures from the production, and critical responses, demonstrates the way in which the production strove for photographic realism of a Harlem flat. Reconstructed in a highly naturalistic manner, the apartment is in need of repair, "feebly lit," and constantly assaulted by outside noises such as the screeches of clothes line pulleys, screaming and cursing neighbors, and the "salacious moans of a deep toned blues singer" emanating from a nearby Victrola. The audience is constantly reminded that the Williams' home is cramped and the rest of the neighborhood is closing in on it, invoking the crowded living conditions of the community. While people visiting the neighborhood chalked these actual conditions up to a sense of kinship among the residents, in reality, this overcrowdedness of Harlem was a result of the high rents. Rents were proportionately much higher in Harlem than in the rest of New York, and residents were forced to take as many tenants as they could to cover the costs. Apartments that had been previously single-family homes before the black invasion, had been sold for far more than they were worth. Because black people were faced with tremendous barriers if they chose to move into a non-black neighborhood, they desired to be a part of this community. Harlem was regarded as a "City of Refuge," and they willingly bought into the neighborhood. Nevertheless, they were forced to accommodate additional boarders to defray the cost of mortgages and rent. As Herbert Gutman records, by 1925, "about half of all black households had one or more lodgers in them, and about one in five households had one or more relatives other than members of the immediate family."⁸⁵

The careful attention to details of the environment (within the confines of the Williams' home as well as its relationship to the "real" Harlem) is indicative of the play's claim to naturalism. The description of the set, for example, seems to be a direct imitation of Strindberg's "backdrop-at-an-angle" design that enhanced the naturalistic effect of Miss Julie. In the stage descriptions for Harlem, the playwrights say that the living room of the Williams' home is to be constructed "on a slant in relation to the footlights, so that the end

of the rear wall on the right is nearer the front wall on the left."⁸⁶ Because this gives the sense that the walls are literally closing in on the characters (from the audience's standpoint anyway), the design would reduce the playing space, causing the flat to appear crowded and too small for the family and the several lodgers. More importantly, however, is the sense that the play offered a wholly different view of Harlem. The effect of this slanted depiction of the Harlem home would be what Strindberg called "an unfamiliar perspective" for the audience.⁸⁷ In an effort to present a definitive version of the "truth" to its audiences, the play's naturalistic setting offered a perspective of Harlem seldom seen by white people. Indeed, with the opening of Thurman and Rapp's play, the final, unexplored territory of Harlem had been invaded--a private home of several of its residents--and the most "authentic" view possible of the lives of black people in Harlem could be disclosed to its white audiences.

Through this heightened realism and overt claims of "authenticity," Thurman and Rapp wanted to galvanize new images of African Americans and the neighborhood. Previously, works using the neighborhood as its setting tended to depict its public spaces, such as the streets, nightclubs, and speakeasies. But Harlem not only offered a view of the neighborhood after-hours, it also depicted a domestic side of the community. As Una Chaudhuri says in her discussion of stage naturalism, this manner of disclosure of the private within a public sphere allows for a theatre of "total visibility," or one which promises to "deliver the whole truth" of the world it unmasks.⁸⁸ Even though the play's exposure of a private realm pointed to the dire economic and social situation of the neighborhood's residents, its emphasis on crime, jazz, and sultry dancing also revealed the depths of the presumed mysterious, exotic world of lower class black people that whites relished. The realistic scenic design and staging exposed the peripheries of the primitive, unrestrained behavior of black people in their natural setting.

The play's heightened realism and presumed authenticity also stemmed from the careful attention applied to the dialogue. The playwrights went to great lengths to capture

the speech patterns and singular phrases of the neighborhood and to further portray the foreignness of Harlem. To this end, they liberally peppered the script with "genuine" bits of dialogue supposedly spoken by native Harlemites. The "Glossary of Harlemisms" (an authenticating device Carl Van Vechten employed in Nigger Heaven) listed in the playbill included twenty-four terms in order for white audiences not to feel alienated by the language. A few examples include:

SWEETBACK--A colored gigolo, or man who lives off women.

DICTY--Highbrow.

MONKEY-HIP-EATER--A derisive name applied to a Barbados Negro: supposed to have originated with the myth that Barbados Negroes are passionately fond of monkey meat, particularly "monkey hips with dumplings."

CHIPPY--A tart; a fly, indiscriminating young wench.

MESS-AROUND--A whirling dance; a part of the Charleston.

38 AND 2--That's fine.

FORTY--Okay.

The use of these terms not only provided local color to the play, but they were also intended to reflect unique cultural differences that separated Blacks from whites and give the play an additional layer of dramatic verity.

In this play, language is used in a manner similar to Zora Neale Hurston's recording of black folklore. In the introduction to Mules and Men (1935), she describes the characteristically black resistance to open up to strangers, particularly white strangers. Blacks present what she calls a "feather-bed resistance." That is, they will speak only in "pleasantries" and superficialities and not divulge what they truly think and feel to meddling whites. According to Hurston, Blacks' language to strangers is evasive and not the way in which they speak intimately to one another or within the larger community. She explains:

The theory behind our tactics: "The white man is always trying to know into somebody else's business. All right, I'll set something outside the door of my mind for him to play with and handle. He can read my writing but he sho' can't read my mind. I'll put this play toy in his hand, and he will seize it and go away. Then I'll say my say and sing my song."⁸⁹

The dialogue of Harlem is intended to give the impression of a private, authentic language spoken by African Americans away from the gaze, or in this case, earshot, of curious whites. The glossary makes black idioms and dialect understandable to whites, and it provides another tool to penetrate the secrets of essential blackness. Thus, apart from its entertainment factor, Harlem offered a unique opportunity for whites to hear blacks "saying their say" in this reconstruction of a private environment where blacks would feel the freest to speak their mind.

In fact, Thurman and Rapp took great pains in the press to argue that the value of Harlem was not simply the entertainment it afforded, but it had higher social merit as well. In an article written together called "Few Know Harlem, the City of Surprises," the playwrights claim that on the one hand, African Americans have a great deal in common with Caucasians. They point out, for example, that there is a steadily increasing black middle class, who similar to their white counterparts "go for vacations in Europe, Atlantic City, the Maine woods and Southern California." But on the other hand, they state that "there are some phenomena peculiar to Harlem alone, phenomena which are inherently expressions of the Negro character before it was conditioned by the white world that now surrounds him." These main differences include the numbers game, which they call "Harlem's most popular indoor sport and the outlet for the Negro's craving for gambling," and the house rent parties. They report, "Some people have found rent parties so profitable that they have become professional givers of house rent parties, getting their whole income from them." Although the playwrights insist that the community is marked by its economic and ethnic diversity, it is the last two "institutions peculiar to Harlem" and not the hobbies

of the "Americanized" black middle class that are given life in their play. Certainly, as Carl Van Vechten implied, those aspects of Harlem life would have much greater appeal to audiences than the antics of the moneyed, conservatively-dressed, and college-educated people who also populate Harlem.⁹⁰

In another joint essay, Thurman and Rapp claim that their play earns the right to be called "educational theatre" because Harlem "presents the [N]egro as he is," rather than reasserting the familiar images of the "stage Negroes," or as they bluntly call them, "white folks' niggers." The latter images, according to the authors, consist of "the old servant or mammy type known derisively among Harlemites as 'Uncle Toms' and 'handkerchiefs,' the lazy slowfoot type typified by such vaudvillians as Bert Williams and [the Shuffle Along creators] Miller and Lyles, and the suple[rstitious, praying type who is always thrown into abject fear by darkness, lightning and thunder." In the same article, they quote an unnamed black critic who praises the play for making black people "understandable" to white audiences and for "educating the theater-going public." The critic writes: "The [white] man in the orchestra seat may not sympathise with [the black characters'] motives, but he can readily understand them. And understanding these characters helps him to better comprehend the concrete [N]egroes he has seen in the subway or reads about in the crime columns of the newspapers."⁹¹ Of course, as the critic implies, these two non-segregated arenas would have been the most common places for whites to encounter black people directly.

This justification may seem rather surprising in light of the wide-ranging proliferation of images (both positive and negative) of racial minorities in contemporary culture, but this would not have been the case in the early part of the century in which segregation was the rule. Certainly, most whites did not have even casual contact with Blacks (to which Thurman's experiences with segregation attest), and they would not have been able to "comprehend" them. A rather theatrical but real-life instance of this lack of comprehension occurs in an account in Variety from December 1927, a little over a year

before Harlem opened. The piece, titled "Harlem's Nite Life As Court Related," appeared in the "crime column," or the "Times Square" section of that paper.⁹² Merging the familiar elements of melodramatic courtroom drama with journalistic crime reporting, the article details the strange circumstances of Ratta Bella Castro, a 23-year-old "high-yaller" (or light-skinned) dancer with Step, Pep and Ginger, which was a burlesque show playing at Harlem's Alhambra Theatre. Castro was arrested by New York's police, and faced charges for "digging a penknife into the hide of her erstwhile sweetie during a despondent fit at a dance." She claims that her boyfriend, Santiago, was dancing with another woman, and when she in turn began spending her evening with another gentleman, Santiago became infuriated. He started to beat her up, and in self-defense, she pulled out a penknife and stabbed him several times around his neck and chest.

In the course of her court testimony, Ratta also revealed that Santiago was married (she in fact called his wife to inform her that Santiago was in Harlem Hospital), and that Ratta regularly gave money to Santiago, who was recently released from the penitentiary. When Assistant District Attorney William Maloney pressed her as to why she gave him money, knowing that he already had a wife, she replied in language that could have been culled directly from popular crime melodrama. "Oh, I wanted to be a sport. Also, I admit I sort of liked him." And when he asked her what the money was to be used for, she answered, "Oh, Santi wanted to 'lollie-paloosa up' (doll up), go to the movies while I was working, and gamble." In a dramatic twist, though, the lawsuit was dropped. As the reporter explains, "The case went to the jury and the dope was that it would acquit the defendant as the ordinary jury in the Criminal Courts is ignorant of the ways of the inhabitants of part of Harlem's 'Black Belt.'"⁹³

In this light, the niche that Thurman and Rapp intended to fill was the white desire to see a side of Harlem not yet explored and reveal the "truth" of this mysterious and inscrutable enclave. With a well-known black author as one of the writers, it guaranteed to be an illumination of the "real" Harlem. To Thurman and Rapp, it would also hopefully

refute the incomprehensible, scandal-driven image propagated in articles about Harlem like the one described above. Therefore, in order to make the “inhabitants” of Harlem’s Black Belt understandable, they presented a cross-section of “concrete Negroes,” reflecting the multiple, often conflicting, and sometimes derogatory representations of Blacks in Harlem. The play and its Broadway production, however, were constantly at odds with this goal. The goal of redefining blacks on the Broadway stage was a noble one, but nevertheless, it often blatantly perpetuated “exotic” and “primitive” images of African Americans. For example, a newspaper advertisement hailed the play as: “Harlem! The City that Never Sleeps! A Strange, Exotic Island in the Heart of New York! Rent Parties! Number Runners! Chippies! Jazz Love! Primitive Passion!”⁹⁴ The “educational” intentions of Thurman and Rapp were pitted against the expectations of Broadway theatregoers, who expected to see a version of the “real” as perpetuated by Nigger Heaven or Lulu Belle.

The public relations campaign helped to assure that these expectations would be met, and it often reconfirmed the worst possible stereotypes of black people in its effort to demonstrate the “naturalness” of the performances on stage. One of the most egregious examples of this appears in a New York Times profile of the 25-year-old director Chester Erskin two weeks after the show opened. Erskin, according to the article, understood “that good [N]egro dramatic players are rare,” so he “visited dives, speakeasies, rent parties, restaurants, cabarets and private homes” to find suitable, authentic “personalities” for his production. The young director accumulated his cast in this manner, and with the patience that “could give Job a tussle,” Erskin “instructed” his cast on the fine points of acting. Reconfirming a stereotypical notion that black people are naturally inferior to whites, the article explains the procedure in which Erskin staged the play:

[Erskin’s] first direction was to make his players repeat the lines after him, word for word, until they could recite them from memory. Then he permitted a few gestures and later he taught them the art of entrances and exits and how to ignore the audience. When they proved a bit slow in

grasping things, their great lament was: “You know, Misto’ Erskin, we’re colored people. We cain’t think as fast as white folks.” When the play actually opened and they were praised for their individual performances they replied, “Misto’ Erskin done it.”

While Thurman and Rapp took great pains in their attempts to banish the “Uncle Tom” and “the lazy slowfoot” types from their play, as well as the white cultural imagination, the publicity reinserted it. The article concludes with another instance of the childlike image associated with African Americans in a tribute to Erskin’s paternal patience and kindness: “[The black actors] at first insisted that he sit in the front row and watch them during every performance and often he still does. Whenever they are applauded they look in his direction for his approval.”⁹⁵ The playwrights were evidently powerless to halt the Broadway publicity machinery that relied on such tactics to make a “black play” sell to its mostly white audiences. Yet the conflicting images, which combined those based on elements left over from minstrelsy with more progressive representations, enacted the struggle to form a national black identity in Harlem. In this regard, the play Harlem mirrored the differing claims to the “authentic” that embroiled the neighborhood.

“The Doomed Children of Ham”

The characters of the play are from the poor working class, and the neighborhood is certainly taking its toll, especially on the older characters. They are gradually being subsumed by the effects of modernization. On one level, the exposure of the social and economic conditions of the characters was not unlike other Broadway plays of the era that theatrically realized the lives of the urban poor. Although contemporary descriptions of the play highlighted the racy rent party dancing and the melodramatic highjinks of the gangsters and detectives who appear prominently in the play, Harlem also evokes the social realism of such plays as DuBose and Dorothy Heyward’s Porgy (1927) and Elmer Rice’s Street Scene (1929). The genre was a familiar one on Broadway in the 1920s, and the plays

within the category tended to address the distressing results of "an oppressive urban environment."⁹⁶ As with these plays, Harlem stresses the tragic dehumanization of its characters as a result of city-living, and points to the personal and familial rifts that the corrupting environment causes. In Thurman and Rapp's play, for instance, several of the characters pine for a simpler (though far from idyllic) southern lifestyle, which they have recently left, and they repudiate the northern urban environment which now consumes them.

One of the most caustic and darkly comic expressions of this urban discontent is Father's response to another character's complaint about the crowded subway conditions. He answers, "Dey may lynch you down home, but dey shure don't squeeze you to death on no subway."⁹⁷ Whereas the South had its share of random misery, the North's modern conditions are much more stifling and suffocating (both physically and socially). According to Father, there is, ironically, far less freedom for black people in this new environment than there had been in the South. It is certainly not the "City of Refuge" black migrants had been promised. For white audiences, however, Harlem's constricting backdrop seems little more than a mere gripe for party poopers like Mother and Father who complain non-stop about the living conditions and who refuse to enjoy the raucous rent party.

The play's ambiguity of form, broad comedy, and thrilling theatrics most likely assuaged the white guilt that a purely socially realistic play may have engendered. That is, why should the audience pity the poor Williams family and their black friends when they clearly seem to be having so much fun? In fact, the production seems to suggest that the black characters are the ones who should be envied. The social realism of the play is all but subsumed by the titillating, vibrant rent party scenes and the exciting, romantic melodrama swirling about the cramped stage. Like its "real" counterpart, the social and economic conditions of the play's dramatic world are over-laid with a patina of sensuality, exotica, and excitement. Audiences at the Apollo were presented with a vibrant and constantly shifting drama that mirrored the metamorphosing landscape just eighty blocks north.

The play contains the characteristics of other genres that were also prevalent in the 1920s. These variant dramaturgical components, as several critics pointed out, do not always successfully meld in Harlem. Brooks Atkinson, for instance, called the play “a rag-bag drama and high pressure blow-out all in one,” and Richard Lockridge described it as “a play which at its least is sudden melodrama, broken by pistol shots, and at its best a colorful, changing picture of the dark civilization within our lighter one.”⁹⁸ Arthur Ruhl saw a dramatic structural divide based on the supposed logical outcome of its racially divergent authors. He writes, the play “was composed of two different strains, and one of these what might be described as the white or Broadway element overlaid the black.”⁹⁹ Judging from the critics’ reactions, one can see that the familiar conceits of the melodrama and social realism (forms associated with white playwrights) did not integrate well with the “authentic” pictures of black life (identified with Thurman’s contribution).

The opening of the play, for example, juxtaposes the expectations of the urban social realism drama, and its tawdry, tragic implications, with a kinder gentler form. Aside from the laments about the ill effects of urbanization, Harlem later gives the impression that it is closer in form to a folk drama, which tended to employ provincial settings. For instance, the first act begins in the Williams’ household as the family prepares for the rent party, and the act concludes with the party itself. Little else happens in-between. The characters clean, discuss burnt bread, and debate whether or not they are better-off in Harlem than they were down South. Alison Smith praised this slice-of-life aspect of the play saying that “it has the deep, half unconscious thrill of compassion which the Negro actors give to a study of nostalgia, the bewildered, inarticulate homesickness of a little family, lured from their North Carolina cabin into the smouldering jungle of Harlem.”¹⁰⁰ The domestic setting and the leisurely unfolding of the action bear the hallmarks of black folk drama form, especially in its presentation of a family faced with adversity. This form, incidentally, would not have been completely unfamiliar one to many in the audience at Harlem.

Although primarily a staple of church groups and playwriting contests in black journals, the black folk drama occasionally appeared in commercial theatres. In fact, the first non-musical play written by an African American to appear on Broadway, Willis Richardson's The Chip Woman's Fortune (1923), fit this genre. This is not to imply that familial black life had been not presented before in straight drama, however, as the territory had already been explored by white playwrights such as Ridgely Torrence, Eugene O'Neill, and Paul Green. These playwrights are often incorrectly credited, according to Ted Shine, as the creators of this new brand of "folk drama," which placed an emphasis on the tragic and exotic lives of its black characters.¹⁰¹ The Chip Woman's Fortune appeared on a double bill with Oscar Wilde's Salome and ran briefly on Broadway in 1923.

Richardson's play attempted to transcend the typically tragic and exotic portrayals of Blacks on the stage, and its simple but affecting plot concerns a store porter faced with losing his job for lapsed payments on the treasured family victrola. An old woman boarder, who collects pieces of coal off the street, and her son, recently released from prison, rescue the family from desperation when they turn over the small fortunes they have accumulated.¹⁰² Performed by the Chicago-originated Ethiopian Art Theater, Richardson's play received generally favorable notices and epitomized the folk form. As is typical of the genre, the play centers around a poor family and their struggle against nearly impossible odds, but their integrity and natural goodness win out in the end. While the New York Times described it as "trifling and at times amusing," Heywood Brown in The World called it "excellent," and noted, "The quality of the performance and of the play itself is somewhat akin to something of Lady Gregory's as done by the Abbey Theatre. The dialogue is rich and authentic and the story has the virtue of the utmost simplicity." Percy Hammond of the Tribune praised Richardson's drama as "honest" and "well-played," but scoffed at the ambition of the troupe who appeared racially unsuited for the roles in Wilde's play with which the play was paired:

[Salome] suffered from some of the minor players' irresolute diction; and one poor actor fell off the rear of Herod's terrace, with a great noise, and was seen no more. . . . As Herod, [Sidney] Kirkpatrick was bafflingly alternating, now seeming to be something like the drunken, neurotic Tetrarch, then resembling a Pullman porter of the better class. In one of his long, long speeches, reciting the gifts Herod was eager to give his stepdaughter, we feared every minute that he was about to sing "Mammy."¹⁰³

The description is amusing--the image of the poor supernumerary falling off the set is priceless--but also very patronizing. More importantly, the remarks typify the commercial expectations of black performance and theatre at the time. When the plays contained a folk element, innocence, and recognizable stereotypes, the plays were judged successful and "authentic," but when black performers appeared in "classic" white plays, their choice was considered "antic" (Hammond's description).

Historically, the folk drama form, to which Richardson subscribed, had actually developed in the 1910s and was consciously modelled after the Irish folk plays of writers such as J. M. Synge and Lady Gregory--a comparison echoed by Broun's remarks. Just as Richardson intended to banish the "stage Negro," the Irish authors intended to banish the stereotypically sentimental, drunk, and pugnacious "stage Irishman" and, instead, depict an honest portrayal of the provincial Irish.¹⁰⁴ Similarly, the African-American folk plays attempted to capture, in James Hatch and Leo Hamalian's description, "the everyday life of ordinary black people during hard times."¹⁰⁵ The hand-wringing, destitute Mother of Harlem, for instance, who continually prays for the souls of her family, seems to be the direct descendant of the keening Maurya in Synge's Riders to the Sea (1904). An indication of this occurs midway through the first act, when Mother, overwhelmed by the family's misfortunes and their propensities for rent parties, "buries her head in her hands and sways the upper part of her body," beseeching: "Father in heaven! Father in heaven! Forgive dis

sinful household. Lawd, fo'give dem. Save my poor wicked children. Watch over dem. Show dem de light. Guide dem, Father. Shield dem from de devil and cleanse der bodies with de Holy Spirit. Amen! Father! Amen!"¹⁰⁶ Yet pitted against the urban realities of this play, the folk characteristics come off as quaint, nostalgic, and out-dated.

The two oldest family members, Mother and Father, for instance, are particularly denotative of the folk drama form. Not unlike the misguided black actors appearing in Wilde's Salome, these characters are also completely out of place in their new urban environment. They represent bucolic domesticity, but they are subsumed by urban industry. The stage directions, for example, describe the Mother as a "typical southern woman, ready to moan and pray at the slightest provocation."¹⁰⁷ but she has no control over her children. About Father, a large, gruff man, the stage directions say, "The North has rendered him helpless. He is just a big hulk being pushed around by economic necessity."¹⁰⁸ Displaced and discontent, Mother and Father represent what Alain Locke in 1925 called the "Old Negro." That is, as opposed to the "New Negro," who is "inevitably moving forward under the control largely of his own objectives." Mother and Father represent the previous generation of Blacks who lack autonomy, consciousness, and self-respect. These characters are bereft of proper names in the play arguably because, as Locke also explains, the Old Negro "was more of a formula than a human being--a something to be argued about, condemned or defended, to be 'kept down,' or 'in his place,' or patronized, a social bogey or a social burden."¹⁰⁹ Even more significantly, they lack control over their family as well as the rent party in their home. The parental roles actually belong to Jasper, who brought the family to Harlem, and his sister Cordelia, who runs the household.

Mother and Father have succumbed to what Cornel West describes as the "white world's view" of themselves and their condition.¹¹⁰ They have little or no agency and do not foresee that black people will improve their conditions; in short, they have accepted the circumstances of white supremacy. Mother places all of her hope for progress in religion,

and Father has simply lost hope that black people will endure in a white world. As Father defeatingly explains, “Dey ain’t nothin’ for a nigger nowhere. We’s de doomed children of Ham.” And Mother responds, “Yeah, we’s doomed all right when eben de little chil’ren who de Father says will show us de way, wants to be here midst de sinners an’ drunkards.”¹¹¹ Their “devaluation” and “degradation” have essentially made them void of effectiveness in the environment in which they are placed. As West argues in relation to Ellison’s The Invisible Man (1952), when total submission or hopelessness saturates a black individual, the situation renders him or her invisible and without humanity; hence, “nameless.”¹¹² Mother and Father’s own namelessness corresponds with their lack of connection to a community, and as West also writes, the “theme of black rootlessness and homelessness is inseparable from black namelessness.”¹¹³ For Father, the sense of eternal displacement, no matter where he is placed, has turned in on itself to become a racial hatred, which is evident in an exchange with Jasper:

FATHER: You know what’s wrong wid’ Harlem? Dey’s too many niggers!

Dat’s it--too many niggers.

JASPER: You said the same thing ‘bout down home.¹¹⁴

The play not only depicts a neighborhood in transition, but it also reflects an evolving black identity.

Whereas Mother and Father appear antiquated and ineffectual in this environment, and the hope of a new homeland for industrious African Americans and a place where they may establish roots is unrealized, the promise of social betterment is rendered through their oldest son, 28-year-old Jasper. He represents the epitome of Locke’s definition of the “New Negro.” Unlike his parents, Jasper is forward-thinking, hard-working, and optimistic about improved social conditions for Blacks. More importantly, rather than being subsumed by Harlem, he is empowered by it. He says about his environment, “Why, Harlem is the greatest place in the world for Negroes. You can be a man here. You can ride in the subway and go anywhere your money an’ sense can carry you.”¹¹⁵ In direct contrast

to his father's *unmanly* inability to lead the family, hold a job, or secure self-respect. Jasper is autonomous, driven, and self-reliant. He also represents the powerful synthesizing of the black split subjectivity as articulated through W.E. B. Du Bois's definition of "double consciousness." In Du Bois's system of black empowerment, Jasper represents the fulfillment of the desire to integrate the fractionated black (male) subject, which Du Bois describes as the "longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge the double self into a better and truer self" and ultimately "make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American, without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of Opportunity closed roughly in his face."¹⁶ In the first act of the play, the Williams home becomes a battleground for the opposing forces of the Old and New Negro, and Locke's ideas are given dramatic immediacy.

These dialectical representations personify the transformational black cultural identity of the 1920s. As Stuart Hall articulates, "Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But, like everything that is historical, they undergo constant transformation. Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialized past, they are subject to the continuous 'play' of history, culture and power."¹⁷ The Williams home symbolizes the nexus of black culture. Past and present collide here, and black cultural identity is (to reiterate Bhabha) "in the process of being formed." But this process is certainly not without resistance. If Mother and Father represent what Blacks used to be, and Jasper represents what Blacks are "becoming" according to Alain Locke's specifications, then thrown into this atmosphere is the menace to that cultural identity. Cordelia Williams, Harlem's Pandora, Lulu Belle, and Lasca Sartoris all rolled into one.

"Sugar Foot Misters an' Sun Dodgin' Sisters"

Cordelia, the oldest Williams daughter, is the central character of the play and the cause of the sensational events that occur. Her madcap machinations threaten to bring down the entire house and throw the dramaturgical structure off-kilter. In fact, by the beginning

of the rent party, it is clear that the quaint black folk drama form combined with the urban social realism cannot contain the divisive, unrestrained, and explosive energy that Cordelia has unleashed on this vision of the Harlem neighborhood. Near the end of Act I, the play has veered off from the picturesque realism and into full-blown melodrama, reminiscent of the white-concocted Lulu Belle. Similar to the title character of that play, and also like Lasca Sartoris in Nigger Heaven (comparisons several critics invoked), Cordelia is a brazen, hard-hearted, young black woman. Walter Winchell referred to her in his review as a "chippie off the old block,"¹¹⁸ and throughout Harlem, she is variously referred to as a "chippie" (or a loose woman), a "hincty [or "snooty"] wench," and a "good-for-nothin' strumpet." While Mother, Father, and Jasper, evoke issues of race associated with class, Cordelia is defined by her alluring, but dangerous sexuality. From her initial appearance, the stage directions make this perfectly clear:

[Cordelia] is about eighteen years old and has dark brown skin and bobbed hair. She is an overmatured, southern girl, selfish, lazy, and sullen. She is inspired by activity or joy only when some erotic adventure confronts her or a good time is in view. She has no feeling for her parents or for her brothers and sisters. Considering herself a woman of the world, she holds their opinions and advice in contempt. She is extremely sensual and has an abundance of sex appeal. Her body is softly rounded and graceful. Her every movement and gesture is calculated to arouse a man's eroticism.¹¹⁹

Cordelia's unrestrained sexuality and uncontrollable need for excitement explode the conventions of the outmoded folk drama form, and she sets the melodramatic apparatus into play. The backdrop for this modern morality play is the sexually-charged on-stage rent party (or as the playbill's glossary defines it, "A Saturday night orgy staged to raise money to pay the landlord"), which Cordelia commandeers.

By the end of the first act, the guests and musicians have all arrived, and the party is in full-swing. Robert Littell referred to this scene as "a queer, sordid, good-natured

orgy, with fifteen or more couples hugging each other in the most extraordinary dances."¹²⁰ The scene was particularly significant in that it recreated the Harlem that audiences wanted to see: A Harlem infused with sultry jazz music and torrid dancing. According to the responses in the press, the dancing in this scene was "sensual," "barbaric," and "anything but lovely" (one critic amusingly described it as "grizzly bear dancing"). The stage directions confirm that its blatant allusion to sexual activity was the intended result. The playwrights describe the staging in the following manner:

Body calls to body. They cement themselves together with limbs lewdly intertwined. Another couple is dipping to the floor and slowly shimmying belly to belly as they come back to an upright position. A slender, dark girl with wild eyes and wilder hair stands in the center of the room supported by the strong lithe arms of a longshoreman. Her eyes are closed. Her teeth bite into her lower lip. Her trunk is bent backward until her head hangs below her waist, and all the while the lower portion of her body is quivering like so much agitated jello.¹²¹

As evidenced by the critical responses, the erotic, "quivering" black bodies on display in this scene posited the play's most authentic claim to black "naturalness."

The scene underscored the supposed cultural differences between black people and white people through the actors' presumably "instinctive" physical responses to the on-stage jazz music. Richard Lockridge, for example, referred to the black dancers as "unself-conscious and barbaric," and in the rent party scene "the members of the cast seem to forget they are acting and [...] give themselves over to rhythms which the [N]egro has brought to the white man and which the white man, however he may try, is always a little too self-conscious to accept."¹²² Lockridge's detection of a "genuine" blackness rehearses Jane Desmond's discussion of "physical foundationalism," which is the basis for "cultural tourism." Desmond suggests that "in common discourse, bodies function as the material signs for categories of social difference, including divisions of gender, race, cultural

identity, and species."¹²³ The seemingly "natural" and spontaneous dancing on view in the rent party scene reiterated the entrenched view that black bodies are essentially different than white bodies.

For Broadway audiences accustomed to seeing the energetic, precisely choreographed dances of musical comedies and revues, the undulating, groping black dancers offered a physicality that seemed unrehearsed, unrestrained, and unconscious. That is, the scene authenticated the romantic and popular notion that black bodies are *naturally* "exotic" and "primitive." Lockridge, for example, went even further in his review to argue that the overtly sexual dancing actually made the melodramatic murders in the play's plot frighteningly believable. The glimpses of "actual" black behavior provided a backdrop for the formulaic aspects of the play, which gave the production a layer of truth and authenticity. He states that the actors "dance lustily, swayingly, shamelessly and reveal the simplicity and deep earthiness of their race's hold on life. And the melodrama of murder is made the more real and plausible by the revelation which the dancing gives of their uncerebral directness. Men and women who dance like that have the strength for violence."¹²⁴ To this particular critic, the primal movement of the black dancers, framed within the proscenium at the Apollo Theatre on Broadway, pointed to a presumed historical and biological primitiveness associated with black bodies.

The acknowledged "truth" of this principle stemmed from the "authenticating" effect of the scene. Whitney Bolton, for instance, wrote that he was "not at all sure that many of the players didn't forget they were on a stage and believed themselves actually participants in a rent party." Therefore, the enactment of the rent party potentially granted what Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett describes as an "unmediated encounter" for the Broadway audiences, or one in which the "performances . . . create the illusion that the activities one watches are being *done* rather than *represented*, a practice that creates the illusion of authenticity, or realness."¹²⁵ Separate from the contrivances of the play's plotting, the rent party scene offered not just an image of the "real," but an interaction with it. Audiences could

momentarily forget that they were watching a recreation of Harlem life, but Harlem itself on-stage. As Robert Littell wrote about this sensation, “Stage parties are as a rule pretty terrible, but the [N]egro rent-paying guests throw themselves into it with such spontaneous go and enthusiasm that one feels as if one was there.”¹²⁶

The unrestrained sexual behavior that characterized this appreciation for Harlem, however, was not completely at home on the notoriously conservative Broadway. Activities tolerated and applauded in Harlem were arrestible on Broadway as a result of the Wales Padlock Law established in 1927. As Brooks Atkinson explains in his 1970 book Broadway, this law “empowered the police to arrest the producers, authors, and actors of plays that the police disapproved of, and to padlock the theater for a year if the courts brought in a verdict of guilty.”¹²⁷ About Harlem and its salacious rent party scene, Burns Mantle of the Daily News cautioned that some theatregoers might be offended by the erotic “animalistic exhibitions” of the “‘Harlem’ realists” because “unfortunately there are likely to be those in the audience who are a bit sensitive about learning the facts of life in mixed company.”¹²⁸ Some of the other critics feared as well that the overly suggestive dancing by the fifty-or-so supernumeraries might cause the police to halt the show and close it down. Atkinson predicted in the Times review that the show would have a good run. “Or will if the police censors, who were in the audience last evening do not clang down Forty-second Street with their patrol wagons.”¹²⁹ Like Atkinson, Bide Dudley of the Evening World implied that the censor might forcefully tone down the “exaggerated dancing” a bit, but Whitney Bolton said that “such dancing is on view in any [N]egro cabaret and if the police interfere with this, they ought, in fairness, to interfere uptown.”¹³⁰ There were, however, no raids upon Harlem.

Although chiefly a gimmick to attract audiences who craved the exuberant and sensational side of Harlem, the rent party also figured rather importantly in the plot. Cordelia, who represents this image, uses the party as an opportunity to seduce one of the guests, the “shy and slippery” Roy, a “numbers runner,”¹³¹ and impetuously, she agrees to

move in with him without the benefit of marriage. And just as Lulu Belle tormented the upstanding and faithful George and led him to ruin with her own wily ways, and Lasca Sartoris brought about the suicide of Byron Kason in Nigger Heaven, Cordelia leads the young man who thought he could domesticate her, the love-struck Basil, to the brink of a murder he is later accused of committing. As the curtain descends on the first act, and as the dancing at the rent party becomes more intense, Basil venges to "slit" Roy's "dirty guts" while Cordelia exits with "loud mocking laughter."¹³² The slice-of-life portrait of Harlem all but dissipates, and the high-speed melodramatic antics precipitated at the end of Act I continue into Act II. The second act takes place in Roy's apartment, where he and Cordelia have begun to make a home for themselves (in time sequence, it takes place almost immediately after the first act). Whereas the previous act takes its time in building the momentum that culminates in the rent party, in this, the shortest of the acts, the events unfurl at a breathless pace. First we meet Kid Vamp, Roy's dashing, but insidious "banker." When Cordelia goes out for cigarettes, the "Kid" kills Roy for withholding money from him and hides the body behind an arras. By the end of the act, and after several dramatic twists and turns, Cordelia, not knowing that the "Kid" is a murderer, promises to move in with him. In addition, the lovestruck Basil, who has followed Cordelia to Roy's apartment, gets into a fight with the Kid (Cordelia has exited again and does not witness this). Basil is knocked out in the tussle, and the Kid seizes the opportunity to place the gun in Basil's hand, framing him for Roy's murder. And in nail-biting melodramatic fashion, Basil resumes consciousness as the police are banging on the door, and he flees out the bathroom window to safety.

By the third Act, Cordelia has returned home where the rent party continues, and she has implicated her entire family in the swirl of disorder she initiated. It will take an outside (white) presence to sort things out. In this act, the dramaturgical combination of the various theatrical genres crash together and create an atmosphere of combustible energy. Once again, returning to the Williams' home, the play reverts to its previous social realism

and folk drama forms. For example, there are two rather lengthy bits in which Dr. Voodeo, a dealer of spiritual powders and herbs, and the Hot-Stuff Man, a dealer in stolen clothing, ply their wares. Neither character advances the plot, but they provide local color and offer a glimpse into particular aspects of black life. The Hot-Stuff Man explains, for instance, that the reason why he does such strong business in Harlem is because if black people are to be accepted by white society, they cannot appear to be poor. He says: "Folks in Harlem has to dress. They gotta' look as good or betta than white folks and they don' have as much money to spend. It takes fellows like me to fix 'em up--see?"¹³³ The scenes with these characters give way to the obligatory unraveling of the melodramatic crime, which is the central feature of the act. The tension builds increasingly, and the act includes a shoot-out, the death of the villain (Kid Vamp), and the vindication of the hero (Basil).

The sorting out of the troubles Cordelia has wrought upon the house are enabled by Detective Sergeant Palmer (named Donohue in the original script)--the sole white character in the play. His presence, even in this predominantly black neighborhood, serves as a palpable reminder of the social hierarchy of the 1920s and must have offered a feeling of reassurance to whites in the audience who might have feared that anarchy reigns in Harlem. In this hot-pot of lawlessness and social unrest, the white patriarchal figure is on the scene almost immediately to solve the problems among the black residents and restore order to this very public domestic space. The hope for an autonomous, independent black (male) leader, as embodied by Jasper, is dashed. It turns out Jasper is powerless to control his sister, and a white *deus ex machina* is necessary to settle the chaos. As Daniel Gerould explains, this reinscription of the social status quo is typical of melodrama, and according to C.W.E Bigsby, early twentieth century realism is characterized by "a faith in social and metaphysical order which remained curiously untroubled."¹³⁴ The play ends as Cordelia, rebellious as ever, exits the Harlem flat with one of the party's musicians, Ippy (for those who are keeping count, he is her fourth lover in the play), vowing to be a star on the stage.

Mother, on the other hand, is overwhelmed by the events of the evening, and defeatingly cries, “An’ dey calls dis de City of Refuge!”¹³⁵

The plaintive sigh of Mother is overshadowed by the sensational exit of Cordelia and the possibilities that lie ahead for her. As Ippy explains,

She don’ have to stay in Harlem. Look at Josephine Baker--makin’ all Paris stand on its head! Look what Florence Mills did! Look at Ethel Waters! Why Delia got more than all of them—more voice, more shape, more pep to her dancing! Given a chance and someone to coach her, she’d set the world on fire.¹³⁶

According to the reviews in the popular press, this assessment was not too much of an exaggeration. Isabelle Washington apparently played the role to the hilt in the original New York production and received mostly raves. Alison Smith described her performance as “almost fatally realistic.” Robert Garland referred to her as, “Vivid, cheap as cheap can be, you believe in her and her tawdry affairs.” Robert Littell wrote, “The wild, raucous, hard-boiled, sensuous abandon of Isabell Washington is worth going a long way to see.” and “Miss Washington’s inexhaustible natural pep, and a gorgeous hoarse voice, which blows out of her like a factory whistle when she is angry, makes this character something quite new and fascinating.” On the other hand, Whitney Bolton found her performance offensive in its unrestrained physical exhibition of sexuality, and in his review said that the producer, Edward A. Blatt, should “urge Miss Washington to curb her dislocations in the interest of peace and prosperity.” Likewise, Bide Dudley of the Evening World suggested that she “pipe down a bit” and reign in her unseemly lewdness.

Oddly, the excessiveness of Washington’s performance was hailed, or disparaged in a few cases, because of its remarkable “naturalness.” The reactions to the performance recall similar points that Alisa Solomon makes in her discussion of Nora in Ibsen’s A Doll’s House. Just as actresses playing Nora created a stir in their offensive portrayals of “inappropriate behavior” for upstanding women, Washington’s performance as Cordelia

registers as "naturalistic" precisely because it is "unbecoming."¹³⁷ This "unladylike," predatorial manner was indeed not strictly a "new and fascinating" creation as Littel writes. To a large extent, white expectations of black femininity had already been conditioned by what they had read about or seen in other Broadway shows and in the nightclubs up-town. Lasca Sartoris from Nigger Heaven and Lulu Belle from Sheldon and MacArthur's play, for example, were well-known representations of the trope of the female, black, sexual snare. Isabelle Washington, however, supplied an additional layer of authenticity to her performance that may qualify it as "new and fascinating": Unlike the stage incarnations of the aforementioned black characters, Washington was actually an African American. The few times that Nigger Heaven had been represented in musical reviews the performers were in blackface, and Lenore Ulric, a white actress, likewise played Lulu Belle in blackface. Therefore, the representation was certainly not new, but Harlem affirmed its "realness" for white audiences who had only seen it through an "inauthentic" blackness.

The presumed "naturalness" of Washington's performance, not to mention the "animalistic exhibitions" of the rent party supernumeraries, gave the production an unconditional "realness." If Jane Desmond is accurate when she says that "bodies (structured through dominant discourses of 'sex' and 'race') function ideologically as if they were prior to discourse,"¹³⁸ then the relative novelty of presenting "material" black bodies on-stage in a carefully recreated Harlem milieu guaranteed its "authenticity." This presumed "authenticity," however, effectively masked the play's complex interplay of cultural and historical signifiers. There are numerous occasions in which the play's apparent constructedness reveals a shifting, unstable, and at times resistant "natural" black identity.

For instance, Cordelia, particularly as it was performed by Washington, exemplifies the metatheatricity of Harlem and further points to the play's contrivances. As a bridge between the folk play and melodrama forms, she exposes the fault lines in the play's craftsmanship. Both her forceful sensuality, which pushed the boundaries of

acceptable Broadway decorum, and her mad desire to become an actress call attention to the artificial theatricality of the “realistic” production. The references to the “real” Baker, Mills, and Waters, for example, remind the audience of Cordelia’s fictionality. But on another level, Cordelia’s singing, dancing, and constantly changing love interests register as an elaborate rehearsal for her imagined stardom. The Williams home loses its verity and becomes itself a stage for the fledgling star. As Chaudhuri explains in her discussion of stage naturalism, when a realistic domestic setting becomes a place for characters’ “acts” or “performances.” “the place represented onstage loses some of that sharp delineation as a domestic interior that is the hallmark of realist drama.”¹³⁴ Cordelia’s metatheatricality undercuts the naturalistic intentions of the playwrights.

Furthermore, Cordelia’s ambition to leave her Harlem home—in this case a realistic reconstruction on Broadway—to become a star on Broadway also creates a sensation of “mimetic vertigo.” This is evident in an exchange between Mother and Cordelia, in which Cordelia refuses to assume the traditional *role* assigned to black women, “kitchen mechanics” and “school teachers”:

MOTHER

But whatcha gonna do chile? Whatcha gonna do?

CORDELIA

I’m goin’ on de stage.

(She begins to snap her fingers and lewdly shake her body as if going into a dance. She hums a jazzy tune.)

MOTHER

Gal, you should be shamed of yoself, standin’ there in front of yo mother, wantin’ to sell your soul to de devil.

(She supplicatingly raises her hands to heaven.)

Oh, Father. I’d rather you take my girl outta this world!

CORDELIA

Some mother you are, wishin' I was dead! Well, I ain't gonna die! I'm gonna live, see! And by god, I'm gonna live high!

(She flaunts herself towards the left.)

The conversation concretely joins racial gender roles with an anti-theatrical prejudice (an added irony is that it was delivered by an actress) in a manner similar to the argument Solomon posits about the "New Woman" and Ibsen's A Doll's House. The conflation of social roles with theatrical roles points to the performance of everyday life. As Solomon explains in relation to Ibsen's play, the characters' defiance and contempt for traditional gender roles "make social conventions seem as hoary and artificial as theater conventions."¹⁴⁰ As with Jasper's representation of the New Negro, Cordelia forcefully enacts the empowering effect Harlem had on young African Americans. Rather than demonstrating a fixed identity for black women, she depicts one that is continuously fluctuating.

Throughout Harlem, there are moments when the play threatens to collapse under the weight of its metatheatricality and over-laid dramatic forms. The strain caused by these different aspects of the play is a result of its, to employ Homi Bhabha's term, "hybridity," and its uneasy mixture of several dramatic genres.¹⁴¹ Between the gaps of the melodramatic and naturalistic forms, critics believed they detected the "bits of authentic [N]egro life," or photographic glimpses of a "real" Harlem. Within these rifts, such as during the first act rent party scene, they argued that genuine black behavior could be observed, for as Solomon poetically explains in relation to A Doll's House, "realism trembles to life in the tension between melodrama and metaphor."¹⁴² The play's moments of presumed "naturalness" were therefore the ironic result of the very visible seams of the theatrical forms. The dramaturgical forms and character representations shift and turn back on themselves in Harlem and make the "real" purely conjectural. Plumbing the depths of the play for a putative black authenticity reveals not a fixed cultural identity but one which is constantly transforming. The merging of the distinct forms, and the presumptions

surrounding the combination of black and white elements, reflect the neighborhood's own manufactured authenticity. Harlem in the 1920s was a mass of contradictions: Determining its essential character is a foolhardy venture, for as one character says in Thurman and Rapp's play, "Harlem is sho' one funny place."¹⁴³ Yet examining the neighborhood as a contested space of racial images, weighing the varying notions of a unified definition of "African American," and sifting through the differing claims of a "real" Harlem, one exposes the fluid nature of an identity, presumed to be fixed, that is nonetheless elusive, deceptive, and fantastically mutable.

ENDNOTES

¹ "Harlem On My Mind," music and lyric by Irving Berlin, sung by Ethel Waters in As Thousands Cheer (1933); Frank Home and Andy Razaf's poems in Alexander Gumby Scrapbook Collection, Columbia University.

² Anita Handy, qtd. in "Her Idea Criticized," Pittsburgh Courier (March 20, 1926). In Carl Van Vechten Scrapbooks, New York Public Library.

³ Ibid.

⁴ "They Won't Keep Away," The New York Amsterdam News (October 23, 1929). Clipping in Alexander Gumby Scrapbook Collection, Columbia University.

⁵ George Hutchinson, The Harlem Renaissance in Black and White (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1995), 2.

⁶ Homi Bhabha, The Location of Culture (New York: Routledge, 1994), 252.

⁷ David Krasner, Resistance, Parody, and Double Consciousness in African American Theatre, 1895-1910 (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997), 96.

⁸ Lillian Faderman, Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers: A History of Lesbian Life in Twentieth-Century America (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 68.

⁹ Oscar Wilde, "The Decay of Lying," selections reprinted in Dramatic Theory and Criticism: Greeks to Grotowski, Bernard F. Dukore, ed. (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich College Publishes, 1974; 624-8), 626.

¹⁰ Elin Diamond, Unmaking Mimesis (New York: Routledge, 1997), 4. Emphasis in original.

¹¹ "Will the Real...Please Stand Up? An Introduction to the Issue." TDR 34 (Winter 1990), 21-27: 21.

¹² Lester Walton, "Harlem Resents Emphasis On Its Vice--Walton" (October 8, 1927). Clipping in Carl Van Vechten Scrapbook, New York Public Library.

¹³ "They Won't Keep Away."

¹⁴ "White Slummer Hit Blow in Report Depicting Conditions in Harlem District" (October 16, 1929). Clipping in Alexander Gumbly Scrapbook Collection, Columbia University.

¹⁵ "They Won't Keep Away."

¹⁶ "Harlem Churches Refute Night Life Charges." Undated clipping in Alexander Gumbly Scrapbook Collection, Columbia University.

¹⁷ Wilde, 627.

¹⁸ Michael Taussig, Mimesis and Alterity (New York: Routledge, 1993), 237.

¹⁹ Lewis A. Erenberg, Steppin' Out: New York Nightlife and the Transformation of American Culture, 1890-1930 (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1981), 253.

²⁰ Qtd. in Erenberg, 254. Luc Sante amusingly recounts a situation in the Pirate's Den involving local youths and the waiters, who were bedecked in "bandannas and eye patches, cutlasses dangling from their belts." Apparently, "a gang of Irish street kids" instigated a fight with the waiters, "thinking they were the genuine article." The owner summoned the police, but instead, he was arrested "on a Sullivan Law violation for having a brace of cutlasses hanging on the wall" (Low Life: Lures and Snares of Old New York, New York: Vintage Books, 1991), 334.

²¹ Robert C. Toll, Blacking Up: The Minstrel Show in Nineteenth-Century America. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), 263-4.

²² Krasner, 91.

²³ Stephen M. Fjellman, Vinyl Leaves: Walt Disney World and America (Boulder: Westview Press, 1992), 87.

²⁴ The Society of the Spectacle, trans. by Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone Books, 1994), 100.

²⁵ Variety (February 3, 1922): 20; and Erenberg, 254.

²⁶ Erenberg, 254.

²⁷ Daniel J. Boorstin, The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America (New York: Vintage Books, 1961), 234-5.

²⁸ Qtd. in Singer, 89.

²⁹ Singer, 135, 144.

³⁰ Erenberg, 254-5.

³¹ Boorstin, 106.

³² “The Caucasian Storms Harlem” from American Mercury, Vol. XI (August, 1927); reprinted in Nathan Irvin Huggins, ed., Voices from the Harlem Renaissance (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), 75.

³³ Langston Hughes, The Big Sea (New York: Thunder’s Mouth Press, 1991; orig. 1940), 223.

³⁴ David Levering Lewis, When Harlem Was in Vogue (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), 164.

³⁵ Jean Baudrillard, Simulations, trans. by Paul Foss, Paul Patton, and Philip Beitchman (New York: Semiotext(e), Inc., 1983), 146.

³⁶ Lacanian psychology points to the impossibility of representing the real, for as Andrew Quick summarizes in “Approaching the Real: Reality Effects and the Play of Fiction” (Performance Research: On Illusion, vol. 1, no. 3, Autumn 1996, 12-22): “In short Lacan indicates that the real cannot be reached since it always escapes symbolization. The real is the point of origin that is for ever lost and trauma marks this loss” (16).

³⁷ Carl Van Vechten, Nigger Heaven (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1926).

³⁸ Simulations.

³⁹ Steven Watson, The Harlem Renaissance: Hub of African-American Culture, 1920-1930 (New York: Pantheon Books, 1995), 103.

⁴⁰ Bruce Kellner, Carl Van Vechten and the Irreverent Decades (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1968): 220-24.

⁴¹ “Go Harlem.” lyric by Andy Razaf, music by Jimmie Johnson. Reprinted in Barry Singer’s Black and Blue: The Life and Lyrics of Andy Razaf (New York: Schirmer Books, 1992), 239.

⁴² See Michel Foucault, Discipline and Punish, tr. Alan Sheidan (New York: Vintage Books, 1979). For a discussion of the implications of theatrical structure and decorations, or “how theatres mean,” see Marvin Carlson’s Places of Performance: The Semiotics of Theatre Architecture (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989).

⁴³ Nigger Heaven, 149.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 235

⁴⁵ Reviews in Carl Van Vechten Scrapbooks, New York Public Library.

⁴⁶ Qtd. in Lewis, 189.

⁴⁷ Nathan Irvin Huggins, Harlem Renaissance (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), 126.

⁴⁸ Lewis, 188.

⁴⁹ Leon Coleman, Carl Van Vechten and the Harlem Renaissance: A Critical Assessment (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1998), 137.

⁵⁰ W.T. Lahmon, Jr., "Ebery Time I Wheel About I Jump Jim Crow: Cycles of Minstrel Transgression from Cool White to Vanilla Ice," in Inside the Minstrel Mask: Readings in Nineteenth-Century Blackface Minstrelsy, Annemarie Bean, James Hatch, Brooks McNamara, eds. (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1996), 283.

⁵¹ Qtd. in Coleman, 123.

⁵² Bhabha, 1-2.

⁵³ According to Stephen Fjellman, "Baudrillard's signs and models seem to be autonomous. He shares with many structural and poststructural thinkers--especially the deconstructionists he claims to oppose--the notion that the human subject has been deposed as an interesting ontological category. Decentered and fractionated, this subject is now merely an epiphenomenal effect of the semiotic juggernaut" (Vinyl Leaves, 301).

⁵⁴ The Explicit Body in Performance (New York: Routledge, 1997), 135.

⁵⁵ W.E.B. Du Bois, The Souls of Black Folk (1903), reprinted in Three Negro Classics, John Hope Franklin, ed. (New York: Avon, 1965), 215.

⁵⁶ "Romance and Tragedy in Harlem--A Review," Opportunity (October 1926), 316-17.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Review in The Crisis, vol. 33, no. 2 (December 1926).

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Qtd. in Walton.

⁶² "Literary Note," The Messenger (October, 1926). In Carl Van Vechten Scrapbooks, New York Public Library. The black community had rather conflicted feelings toward--to use Zora Neale Hurston's tongue-in-cheek term--Negrotarians. While they supported Blacks in their artistic endeavors, the recipients recognized that the reasons for support were not always so noble. Wallace Thurman wrote: "The Negrotarians have a formula, too. They have regimented their sympathies and fawn around Negroes with a cry in their heart and a superiority bug in their head. It's a new way to get a thrill, a new way to merit distinction in the community. . . this cultivating Negroes" (Infants of the Spring, Boston Northeastern University Press, 1992. Orig. published 1932).

⁶³ Baudrillard, 146. Emphasis in the original.

⁶⁴ "In 'Nigger Heaven'--Otherwise Harlem, U.S.A." by Viscountess Weymouth, "who has lately returned from America," Jamaican Mail (1929, exact date unspecified. Clipping in Carl Van Vechten scrapbooks, New York Public Library).

⁶⁵ Discussed in Schneider, 149.

⁶⁶ "The Negro Spirituals." in " (In The New Negro: Voices of the Harlem Renaissance, ed. Alain Locke (1925), with a new introduction by Arnold Rampersad (New York: Touchstone Books, 1997), 199.

⁶⁷ Weymouth.

⁶⁸ "Black Belt's Attitude on 'Harlem' Bit Worrisome to Colored Actors," Variety (February 27, 1929). 1, 92.

⁶⁹ Claude McKay, Home to Harlem (1928; Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1987), xviii-xvii.

⁷⁰ Hughes and Du Bois qtd. in Wayne F. Cooper's foreward to Home to Harlem (1987).

⁷¹ "Deep Harlem." review in Variety (January 9, 1929), 62.

⁷² Reviews qtd. in Barry Singer, Black and Blue: The Life and Lyrics of Andy Razaf (New York: Schirmer Books, 1992), 220.

⁷³ Qtd. in Allen Woll, Black Musical Theatre: From Coontown to Dreamgirls (New York: Da Capo Press, 1989), 133.

⁷⁴ "'Harlem'--38 and 2: An Approach to Perfection" (February 22, 1929. Review in Harlem clippings file, Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York Public Library).

⁷⁵ "Play About Negroes Trying for Truth" (March 4, 1929. Unidentified clipping); Alison Smith, "Other New Plays: God's Chillun." World (February 22, 1929); and Brooks Atkinson, "Up 'Harlem' Way: Negro Customs, Traits and Acting in a Black-Belt Melodrama--An Idea Lost in Shuffling Entertainment." New York Times, (March 3, 1929). Reviews in Harlem clippings file, Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York Public Library. Freda L. Scott offers a thorough account of the plot, history, and summary of the responses to the play in her 1991 dissertation, "Five African-American Playwrights on Broadway, 1923-1929" (City University of New York).

⁷⁶ The journal was reprinted in 1982 by Richard Bruce Nugent and Thomas H. Wirth.

⁷⁷ From the manuscript of her forthcoming Staging Tourism: Bodies on Display from Waikiki to Sea World (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2000), 245.

⁷⁸ The description and quotations from the play come from Thurman and Rapp's unpublished manuscript Black Belt: A Melodrama of Negro Life in Harlem in Three Acts which was later produced as Harlem on Broadway. The script includes revisions and notes in Thurman's handwriting and is contained in the Thurman Collection in the Beinecke Rare Books and Manuscripts Library, Yale University Library. Based on the reviews of the play, the script, originally penned in 1927, changed little from what appeared on opening night, February 20, 1929. Citations that follow are as they appear in the script: Act-Page (each new act begins with page 1).

⁷⁹ Harlem, I-16.

⁸⁰ Osofsky, 151.

⁸¹ Qtd. in Scott, 91.

⁸² Lewis and Whitney reviews qtd. in Scott, 259-60.

⁸³ Bhabha writes, "For a willingness to descend into that alien territory--where I have led you--may reveal that the theoretical recognition of the split-space of enunciation may open the way to conceptualizing an *international* culture, based not on the exoticism of multiculturalism or the *diversity* of cultures, but on the inscription and articulation of culture's *hybridity*. To that end we should remember that it is the 'inter'--the cutting edge of translation and negotiation, the *in-between* space--that carries the burden of the meaning of culture. It makes it possible to begin envisaging national, anti-nationalist histories of the 'people'" (38-9).

⁸⁴ Later in the letter, Thurman qualifies his disheartening Broadway experiences by comparing them to what he has encountered in California, where he was unsuccessfully trying to get some screenwriting work: "New York is heaven compared to the rest of the country despite certain unpleasant experiences one has. At least people don't stare at you or jump away as if you were a leper. Coming west three people left the observation car in protest to my being there" (Qtd. in Scott, 268).

⁸⁵ The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750-1925 (New York: Vintage Books, 1925), 454.

⁸⁶ 1-1.

⁸⁷ August Strindberg, "Preface to Miss Julie" (1888), reprinted in Dramatic Theory and Criticism: Greeks to Grotowski, Bernard F. Dukore, ed. (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich College Publishers, 1974, 564-74), 573.

⁸⁸ Una Chaudhuri, Staging Place: The Geography of Modern Drama (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1995). Chaudhuri explains: "The naturalist stage adumbrates a specific relationship between the performance and the spectator, connecting them to each other with an ambitious new contract of total visibility, total knowledge. The promise of the well-stocked stage of naturalism is a promise of omniscience, indeed of a transfer of omniscience from dramatist to spectator" (29).

⁸⁹ Zora Neale Hurston, Mules and Men (New York: Perennial Library, 1990; orig. 1935), 3.

⁹⁰ The New York World (March 1, 1929). (Clipping in Alexander Gumby Scrapbook Collection, Columbia University.)

⁹¹ "'Harlem' as Educational Drama," 1-3. (Manuscript in Wallace Thurman Collection in the Beinecke Rare Books and Manuscripts Library, Yale University Library.)

⁹² At the time, this section contained all of the articles related to criminal behavior of people in show business whether or not those crimes took place in that district.

⁹³ "Harlem's Nite Life As Court Related." Variety (December 21, 1927), 43.

⁹⁴ Handbill for show, qtd. in Gilbert Osofsky, Harlem: The Making of a Ghetto, Negro New York, 1890-1930, 2nd edition (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), 186.

⁹⁵ "Transplanting Harlem to 42d St.," New York Times (March 3, 1929). Clipping in Alexander Gumbly Scrapbook Collection.

⁹⁶ C.W.E. Bigsby, A Critical Introduction to Twentieth-Century American Drama: 1900-1940 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 156.

⁹⁷ I-23.

⁹⁸ "God's Chillun," New York Times, (February 21, 1929); and "Life in 'Harlem,'" New York Sun (February 21, 1929). Reviews in Harlem Clippings File, Museum of the City of New York.

⁹⁹ "'Harlem' Negro Melodrama of Racketeer Sort." Undated and without a source listed, this review appears in Harlem Clippings File, Museum of the City of New York. Ironically, the critic actually demonstrates the slipperiness of tracing the authenticity in a particular work. He writes, "A valiant attempt at authentic Harlem color, in the vein of disillusion and protest in which the one Negro author of the piece--William Jo[u]rdan Rapp--would appear to be thinking is the sodden picture of the 'rent party.'" Wallace Thurman was the black author of the two. When the review was reprinted in another paper, the error was corrected.

¹⁰⁰ "Other New Plays: God's Chillun," World (February 22, 1929).

¹⁰¹ In his forward to Black Theatre USA, Shine writes: "Even today someone interested in plays dealing with black life or folklore is usually referred to these writers. The integrity of their intentions is unquestionable, but they lacked a true knowledge of the black experience. Ironically, at the same time that works of these white playwrights were being produced, an amazingly large number of black playwrights were recording a truer black experience in numerous unproduced plays. These plays have been virtually ignored, except for a few scattered productions in black colleges, community theatres, high schools, and churches" (x).

¹⁰² The play is reprinted in Leo Hamalian and James V. Hatch, eds., The Roots of African American Drama: An Anthology of Early Plays, 1858-1938 (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1991), 159-185. For a discussion of the significance of Willis Richardson, see Bernard L. Peterson, Jr.'s "Willis Richardson: Pioneer Playwright" in Errol Hill, ed., The Theatre of Black Americans: A Collection of Critical Essays (New York: Applause Theatre Book Publishers, 1987), 113-125. Peterson offers a biography of Richardson and outlines the important themes in his many plays. He says: "Willis Richardson is one of Black Theatre's genuine pioneers: and like all pioneers, he was considerably ahead of his time. Too far ahead, in fact, to personally realize all of the benefits which his prolific output would seem to have merited" (125).

¹⁰³ Reviews in Scrapbook Collection in the Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York Public Library.

¹⁰⁴ As Lady Gregory indicates, the movement was a nationalist effort to unite Ireland and develop a dramatic tradition. In a statement composed by William Butler Yeats, Lady Gregory, and Edward Martyn, which would serve as the basis for the formation of the Abbey Players, they wrote: "We propose to have performed in Dublin in the spring of every year certain Celtic and Irish plays, which whatever be their degree of excellence will be written with a high ambition, and so to build up a Celtic and Irish school of dramatic literature. . . . We will show that Ireland is not the home of buffoonery and of easy

sentiment, as it has been represented, but the home of an ancient idealism" (from Lady Gregory's autobiographical Our Irish Theatre, and reprinted in Modern Irish Drama. John P. Harrington, ed. [New York: W.W.W. Norton & Co., 1991], 378). Recent studies have examined these nationalist endeavors as an attempt to replace the British colonial struggle, not with the best interest of the "folk" in mind, but with an agenda imbued with the ideals of its upper-class leaders. See Adrian Frazier's Behind the Scenes: Yeats, Horrihan, and the Struggle for the Abbey Theatre (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), and Stephen Tift's "The Parricidal Phantasm: Irish Nationalism and the *Playboy* Riots" in Nationalisms and Sexualities, Andrew Parker, et al., eds. (New York: Routledge, 1992), 313-34.

¹⁰⁵ Richardson advocated a "kind of play" that "shows the soul of a people" (qtd. in Hatch and Hamalian, 161). Alain Locke stressed that black writers should follow the example of the Irish Renaissance writers in his introduction to The New Negro: "Without pretense to their political significance, Harlem has the same rôle to play for the New Negro as Dublin has had for the New Ireland or Prague for the New Czechoslovakia" (7).

¹⁰⁶ I-22.

¹⁰⁷ I-4.

¹⁰⁸ I-6.

¹⁰⁹ Locke. "The New Negro." 3.

¹¹⁰ Cornel West, "Black Strivings in a Twilight Civilization" in The Future of the Race, eds. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Cornel West (New York: Vintage Books, 1996), 87.

¹¹¹ I-19.

¹¹² West, 85.

¹¹³ West, 87.

¹¹⁴ I-18.

¹¹⁵ I-19.

¹¹⁶ Souls of Black Folk, 215.

¹¹⁷ Qtd. in Krasner, 97.

¹¹⁸ "Opening Nights with Walter Winchell" (February 21, 1929). Clipping in Alexander Gumby Scrapbook Collection, Columbia University Library.

¹¹⁹ I-5.

¹²⁰ "'Harlem.' a Melodrama About the Rent-Paying Parties and Gamblers of the Black Belt. With a Large Negro Cast." New York Evening Post (February 21, 1929). Clipping in Alexander Gumby Scrapbook Collection, Columbia University.

¹²¹ I-48.

¹²² Richard Lockridge, “Life in ‘Harlem,’” New York Sun (February 21, 1929). Clipping in the Museum of the City of New York, Theatre Collection.

¹²³ Desmond, 2.

¹²⁴ Lockridge.

¹²⁵ Qtd. in Desmond, 11. Emphasis mine.

¹²⁶ Robert Littell.

¹²⁷ Brooks Atkinson, Broadway (New York: Macmillan, 1970), 248.

¹²⁸ Burns Mantle, “Realism and the Negro Drama.” Daily News (March 1, 1929). Clipping in Alexander Gumby Scrapbook Collection, Columbia University.

¹²⁹ “When White is Black” (February 21, 1929). Review in Harlem clippings file. Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York Public Library.

¹³⁰ “Harlem” (February 21, 1929). Review in Harlem clippings file, Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York Public Library.

¹³¹ As the glossary in the playbill explains, the “Numbers” was “A gambling game peculiar to Harlem; a sort of lottery based on three figures of the daily Clearing House Statement. The banker holds the money bags, pays winners, if any, and allows his runners a commission of all the sums they bring in. . . . Often, when a number of people pick the correct number, a banker disappears. Also, runners sometimes pocket the bets, not turning them over to the banker. The whole business is illegal, so the number entrepreneurs, like the bootleggers, are open to hijacking as they can hardly appeal to the police if their runners and collectors are held up.” (Playbill in the Harlem clippings file, Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York Public Library.)

¹³² I-51.

¹³³ III-8.

¹³⁴ “The Americanization of Melodrama,” in American Melodrama, Daniel Gerould, ed. (New York: Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1983), 28. Bigsby, 156.

¹³⁵ III-45.

¹³⁶ III-5.

¹³⁷ Alisa Solomon, Re-Dressing the Canon: Essays on Theater and Gender (New York: Routledge, 1998), 55.

¹³⁸ “Invoking ‘The Native’: Body Politics in Contemporary Hawaiian Tourist Shows,” TDR 156 (Winter 1997), 105.

¹³⁹ Chaudhuri, 58.

¹⁴⁰ Solomon, 54.

¹⁴¹ Bhabha invokes a similar comparison between works by marginalized authors as reflective of the emerging national cultures from which they write. In a postcolonial epoch, the very thought of a "pure," "ethnically cleansed" national identity is absurd. He explains, "The very concepts of homogenous national cultures, the consensual or contiguous transmission of historical traditions, or 'organic' ethnic communities--*as the grounds of cultural comparativism*--are in a profound process of redefinition" (5, emphasis in original).

¹⁴² Solomon, 57.

¹⁴³ 1-4.

CHAPTER 2

"Gimme a Pigfoot and a Bottle of Beer"

Performance, Privacy, and Harlem Parties

Gimme a pigfoot and a bottle of beer
Send me, gate. I don't care

I feel like I wanna clown
Give the piano player a drink because he's bringing me down

He's got rhythm, yeah, when he stomps his feet
He sends me right off to sleep

Check all your razors and your guns
Do the shim sham shimmy 'til the risin' sun

Gimme a reefer and a gang o' gin
Slay me, 'cause I'm in my sin
Slay me, 'cause I'm full of gin

--"Gimme a Pigfoot" by Wesley Wilson¹

"Do the Shim Sham Shimmy 'til the Risin' Sun"

Although many of the New York critics balked at the "lewdness" and "animalistic exhibitions" of the on-stage rent party in Harlem, the playwrights publicly acknowledged that the goings-on were nothing compared with the spectacle of an actual Harlem party. Sensual dancing, torrid entertainment, and sexual experimentation were hallmarks of such affairs. As Thurman and Rapp claimed, "The party on the stage of the Apollo is a tame affair compared to the average Harlem rent party."² Indeed parties in Harlem, such as rent parties, "buffet flats," and private society functions (of course, the kind of party depended on the social and economic status of the sponsors), became a mainstay of the neighborhood's cultural scene. And whether staged to assist a beleaguered tenant raise a month's rent, or offered as a late-night hot-spot in someone's tiny flat, or thrown by a wealthy socialite for a select circle of friends, Harlem parties generated a great deal of

excitement among black residents. There were often white people present at such parties, but unlike the hottest nightclubs and speakeasies in Harlem, the attendees were predominantly black. Most importantly, private parties provided respite from curiosity seekers and inquisitive onlookers. As Langston Hughes explains in his autobiography, The Big Sea, "Non-theatrical, non-intellectual Harlem was an unwilling victim of its own vogue. It didn't like to be stared at by white folks."³ These get-togethers permitted Harlem residents to enjoy themselves away from the watchful gaze of downtowners and tourists. They could, according to Hughes, "do the black-bottom with no stranger behind [them] trying to do it, too."⁴ As the neighborhood became more and more public, privacy grew increasingly more valued—and more difficult to maintain.

Ironically, rent parties were originally staged from economic necessity for Harlem residents, but as the success of Thurman and Rapp's play and the allusions to them in numerous literary works and musical revues imply, they became quite marketable. And more importantly, as marginalized sites of sexual and theatrical experimentation, these parties quickly earned the reputation among whites as the source of putative black culture. Social theorist and historian Michael Bronski describes urban neighborhoods that were characterized by their predominant racial or sexual makeup (such as Harlem or Greenwich Village) as originators and purveyors of the avant-garde, and he refers to such areas as the "crucibles of culture, change, and pleasure."⁵ According to Bronski, the aesthetic achievements generated in these neighborhoods--borne not from an essentialized concept of race, sexual orientation, and performance, but from the political and cultural liberation that marked these areas--eventually permeated the mainstream and irrevocably altered popular culture.⁶ The Harlem parties--particularly the rent parties--were themselves a nexus of the forbidden pleasures associated with race, performance, and sexuality. Inevitably, cultural appropriation followed, thus stimulating the rapid and widespread embrace of this marginalized black entertainment.

Because they were often a training ground for young musicians and performers, the rent parties of the 1920s offer a crucial site of inquiry in analyzing the theatre and entertainment of the Harlem Renaissance. On the one hand, these parties fostered a private performance of race and sexuality, allowing Blacks, gays, and lesbians to forge new alliances and communities away from the stares of curious sightseers. On the other hand, the parties also helped to establish a private economy in Harlem. Through pleasure and performance, Harlem residents supported each other, bolstering financially strapped families with much needed income. At the same time, the exclusiveness of the parties removed racial expectations from the creation of performance, temporarily taking race off the market of cultural capital, until the inexorable process of assimilation and commodification pulled them back on.

Private parties were especially important in developing a sense of community among the Harlem residents. The black newspapers often covered many of the high profile parties, but gossip about party guests, activities, and performances contributed to the neighborhood lore. Those thrown by black millionairess and socialite A'Leilia Walker, the daughter of Madame C.J. Walker, who had made millions in the 1910s from her hair products for black women, were especially grist for the gossip mill. The guests at these parties were usually at the opposite end of the socio-economic scale than those attending most Harlem rent parties, but the same sense of reckless abandon and liberation was often evident. The Amsterdam News and the New York Age frequently printed the guest lists of her parties and indicated that they were not at all the stodgy society gatherings one might expect. In December 1924, for example, the Age described a party at her "palatial residence" as a "brilliant affair," which included music "furnished by Joshua Europe's Orchestra." As the article explains, "The guests assembled at 11 p.m. and dancing was enjoyed until early Monday morning. The house was elaborately decorated and a buffet breakfast was served."⁷ Word around town, however, alleged that Walker's parties often offered much more than just music, dance, and breakfast.

Mabel Hampton, a black entertainer who performed in the choruses of shows in Coney Island, the Lafayette Theatre in Harlem, and the Cherry Lane Theatre in Greenwich Village, vividly recalled one of A'Leilia Walker's parties, which she attended upon her arrival in Harlem in the early 1920s and confirmed the truth behind these widespread rumors. One night in 1921, Hampton arrived at Walker's mansion in Harlem's Sugar Hill section at 108-110 West 136th Street, where she was supposed to meet her female companion who had secured the invitation. She rang the bell, was greeted by one of Walker's manservants, and she was escorted into a large, sumptuously decorated room. Hampton waited ten minutes in this room before A'Leilia Walker, wearing a maroon robe and slippers, welcomed her and asked Hampton to follow her to another section of the house. As Walker pushed open the folding door to a room, Hampton was amazed at the tableau in front of her. There were some fourteen or fifteen men and women, black and white, none of whom were wearing any clothes, lounging about on oversized pillows. Soft music filled the room, gentle lights emanated from the floor, and the men and women lay in each other's arms. When she looked more closely, though, Hampton noticed something even odder: The men were lying on top of other men, and women were lying on top of other women. "Lookit here!" she thought as she surveyed the room. "O.K., as long as they don't bother me."

After a short time, Hampton relaxed into the milieu, removed her own clothes, put on a robe supplied by her hostess, and took a seat on one of the pillows. As she sipped a glass of wine, she took in the ambience of the room, and as she remembered the scene: "Some man over there was kissing another one. A woman over there was kissing another one. Boy--everybody was kissing." Finally, about an hour later, her friend arrived. Her friend also took off her clothes, made herself comfortable on a pillow next to Hampton, and in no time the two women were hugging and kissing as well. As Hampton summarily explained: "Seen the rest of them do it, what the hell, I'll do it too. It was fascinating."^b

A 'Leilia Walker's parties were notorious for their sexual experimentation, but even in more modest dwellings, such as Harlem rooming houses and apartment buildings, non-heterosexual coupling was not uncommon. As George Chauncey, Lillian Faderman, and Eric Garber have documented in their histories of lesbian, gay, and bisexual subcultures in New York City, private parties in Harlem provided protected spaces for lesbians, bisexuals, and gay men to meet and mingle. The parties, like the one described above, may have taken place in luxurious Harlem homes, but more frequently they were held in less affluent apartments like the working class home represented in Thurman and Rapp's Harlem. Hampton, for example, especially remembered the nightly parties "with the girls" in her apartment building on 122nd Street. People would pay a small amount at the door, and while at the soiree, they danced, sang, and, of course, enjoyed the standard rent party culinary fare (for a small price): bootlegged liquor, pig feet, chittlins, and cold beer. But the particular parties Hampton generally attended were open to women only. According to Hampton:

The bulldykers would come and bring their women with them. And you wasn't supposed to jive with them, you know. They danced up a breeze. They did the Charleston, they did a little bit of everything. They were all colored women. Sometimes we ran into someone who had a white woman with them. But me, I'd venture out with any of them. I just had a ball.'

Within a private home nestled in a very public Harlem, Mabel Hampton and her lesbian cronies could congregate socially and enjoy the sexually liberating music, dances, and attitudes that characterized the Harlem Renaissance away from the penetrating stares of curious onlookers.

Theatrically, the parties served an important function as well. Many of the gatherings featured entertainers, ranging from famous jazz and blues performers, including Thomas "Fats" Waller and Bessie Smith, to popular comedians, such as Jackie "Moms" Mabley, to infamous and bizarre "specialty" acts that played the uptown party circuit. High

up on the list in the latter category would have to be a young black singer and pianist named “Joey,” whose particular talent was removing his clothes, sitting on a lit candle, and making it disappear.¹⁰ Whatever the individual’s talent, though, the parties provided a performer an appreciative environment in which to try out a new song, comic sketch, or vaudeville routine. After further refinement, the act might find its way into a Harlem nightclub, in black vaudeville, and perhaps eventually on Broadway. In an article entitled, “Where Jazz Was Born,” Wallace Thurman alleges that the private Harlem parties were the birthplaces of many “dance crazes” that were subsequently performed for and then appropriated by mainstream audiences.¹¹

“Up in Harlem Every Saturday Night”

Langston Hughes rhapsodized over the raucous, communal spirit of Harlem rent parties, which were also called “whist parties,” in numerous poems as well as in his autobiography. To him, throughout the 1920s they remained the one authentic black social event that was unspoiled by white tourism. As he explained in The Big Sea:

The Saturday night rent parties that I attended were often more amusing than any night club, in small apartments where God knows who lived--because the guests seldom did--but where the piano would often be augmented by a guitar, or an odd cornet, or somebody with a pair of drums walking in off the street. And where awful bootleg whiskey and good fried fish or steaming chitterling were sold at very low prices. And the dancing and singing and impromptu entertaining went on until dawn came in the windows.¹²

Even more importantly, he claimed that these parties offered a social outlet for the black working class, who were denied access to some of the more glamorous nightclubs and speakeasies in their own neighborhood. At the parties that he regularly frequented, Hughes recalled mingling with Harlem’s laborers, including “ladies’ maids and truck drivers.

laundry workers and shoe shine boys, seamstresses and porters.”¹³ And Wallace Thurman remarked similarly that rent parties were to the working class what elaborate parties such as A'Lelia Walker's were to Harlem's elite, stating that rent parties were “as essential to ‘low Harlem’ as the cultured receptions and soirees held on ‘strivers’ row’ are to ‘high Harlem.’”¹⁴ Most notably, the music and dance were far less refined than one would hear and see at one of Walker's parties, but the atmosphere was no less sexually charged.

Describing the dancing at a typical rent party, he wrote:

The ‘mess around’ is also a body dance, and the couples are standing transfixed beneath the solitary red glob which provides the light: they bounce on the balls of their feet, while the mid-sections of their bodies go round and round. Still another couple is doing the ‘fish tail’ dipping to the floor and slowly shimmying into an upright position then madly whirling a moment before settling into a methodical slow drag one-step.¹⁵

The admixture of alcohol, jazz music, and feelings of political and social liberation engendered at these parties contributed to a sense of sexual freedom as well. At the end of the week, the parties offered a social outlet for the pent-up economic difficulties that many of Harlem's residents faced.

Rent parties were not held exclusively on Saturday nights, although this was the most favored day of the week. Of course, Saturdays were particularly popular because people did not have to work on Sunday, and often a party followed a pay day. Everyone was welcome at a rent party, but the only provision, according to Thurman, was “that the public pay twenty-five cents admission fee and buy plentifully of the food and drinks offered for sale.”¹⁶ But as rent parties became more and more ubiquitous, as well as more profitable, competition arose among organizers, who resorted to ambitious, but surreptitious, advertising strategies. While avoiding too much publicity that might attract the attention of the police who might, Thurman pointed out, “want to collect a license fee or else drop in and search for liquor,”¹⁷ residents deposited brightly colored cards around

Harlem, such as in subway stations, pool halls, cigar stores, and in the gates of apartment buildings' elevators. These tiny advertisements, which were the size of business cards, were printed with catchy slogans and listed the name and address of the resident throwing the party. For example, blues singer Clara Smith posted the following card around town:

Come on Boys don't be Ruff, just have a nice time,

and Strutt Your Stuff

--- AT ---

A SOCIAL WHIST PARTY

GIVEN BY

MRS. CLARA SMITH

at 18 WEST 130th STREET

Saturday Evening, June 16, 1928

GOOD MUSIC

REFRESHMENTS¹⁸

Likewise, Mabel Hampton remembered going to parties quite frequently, particularly ones exclusively for women. On September 22, 1932, she met her lifelong partner, Lillian Foster, while waiting for a bus. Just a few days later, Foster invited Hampton to a party which was advertised on a pale blue card with the following exhortation:

Hard times are here, but not [to] stay

So come, sing and dance your blues away, at

A Sunday Matinee

Given by

LILLIAN

151 West 130th Street, Room 12

Sunday, September 25th, 1932

Good Music

Refreshments Served¹⁹

Because private parties afforded considerable more protection and discretion than the nightclubs and speakeasies, they were, according to Eric Garber, "the best place for Harlem lesbians and gay men to socialize."²⁰

Rent parties, although romanticized in the literature, music, and drama of the period were actually a creative measure in dealing with the dire economic circumstances facing many African Americans in Harlem beginning in the 1920s. Lower wages and higher rents forced black residents to develop inventive means of making ends meet. In 1923, the New York Age reported that "many of the ills Harlem is suffering from as a community can be traced to the evil of high rents and overcrowding, which are more acute in this section than anywhere else in the city."²¹ By 1928, the New York State Department of Health announced that because of poorly constructed and overcrowded housing in Harlem, "the tuberculosis death rate among [N]egroes in New York was three and one-half times greater than that of the white population."²² For some individuals, necessity forced them to open their homes to illegal activities, which under normal circumstances they would never have condoned. Bernice Gore, a Bermuda immigrant, for instance, once said she "thought rent parties were disgraceful" because of the "corn liquor," gambling, and sexual activity they offered. But when her husband deserted her, leaving Gore, as she stated, "with a sixty-dollar-a-month apartment on my hands, and no job, I soon learned, like everyone else, to rent my rooms out and throw these Saturday get-togethers."²³

The particularly high rents that plagued Harlem were actually a direct result of the unparalleled arrival of migrating Blacks that began around World War I. In addition, greedy landlords played on the fears of white residents and homeowners who tried to maintain the white composition of a particular block. By threatening to rent to black people, these landlords intended to force the sale of properties at inflated prices to wealthy white owners intent on preserving the racial status quo. As late as 1925, near the pinnacle of the black invasion, attempts at staving off further black encroachment were still evident in the predominantly white borders of Harlem. An article appearing in the New York Age, for

example, recounts the efforts of Nat Levine, an owner of a private home in a "fashionable section of West End avenue, at 101st street," to sell this building at a disproportionate cost to a buyer interested in keeping black families at bay. The house was adjacent to a well-appointed apartment building where, according to the article, Supreme Court Justice Aaron J. Levy (who is credited as "the author of the law which forbids discrimination in New York State in public places because of race or creed"), John C. Knapp, vice president of the Otis Elevator Co., "and several other prominent people live." Levine, who is identified in the article as a "Jewish milliner," posted a sign advertising: "Furnished Rooms for Rent for Colored Folks. Inquire Within." Although the article explains that "it is not thought that [Judge Levy] or others in the apartment [building next door] would make objection to living besides respectable colored people," the sale was apparently averted when Harlem's papers identified the ploy and urged prospective black renters to avoid being "catspaws" in such a scheme. The article also proudly claims that "the colored tenant is becoming wise to the selfish plan of certain property owners who want to get rid of holdings at a greatly inflated price, and use a threat of renting to Negroes as a means to that end."²⁴ Still, black people continued to pour into Harlem throughout the 1920s creating an unprecedented housing crisis and cramped living conditions. As David Levering Lewis documents, one out every four Harlem families had at least one lodger, which was two times as many as whites had, and there were a large number of people who employed a "hot bed" system, which meant that tenants on different work shifts shared the same mattress.²⁵

Social historian Gilbert Osofsky attributes the rapid deterioration of the neighborhood to the en masse migration into the rather limited geographical area. In fact, Osofsky points to the 1920s as the period in which Harlem emerged "as a slum." He writes, "Largely within the space of a single decade Harlem was transformed from a potentially ideal community to a neighborhood with manifold social and economic problems called 'deplorable,' 'unspeakable,' 'incredible.'" And quoting the chairman of a New York City housing reform committee in 1927, he adds, "The State would not allow

cows to live in some of these apartments used by colored people . . . in Harlem."²⁶

Statically, the state of affairs was indeed distressing. In 1923, the New York Age reported that the average black worker earned \$25 per month (or roughly \$1,300 a year), and spent from one-half to two-thirds of these monthly wages on rent. The report also states that black tenants generally paid twice as much for rent than average white New Yorkers. "In one case," the article explains, "on 145th street, colored tenants moved into a five-room apartment paying \$80 per month although the former white tenants only paid \$40 per month. There are still many white families in this house with apartments the same size and just as good who do not pay more than \$40." The article cites another example in which a private house on 130th Street previously rented to white tenants for \$70 per month, while the black residents paid \$175.²⁷ And as the decade proceeded, the situation became even more dire.

In 1924, the New York Age reported that a five-storey apartment house on 139th Street near Lenox Avenue had set a new high for rentals in the neighborhood. The one, two, and three-room apartments in the building were going for \$45, \$65, and \$85 per month. Although the prices were exorbitant, the apartments were anything but luxurious. The bathrooms, the article points out, were considerably smaller than those in analogous apartment buildings, because they included shower baths rather than bathtubs, and furthermore, the reporter claims that the "cheapest materials" had been used in the building's construction. The article concludes: "As it is a walkup apartment house, realty men in the neighborhood are surprised that the agents are asking such a high rental. They are wondering whether Harlem tenants are going to take these apartments."²⁸ Yet because of the social desirability of the neighborhood and the ease in which black people could acquire apartments compared with other places in the city, overpriced apartments did rent, and the fleecing of tenants by landlords was often grudgingly tolerated.

Even rental agents and brokers profitted from the surge of black interest in Harlem real estate. Prospective tenants might find that an additional \$20-\$50 in "security deposits."

"bonus charges." or other ambiguous fees had been tacked on to their initial rental agreement, which were in addition to those exacted by the landlord. In Harlem's rental climate of the 1920s, such fees were almost always paid. As one journalist gloomily admitted, the added expenses were a byproduct of the great demand for the limited housing available. "In many cases," the reporter explained, "it is charged that prospective tenants, in anxiety to secure rooms in a certain building or section, will themselves offer more than is asked as rental."²⁹

Rarely did occupants and prospective tenants wrangle over the inequities with which they were faced, and when they did, they were confronted with extremely difficult battles. In 1925, a group of tenants from 574 St. Nicholas Avenue took their landlord to court for extortionate rentals. They argued that their rent was considerably higher than that paid by the former white tenants, who had been all but succeeded by black tenants. Additionally, the litigants alleged that when the building had been rented to whites, the landlord had employed a separate operator for the switchboard and elevator. When the apartment house had become predominantly black, however, the landlord dismissed one of the employees, making a single person responsible for both duties. When the tenants complained about the greatly reduced services, as well as the increased costs of phone calls, the landlord purportedly responded that "if they were not satisfied with the rents, to get out and into other houses with a lower scale of rents, houses that were of a class to which they were accustomed."³⁰ Each tenant's case was tried separately, and the outcome is unclear, but one individual involved in the suit complained that the judge "made the direct assertion that the tenants should pay the asked for rent or get out and find other quarters."³¹

Although many black residents were oppressed economically, Harlem was not remotely--contrary to Osofsky's estimation--depressed. As Lewis concedes, "Whatever its contradictions . . . the one certainty almost all who lived there shared was that Harlem was no slum. Ghetto, maybe. Slum, never."³² This description is not meant to be taken as merely coy semantics. Within the confined neighborhood, black people took immense pride

in their community and exuberantly paraded their social liberation. In black publications such as the Amsterdam News, New York Age, Inter-State Tattler, and the Messenger, black journalists and essayists triumphantly declared the political, academic, and cultural accomplishments of Harlem residents even more boldly than they did the terrifying housing statistics, arrests, and artistic disappointments. Socialites were toasted; recent college graduates were honored; and famous and not-so-famous performers, authors, and sport stars were feted in the pages of the weekly and monthly issues. The doomsday reports published by the Committee of Fourteen, the New York State Department of Health, and the New York City Housing Department belied the attitude of racial pride held by most of the black residents north of Central Park. Much of the population that lived there may have been economically oppressed, but most surely would not have admitted that technically Harlem was indeed a "ghetto." Rather paradoxically, this seemingly willing ghettoization of Harlem was largely responsible for the generous outpouring of artistic and cultural riches from the black community.

In The Pleasure Principle, Michael Bronski points to the multiple functions of the ghetto. First, he argues that the ghetto provides protection for its inhabitants. That is, an African American would be less likely to encounter police harrassment and racially incited violence in a predominantly black neighborhood than in a white one. For the most part, in the 1920s black people could walk down the streets of Harlem and not be afraid of random acts of prejudice. As Elton Fax, a black resident once recalled, "Man we *strolled* in Harlem. This was our turf."³³ And to many black immigrants, 1920s Harlem seemed to be the embodiment of racial security and represented a guarded cocoon from white biases.

This sense of enclosure connects with the second function of the ghetto, which is to "contain" a minority group feared by the dominant group. As Bronski explains, "By separating 'the other' in a secure geographic area, [ghettos] ensure that the minority is 'visible' and easy to detect."³⁴ Knowing that what one fears is relegated to one area makes the threat of infiltration and assimilation less terrifying. In the 1920s, whites could visit

black people in their "natural environment." partake of their cultural "otherness" in often strictly regulated venues, and return to their own segregated and secure neighborhoods. In this regard, Harlem offered a controlled sanctuary for alleviating white anxiety about exotic blackness without having to force social change. As Mel Watkins explains ironically, "Even as they violently suppressed black efforts to advance in education and employment, and exercise their lawful rights, whites turned to the black community as a model for their rebellion against puritanical rural values."³⁵

Finally, the third function of the ghetto, according to Bronski, is as "a place of display," which furnishes "visible evidence of a minority presence and culture."³⁶ In the United States during the 1920s, Harlem personified the wellspring of African-American culture and accomplishments, and to the dominant culture, it was a cradle of "otherness." Although other urban centers throughout the country supported and encouraged new work by African Americans, the fame accorded Harlem made it an international symbol of black achievement. Harlem's extensive visibility attracted artists, authors, and entertainers to experiment with form and present new work in this environment. The neighborhood's geographical borders and the sense of refuge engendered there, enabled the production of Harlem's most magnificent cultural successes.

Increased visibility, however, brings greater pressure for success. As "slummers" began invading the neighborhood and predominant black public spaces were gradually overrun by white tourists, artists sought new settings in which to develop their craft. Yet, musicians and performers did not need to burrow too far into the ghetto to find supportive and sympathetic audiences. Entertaining in private homes allowed them to try out new material away from the critical gaze of critics, theatre-owners, and paying white spectators. Rent parties, which attracted a mostly black working-class crowd but also accommodated wealthy downtowners, were the ideal space for artistic development. These public-private environments--for invitations to the rent parties, even though they were confined to the neighborhood, could only be partially restrictive--guaranteed a liberated and secure

atmosphere. The situations were ideal for developing new work because artists and audiences mingled within intimate surroundings, feedback for the performer was immediate, and the partygoers, who were usually neighbors, were there to enjoy the social freedom denied them in many parts of the city. In fact, a central purpose of the parties was building and celebrating a sense of community, and a sexual energy often pervaded the occasions. As jazz musician Willie “the Lion” Smith pointed out, “The parties were recommended to newly arrived single gals as the place to go to get acquainted.”³⁷ Additionally, rent parties functioned as the gateway, for better or worse, between the margins of Harlem life and the rest of the world.

The clearest indication of this is in the meteoric success of jazz pianist and composer Thomas “Fats” Waller who cultivated his prodigious talent in the rent party “circuit.” Waller, in fact, wrote one of the most famous compositions about a rent party called “The Joint is Jumpin’.” and began his professional career playing piano at one of these uptown “struts.” According to Barry Singer, 17-year-old Waller made his rent party debut in 1921 at the Lenox Avenue Apartments on 141st Street. An “unofficial” rent party booker named “Lippy” Boyette orchestrated the engagement, and according to Singer, “Waller dazzled his co-performers, as well as the strut’s assembled revelers.”³⁸ Waller’s legendary personality was particularly well-suited to the party atmosphere. A man of huge talent, but with an equally great lust for enjoyment, Waller ate and drank voraciously, and exchanged his remarkable abilities for ready cash. He sold songs anonymously, made piano rolls, and played burlesque houses all for a pittance to indulge his appetites. In the early 1920s, he ventured into recording, but as David A. Jasen and Gene Jones explain, “His recordings were aimed at the urban race market (that is, Harlem), yet his target audience could hear him practically any hour of the day or night, performing without pay at rent parties and clubs as long as the free food and liquor kept coming.”³⁹ Harlem could not contain Waller’s prodigious gifts, and it was just a matter of time before--despite himself--

Waller made a name for himself outside of the ghetto as one of the greatest nightclub pianists of the 1920s, and later as a singer and Broadway show composer.

Waller's advancement from the rent party circuit to widespread appreciation is symptomatic of the black entertainment apparatus of the time. Because rent parties occurred in non-commercialized, semi-private spaces, they were accorded a great deal of caché, representing a point of origin for many of the musical compositions, club acts, and dance crazes that characterized the Harlem Renaissance. This presumed authenticity made the products of the rent parties especially attractive to mainstream audiences, who craved the "real thing." And rather quickly, these performances, or versions of them, filtered into the wider culture through the work of savvy musicians, singers, and dancers. Ann Douglas refers to the process as "instant assimilation."⁴⁰ In the case of certain music and dance forms, the cultural attributes were subsumed as they became more popular and were adapted to different performance styles. For example in his novel Parties, which offers a sensational look at New York's parties from Harlem to Greenwich Village to Brooklyn, Carl Van Vechten wrote prophetically on the eve the Lindy Hop became a national dance craze:

Nearly all the dancing now to be seen in our musical shows is of Negro origin, but both critics and public are so ignorant of this fact that the production of a new Negro revue is an excuse for the revival of the old hoary lament that it is a pity the Negro can't create anything for himself, that he is obliged to imitate the white man's revues. This, in brief, has been the history of the Cake-Walk, the Bunny Hug, the Turkey Trot, the Charleston, and the Black Bottom. It will probably be the history of the Lindy Hop.⁴¹

As Bronski reminds, while culture often develops in the ghetto and among subcultures, "it can quickly become commodified and marketed."⁴²

Black performance, appropriated from the half-hidden and semi-private enclaves of the widely visible, but inscrutable ghetto, was devoured by the larger culture, which is

always on the lookout for the newest vogue. The "mysteriousness" of the performances, the new mechanisms that connected popular entertainers, and the anonymity of the black "originators" guaranteed fast, sure, and undetected passageway into the mainstream. As Ann Douglas writes, the technological advances in mass media in the 1920s, including developments in radio, recordings, and film, "ensured that black performance would be transmitted to the larger culture and absorbed by it in a state both incomplete, even mutilated, and strangely, potently, intact."⁴³ The style of a dance like the Black Bottom, for instance, might become slightly more refined and genteel as it passed into public venues frequented by middle-class whites, but the madcap vitality, liberating physical abandon reflecting the mood of the black ghetto from where the dance emerged, could not be squelched. That is, the *spirit* of the dance remained undiminished even after it was taken up by dancers who adapted the Black Bottom to their own style.

In 1928, Wallace Thurman described the manner in which black performance was appropriated, adapted, and assimilated by the mainstream in an article called "Where Jazz Was Born." He posits that the Harlem rent party was where everyday black people congregated, and these were the breeding ground for new dance steps and performance routines. At a typical party, he says, one is sure to see what Thurman calls a "stereotyped [N]egro vaudeville performer," or a black entertainer who feeds off and exploits Harlem's newest artistic creations. Thurman explains that this performer "makes it his business to patronise the most colourful of these parties whenever he can and once there he becomes a part of the crowd, observing their every action and following as best he can the most original and most striking of their dance steps." The following day, the performer faithfully reproduces what he learned at the party, refines it, and then teaches "the finished product" to his vaudeville partner. Next in the process, the dance team presents their act on the black vaudeville circuit, where other entertainers imitate the new dance. This continues "until finally some white performer on a big vaudeville circuit appropriates what he has seen a less well-known performer do, labels it with a catchy name and presents it as his own."

The cycle completes its course when the dance infiltrates the most staid environments.

Thurman explains: “In a few more months scandalised society matrons object to dashing debutantes disturbing the decorum of their fashionable dances by reproducing refined versions of the mad, stark, dance rhythms first seen in a Harlem ‘house rent party.’”⁴⁴

The process that Thurman describes demonstrates the profound influence that the partly-private, veiled side of Harlem had on the dominant culture. In the 1920s, the neighborhood represented the source of new forms of entertainment, and it was available for anyone who wanted a piece of it. Harlem seemed to be an exotic, waiting-to-be-discovered new continent just a quick cab ride away, and it seemed predisposed to be penetrated and explored. The riches people mined from its magnificent depths were assumed to be theirs for the taking. There were no areas out of bounds for white enjoyment in Harlem: middle-class whites believed that they had the right to observe, study, and intrude upon the lives of African Americans from any vantage point they chose. Ann Douglas points out, “In New York the presence of the New Negro was as public as the subway system and as far underground.”⁴⁵

As Harlem increasingly became a source of pleasure, downtowners and white tourists believed they had the right to explore the furthest depths of the neighborhood, and they demanded total visibility from this ghetto. With insider tips of the party circuit, or the right map of the “invisible city,” or a well-informed “slumming” guide, anyone could permeate the heart of the ghetto. In 1926, the New York Age described a service that for \$5.00 (not including the cost of drinks and admission to parties and nightclubs), one could see the “private” side of Harlem that outsiders rarely had a chance to see. Advertised on small cards with a picture of a glamorous black woman wearing a formal evening gown and a matching hat with a wide brim, the invitation offered:

Here in the world’s greatest city it would both amuse and also interest you to see the real inside of the New Negro Race of Harlem. You have heard it discussed, but there are few who really know. Because the New Negro will

be looked upon as a novelty, I am in a position to carry you through Harlem as you would go slumming through Chinatown. My guides are honest and have been instructed to give the best of references of being both capable and honest so as to give you a night or day of pleasure. Your season is not completed with thrills until you have visited Harlem through Miss -----'s representatives.⁴⁶

The proposal also noted that "two colored guides, one male and one female, would accompany the party."

The focus on the forbidden, the opportunity to view the "real inside," and the chance to penetrate the neighborhood's private side, underscore the culminating eroticization of Harlem's geographic space. That is, Harlem was perceived and advertised as a site that tempted visitors with possibilities of both social and sexual transgressions. Tourists could enjoy the "authentic" performances of the clubs and parties, but they could also experiment themselves with the taboo. Harlem offered them a setting to publicly enact their private fantasies. In many ways, the neighborhood was viewed as a pornographic playground. For example, in the alluring advertisement above, "Miss ----" is painted as the equivalent of a high-class madam, and her "representatives," like those in the most respected escort service, are assured of their "honesty" and "capabilities." Likewise, the language of the invitation is charged with sexual innuendo (including the seductive, "I am in a position to carry you through Harlem"), but the enticement is never sleazy. And notably, the "thrills" and "pleasure" one might receive "through these representatives" are highlighted by the presence of both a male and female guide. On one hand, the presence of a black man might provide a sense of security for timorous tourists afraid of what might lurk around dark corners, while a black woman guide can offer warmth and matronliness. On the other hand, having guides of both genders on the tour makes it possible to accommodate a variety of sexual fantasies, with the prospect for experimental coupling.

I would also argue that the advertisement's comparison with "slumming through Chinatown" was an attempt to highlight a prurient side of Harlem and consciously sexualize the neighborhood. Even before the growth of Harlem, New York's Chinatown represented a source of erotic pleasure, and "Miss ----'s" invitation draws upon its legendary status. "Slumming through Chinatown" for most readers would evoke images of Asian prostitutes, drug dealers, and white slave traders on every corner, because in the popular imagination of the 1920s, the Chinese ghetto was still regarded as a scene of limitless vice and sexual adventure. Newspapers often printed sensational stories about opium dens, white slavery, and crimes of passion, and Broadway plays such as John Colton's The Shanghai Gesture (1926) depicted the Chinese as treacherous, exotic, and alluring. In his 1920 tract on New York's tenements called How the Other Half Lives, Jacob Riis, for instance, claimed that Chinatown was one of the worst slums in the city because of what he considered the despicable sexual mingling of whites and Asians, which was caused by the effects of opium. He describes "houses, dozens of them, in Mott and Pell streets, literally jammed from the 'joint' in the cellar to the attic with these hapless victims of a passion which, once acquired, demands the sacrifice of every instinct of decency."⁴⁷

More often than not, however, such tales of Chinese lust and corruption were the products of white fantasy. When a ghetto did not meet the expectations of scenes from the popular imagination, such scenes were often staged to confirm those expectations. Police officer Cornelius Willemse recalled in his memoirs, "Visitors are more or less of a nuisance in Chinatown and a good many times they're disappointed. For they've built up such fantastic ideas of what goes on down there that if they don't see a few Chinamen disappearing down traps in the pavement pursued by somebody with a hatchet or a long curved knife, they haven't had any fun and they go home disappointed." Willemse goes on to say that he and other police officers would often "arrange a set-up" for tourists, "so as not to disappoint them."⁴⁸ Frequently, the increased visibility of a ghetto leads to its

developing into a source of pleasure, entertainment, and fantasy for the dominant culture, even as it remains a place for community-building and political and social freedom for its residents.

The cost of so much political and social freedom for black people in Harlem was the utter loss of their privacy. The emergence of the rent party phenomenon signalled the end to Harlem’s unknowability. As neighborhood homes became sites of public entertainment, Harlem’s claim to privacy evaporated. In fact, at the height of the Harlem Renaissance, privacy was a commodity that most working class residents could not afford. Overcrowded tenements and frequent non-exclusive rent parties undercut the black residents’ right to be left alone. As indicated by the reports on the lack of affordable housing in Harlem, “private” space was at a premium. Therefore, African Americans were powerless to halt the incursion of upper and middle-class whites to their neighborhood and homes because they did not have the capital to do so. Even now, complete privacy is a luxury that only the wealthiest can maintain and preserve. Owning one’s own home (as opposed to renting, subletting, or sharing), protecting one’s belongings with the finest security systems, and legally defending the right to maintain one’s personal space comprise a costly enterprise. As Una Chaudhuri explains, “the concept of privacy” is ultimately tied up with the “exclusive claims” of “upper-class privilege.”⁴⁹ Likewise, Bronski argues that “the more money you have, the more privacy you can buy.”⁵⁰ So in the 1920s, for very little money, “slummers” to the neighborhood could pay to see the “real” Harlem and act out their own “private” fantasies.

“Prove It On Me Blues”

Concurrent with the growth of Harlem as a very public and highly visible black ghetto, a gay and lesbian subculture emerged in this neighborhood. Times Square and Greenwich Village were already recognizable enclaves for homosexual activity by the 1920s, but as Harlem evolved more fully as a distinctly racialized and sexualized site, it

soon attracted non-heterosexual (or at least bi-curious) downtowners to its clubs, speakeasies, and dance halls. Lillian Faderman convincingly argues that lesbians and gay men gravitated to Harlem because they felt a "bond" between themselves and African Americans. She contends "they compared their social discomfort as homosexuals in the world at large with the discomfort of black people in the white world."⁵¹ Kevin J. Mumford echoes Faderman by arguing that "racism and then sexual repression from without helped to forge cultural bonds between subordinated groups."⁵²

Additionally, African Americans were a vital part of this mix, for as George Chauncey points out, New York's institutionalized segregation established Harlem as the sole area where black lesbians and gay men "could congregate in commercial establishments." and he adds that "they were centrally involved in many of the currents of Harlem culture, from the creative literary circles that constituted the Harlem Renaissance to the blues clubs and basement speakeasies where the poorest of Harlem's residents gathered."⁵³ And as Chauncey, Faderman, and Eric Garber have documented, a lesbian and gay subculture indeed thrived in Harlem of the 1920s. Indeed, it is now almost common knowledge that many of the leading literary, musical, and theatrical figures, including Countee Cullen, Wallace Thurman, Bruce Nugent, Langston Hughes, Alberta Hunter, Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Ethel Waters at some point engaged in lesbian, gay, or bisexual relations. For as Mabel Hampton responded when asked if Florence Mills was also "in the life": "Yeah, all of them girls were. Every last one of them. They didn't call it 'gay'--I don't know what they called it--but all of them was one of these."⁵⁴

Yet with the numerous arrests records, newspaper articles, and literary allusions that point to an active homosexual subculture, one has to be very cautious in over-interpreting this evidence. This was not a utopian vision of prevailing tolerance. Indeed, acceptance was extremely limited among white and black communities in New York, and few individuals privately or publicly identified themselves as exclusively non-heterosexual (which most likely explains why Hampton could not recall the term people used at the

time). Notably, none of the above mentioned figures, except Bruce Nugent, openly acknowledged his or her homosexuality. In this era of Prohibition and reactionary conservatism, simply because so many people were enjoying frequent or experimental same-sex activity did not make it legal nor necessarily regarded as moral. Preachers railed against the evils of homosexuality from the pulpit, anti-vice organizations exposed purported dens of iniquity in published reports, and newspapers sensationally dramatized New York's "perverse" underworld, listing the names, ages, and addresses of people arrested for such indiscretions. For all of the transgressive sexuality supposedly apparent in Harlem, this aspect of the Harlem Renaissance remained, for the most part, a "culture of secretness," to employ Michael Bronski's phrase.⁵⁵ It may have been a relatively "open secret," just as the places that served bootlegged liquor were not particularly covert, but it was a "secret" just the same.

Moreover, the greater conspicuousness of lesbians and gay men on the stages and streets throughout New York aroused increased cultural anxiety about their supposed assaults on traditional morality. Jeffrey Escoffier has argued that historically, intense conservative backlash generally accompanies an evolving homosexual visibility. This backlash in the 1920s, resulting in stigmatization and enforcement of sodomy and decency laws, propelled lesbians and gay men to develop underground social networks and institutions. Escoffier explains that "the social stigma and the criminalization of homosexuality—both of which reinforced the necessity of homosexuals themselves controlling information—contributed to the construction of what we now call 'the closet.'"⁵⁶ In the 1920s, lesbians and gay men secretly remapped New York's urban landscape, while reclaiming, reshaping, and refashioning public spaces as their designated meeting spaces. But establishments that catered to, or at least tolerated, a lesbian and gay clientele had to be particularly careful not to invite too much publicity that might trigger a raid or police shutdown.

Puritanism and priggishness were certainly not new to New York in the 1920s. The city had already witnessed the one-man crusade to stamp out moral corruption in the form of Anthony Comstock, who established the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice in 1873. While working in the name of that organization, Comstock had over three thousand people arrested for indecency, and he eradicated nearly 160 tons of literary materials that he deemed obscene. Perhaps Comstock is most famous, though, for impelling the Department of the Interior to fire Walt Whitman and in 1905 for bringing legal proceedings against George Bernard Shaw for his play Mrs. Warren's Profession. In response to that incident, Shaw invented the term "comstockery," referring to strict censorship of allegedly immoral literature.⁵⁷ Most people agreed, however, that Comstock went too far when he brought legal action against department store window dressers for clothing naked mannequins in front of passersby, charging that such blatant displays of nudity might corrupt the morals of the innocent. For once, though, his overzealousness became a source of laughter and derision. But even after his death in 1915, Comstock's legacy was already firmly in place.⁵⁸

By the 1920s, Comstock's era of enforcing Victorian prudery was long past, but attempts at protecting the morals of a supposedly susceptible public were not. John S. Sumner took over as head of the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice after Comstock's death, and he was a driving force behind much of the censorship campaign that nearly brought Broadway to its knees in the 1920s. As Nicholas de Jongh explains, such attempts at waging war against the nation's rising liberalism went against the grain of the decade's defining spirit. He writes:

The new Jazz age, with its sexy liberating dances, was characterized by its hectic exuberance, by a determined flight into high spirits. Gay was the defining stance, a gaiety which ran in opposition to a parental generation's sexual and social rigidity. The old forms, the old taboos were to be broken, in art as in life. The cultural revolt against the prevailing orthodoxies, in

which the children of the early years of the century had been reared, was also a revolt against patriarchy and those values patriarchy enshrined.⁵⁹

This widespread cultural revolt precipitated a conservative counteraction by Sumner and a staunch old guard, represented by newspaper publisher William Randolph Hearst, a handful of prominent politicians, religious leaders, and even several people associated with the theatre. The result was a fierce artistic backlash that played itself out through strict sexual censorship in the popular theatre.

The theatre, compared with the private, ghettoized performances of rent parties, offered a public venue for performances of race and sexuality, and it represented a main source of tension between traditional patriarchal values and the decade's "New Immorality." Societal "problems" such as "loose women," "fairies," and "bulldaggers," all associated with the ghetto, found their way on to the characteristically upstanding Broadway stage in the 1920s in great numbers. While these elements of New York's various ghettos were often disparaged from the pulpit and in right wing newspaper editorials, they did not become the subject of national disgust until they were portrayed (*exploited* might be a more appropriate term) in mainstream Broadway shows. It should come as no surprise then that the theatre became the contentious center where the opposing forces of progressiveness, conservatism, and public titillation were hotly debated and censured.

Police raids and threats of theatre closings were *de rigueur* in New York of the late 1920s, and in February 1927, Variety even reported the presence of a "U.S. Censorship Epidemic" that was agitated by several controversial shows playing on Broadway.⁶⁰ The climax of this epidemic occurred on February 9th, 1927, when three Broadway plays, including The Captive, Sex, and The Virgin Man were raided, and the casts were arrested on obscenity charges. Similar incidents erupted across the country, but the reverberations were felt especially acutely in Harlem. When the nation's attention focused on New York's "obscene" and "immoral" entertainment, naturally reformists also looked directly Uptown.

With its steamy musical revues and nightclub floorshows, Harlem seemed to be a teeming hotbed of immoral stage productions. In April 1927, for example, Variety noted that several of the large nightclubs, which included nude and scantily clad women in their floorshows, were threatened with a massive police crackdown. Although the club owners expected that charges would be dismissed in court, they "covered up their girls" because they "[did] not wish to antagonize the police and [would] go to any lengths to avoid a pinch." The article also speculated that political ambitions motivated the actions, explaining that "Governor [Alfred E.] Smith is planning now for the 1928 Democratic Convention in New York again and wants a spotless town."¹ In a similar incident, nine chorus girls along with the director of the "Club Kentucky Revue" at the Lafayette Theatre were arrested April 14, 1927 for "presenting and participating in an immoral and indecent act." The defendants were released on \$500 in bail, but the manager of the theatre responded that he was only producing "the kind of show the Harlem public wanted."² Nevertheless, the concerted effort to "clean up" shows in Harlem and throughout New York continued throughout the year. As a result of this campaign, new and stronger legislation clarified what was immoral on the stage, and for the first time, there were laws that expressly forbade images and discussions of homosexuality in dramatic works completely.

Such legislation was clearly a reaction to the sudden emergence of several popular plays that pushed the boundaries of traditional definitions of stage decency. In 1927, there were at least nine "dirt plays," as Variety liked to refer to them, including Sex, The Virgin Man, American Tragedy, and Lulu Belle.³ Two of the plays on Variety's list, The Captive and New York Exchange, revolved explicitly around homosexual characters and issues, and a play by Mae West called The Drag, subtitled "A Homosexual Comedy in Three Acts," was playing out of town in Paterson, New Jersey. The Drag was heading toward Broadway, and most historians agree that this was the impetus for the censorship campaign that hit New York in the early months of 1927. There had been issues in plays prior to 1927 that tweaked the nose of the censor, but clearly none had provoked the wrath as

urgently as the threat of homosexuals flaunting their proclivities on the New York stage. As Kaeir Curtin argues in We Can Always Call The Bulgarians, it was the imminent arrival of The Drag, a play about a wealthy (but married) gay man who hosts a party for his cross-dressed friends, that prompted the Republicans in the New York State Assembly to re-examine the state's obscenity law, the Penal Code of 1909. In turn, the Assembly amended this mandate to include restricting any show "depicting or dealing with the subject of sex degeneracy, or sex perversion."⁴ Furthermore, Section 1140A of this legislation declared that theatres would be padlocked for one year should the owners refuse to close a show that a jury believed "would tend to the corruption of youth or others."⁵ This new ordinance, formally known as the Wales Law after its originator, was widely referred to as the Wales Padlock Law, and it remained on the books for nearly fifty years." By the end of 1927, another wrinkle had been added to Prohibition's legislative trenchcoat, and because of the intense resistance against it, as well as threats of arrest to the actors and theatre managers, The Drag never opened on Broadway.

The Drag was not just a convenient whipping boy for reformists, politicians, and the clergy. Even show people, who in general vehemently opposed anything that whiffed of theatre censorship, refused to defend the play. In fact, they tended to support the official opinion that homosexuality, particularly male homosexuality, had no place on the respectable stage. In February 1927, a meeting of seventy-six theatre managers was called to devise a plan to halt The Drag from opening on Broadway. In effect, the managers agreed to make the play a sacrificial lamb to appease a vengeful censor intent on bringing "respectability" back to Broadway. According to the official scuttlebutt, many of those present at the managers' meeting said they "feared" the consequences should Mae West's play come to New York after its engagement in New Jersey. Variety reported, "If The Drag is as raw as reported, the managers figured it might bring about the closing of some of the current plays. They are said to have planned to agree not to book The Drag on Broadway."⁷ Likewise, Actors' Equity opposed The Drag on Broadway and actively

campaigned against it coming to New York as well. In fact, throughout the 1920s, Actors Equity went to great lengths to distance itself from issues involving homosexuality. For instance, in 1928 at the second performance of another Mae West play, The Pleasure Man, which also featured cross-dressed men, it too was forcefully closed, and Actors' Equity refused to intervene. The actors in the play were arrested, forcefully removed from the stage by the police, and charged with indecency. Although the charges were eventually dropped after a jury could not reach a decision, rather than defending its union members, Equity responded to the ordeal: "In general the stand of the Actors' Equity Association on alleged salacious plays is well known. Equity has preached against them and the columns of its magazine teem with articles condemning them."⁸

The homophobia of the theatre community is well-documented in the 1920s. Publicly, people in the theatre tended to deride homosexuality, and they consciously disassociated themselves from gay men and lesbians. Just as today, an actor's image was dependent upon his or her appearance of "normality." Open support of lesbians and gay men could mean guilt by association. As playwright William Hoffman, writing about the "great Western silence on homosexuality" in the theatre until the 1960s, explained: "There is a myth that gay people can lead openly gay lives in the theater, where everyone is supposed to be accepted on their merits. But the theater, of all art forms, is the closest mirror of society's expectations, and must, of all institutions, most reflect heterosexual hopes and prejudices." Dramatic works of the 1920s, in which the "degenerates," "perverts," and sexual "inverts" were invariably punished by the play's end, clearly bore this out. Offstage, an actor had to uphold a semblance of normalcy and heterosexual desire if he or she hoped to continue to find work. "Therefore," Hoffman concludes, "it is almost obligatory to appear straight in the public eye if you want to survive in the theater."⁹

Even show business magazines and newspapers campaigned vigorously against homosexuals. Most notably, Broadway Brevities, a New York monthly tabloid devoted to the theatre, spent a great deal of space rooting out the names of "fags" and "bulldickers" in

the entertainment industry, as well as their meeting places throughout the city. Blind items and rumors were the principal components of this magazine, which often poked fun at an innocent and amusing quirk of a popular performer, such as, "How would you like to consume twelve pineapples each week? Ask Charlotte Greenwood." But a typical entry might also speculate on a person's sexuality with coded innuendo, like, "Why is Dick Barthelmess so fond of Childs [a well known cafeteria where gay men often hung out after hours] at 58th and 5th? We thought Dick liked the swell fooderies."⁷⁰ Another item might disclose the name of an eatery or theatre that shamefully, in the editor's opinion, permitted homosexual activity. In a passage entitled "Lesbians Hit the Movies," the editor acknowledges a letter received that addresses the "peculiar conditions on the first balcony of the Plaza Theatre at Madison and Fifty-ninth." Apparently, the informant "recently observed four pairs of loving Lesbians--*nauseating* would be a better word, he adds--and expresses wonder that these inverts haven't been noticed." The women, the informant also pointed out, go to the movie theatre "singly, looking for prey, and are never troubled by the ushers, even after complaint is made." The editor, conflating homosexuality with the lower class, admonishes: "As the Plaza has a clientele of 'upper class' character, and is a house of fine repute, we hope this item may reach the eyes of the proprietors thereof and a 'No Parking' sign go up promptly."⁷¹ Such exposure, while almost surely providing useful information to lesbians and gay men, became the righteous cause for the editors of Broadway Brevities.

Beginning in 1924 and lasting over a year, the magazine published a monthly series called "Nights in Fairyland," which uncovered the likely places one could, on any given night, encounter lesbians and gay men throughout the city. The most popular hangouts, according to the unnamed reporters, were Paul & Joe's Italian restaurant on 19th Street near 5th Avenue; Trilby's, a small restaurant they describe as a "cellar of carnality in the Village"; Louis' on East 49th Street, where apparently contrary to popular perception, "the fags outnumber the Lesbians two to one"; and the aforementioned Childs, where "on

almost any Sunday morning at one o'clock you may--if you have an eye skilled in identifying the nance--see from one to two hundred rouged and powdered sissies petting and coquetting." The spectacle at Childs was especially abetted by the fact that it was the preferred after-show haunt for gay chorus boys, whom the reporters earlier describe as "pasty of face and coquettish of gait." The writers explain: "The Broadway chorus fairies--and there are hundreds of them--furnish the only midnight novelty at Childs. They naturally aren't free to join their fellow-psychopaths until after the show, so you can have a close-up at Childs at twelve of the dear sweet things that pranced and curtsied earlier in the evening in the ranks of the Winter Garden, 'Vanities' and Music Box Revue."²

The articles are mean-spirited and ominous, often threatening to expose in future issues the real identities of the business proprietors and actors alluded to by initials or drag pseudonyms like "Lady Clifford," "Lucile Cavanaugh," and "Nazimova." There was even speculation at the time that the authors might be "in the life" themselves. To those reading the articles, such an intimate knowledge of the community seemed inconceivable for an outsider to possess. Nevertheless, the writers denied the accusation. The specific details printed in the series more than likely provided a useful Baedeker directing gay men and lesbians through the subculture's hot spots, but the articles' stated intention was to hold the community up for contempt and ridicule. Accompanied by cartoons, and an artist's conception of "Fag Types," the pieces stress the infiltration of lesbians and gay men and the ways they may be identified. By offering hints for recognition--such as the tell-tale evidence of makeup on men as well as the "fairy cry," that is, the delighted scream that gay men make when with other gay men (the reporters describe this as "the most terrifying, the most pitiful, of all human sounds"), and the short-cropped, page-boy haircuts and masculine dress for women--the series intended to provide the necessary tools for bringing to light homosexuals carefully hidden within the reader's own community. The reporters stress that there are subcultures within all of the major neighborhoods in the city, stating portentously:

In the Bowery poor and shabby fags of every breed may be seen; in the Bronx, fags of Jewish descent; in Mulberry [S]treet invert Italiano; in Chinatown the comical oriental urning. Not less may be observed in the colored neighborhood of Lenox Avenue, on that long reach from 110th Street to 160th Street, hordes of ‘big boys,’ flamboyantly arrayed, plying the oldest and most noxious of all trades. And so on throughout the city-- throughout the nation--throughout the world.”⁷³

Ironically, the “problem” with homosexuals it seems was not that they “may be seen” in the city’s ghettos, rather the more crucial cause of anxiety was their ability to blend in with the urban milieu. This invisibility made homosexuals both dangerous and socially corrupting.

The intense paranoia that informed the vehement investigations by the editors of Broadway Brevities reflected a larger cultural anxiety over the changing face of American society. Lee Edelman and David Savran have examined the 1950s through a similar lens, showing the conflation of a “lavendar menace” with “communist infiltration and subversion.”⁷⁴ Edelman argues that the campaign against homosexuality stemmed from the social and national havoc reeked by the war. He says:

If the reactionary aftermath of World War II, then, saw a massive intensification of the State’s efforts to control homosexual behavior, those efforts responded to the widespread perception of gay sexuality as an alien infestation, and unnatural because un-American practice, resulting from the entanglement with foreign countries—and foreign nationals—during the war.”⁷⁵

And as Cindy Patton explains, at the beginning of the Cold War, the charges brought by the House Committee on Un-American Activities were not well-defined, except in implying that “while homosexuals operated in a conspiratorial manner, their main objective was to avoid detection and increase the reach of their perversion.”⁷⁶ Similarly, homosexuality in the 1920s was associated with secrecy and perfidy, and like the later period, efforts to

harness it coincided with a desire to stabilize a national identity torn asunder by World War. As Nicholas de Jongh points out, "The 1920s were darkened by deep problems of adjustment and recuperation from the devastations of the First World War."⁷⁷ As a result, Americans redirected their focus inward, concentrating on domestic issues and re-examining traditional values. Private matters, such as family welfare, sexuality, and individual morality became issues of public concern.

Beneath the general exuberance and optimism of the decade lurked a palpable uneasiness. The seeds of the dire economic situation that choked the nation in the 1930s had already been sown, and New York's growing housing crisis, first evident in Harlem and then in pockets throughout the City, offered tangible proof of this fact. In addition, the family, the central unit of American moral and economic stability, was also changing. Immigrants continued to pour into the city and competed for the same jobs as white, working-class men, forcing other family members to find employment. In 1924, efforts to reverse this trend led to the Immigration Law, which established a quota system that was biased against all groups other than northern and western Europeans. Likewise there was, according to Nathan Irvin Huggins, "a spectacular revival of racism." The New Negro evidently posed a tremendous threat to white Americans, for "the new Ku Klux Klan found white support throughout the country, and violence against [African Americans] increased."⁷⁸ At the same time, many women were declaring their independence, and they began taking up formerly male-defined behaviors such as smoking, wearing masculine clothing, and voting. Some were even entering the workforce. This new economic freedom that many women enjoyed stimulated a much higher divorce rate, which rose sharply in the 1920s. Sociologist E.J. Graff cites statistics showing that "between 1867 and 1929, the population of the United States grew 300 percent, the number of marriages increased 400 percent, and the divorce rate rose 2,000 percent."⁷⁹ The only ground for divorce in New York State, however, was adultery, but as Graff explains, "Everyone knew that you could get a divorce simply by having your picture snapped lying on a hotel bed with a co-

respondent-for-hire."⁸⁰ As one of the "merry murderesses" in Maurine Watkins' Chicago, which opened on Broadway in December 1926, quipped about the chief similarity between murder and suing for divorce, "The *reason* don't count--it's the grounds."⁸¹

Homosexuality, in the cultural imagination of the 1920s, presented a particularly formidable threat to the nuclear family. Not only did lesbians and gay men apparently have ruinous effects on a household, but they were also cast as notoriously deceptive and conniving. For example, in 1926 when The Captive, Arthur Hornblow's adaptation of Edouard Bourdet's La Prisonnière, opened on Broadway, audiences saw the domestic devastation wrought by an irresistible lesbian. The plot centers around a French diplomat's daughter, her up-standing husband, and a beguiling woman who secures the young woman's affections. The turn of events causes the husband to attest to the duplicity of women and the horrible reality that "undercover of friendship a woman can enter any household whenever and however she pleases . . . she can poison and pillage everything before a man whose home she destroys is even aware what's happening to him."⁸² Reviewing the play in the American Mercury, theatre critic George Jean Nathan called it "the most subjective, corruptive, and potentially evil-fraught play ever shown in the American theatre," and he added that it was "nothing more or less than a documentary in favor of sex degeneracy."⁸³ Other New York critics were much more appreciative of the show, including Brooks Atkinson, who found it "written with taste," and "acted with style and reticence."⁸⁴ Nevertheless, after the show had proven to be a huge commercial success, and after it had played 160 performances without incident, the Empire Theatre was raided. Accompanied by a deluge of photographers and scandal mongers, the entire company and management were arrested. But rather than face a lengthy trial, the producer opted to close the show instead.⁸⁵ Atkinson later wrote, "As usual, the district attorney could not tell the difference between literature and hokum."⁸⁶

Just as despicable as the lesbian in the cultural imagination was the gay man who married a woman and "played on her innocence" so that he could fit into heterosexual

society. In The Drag, for instance, when the central character makes a pass at his friend who happens to have designs on the young man's wife, the friend scolds: "Why, I think it's the most contemptible thing you could do--marry a woman and use her as a cloak to cover up what you are."⁸⁷ This secrecy, which magazines like Broadway Brevities hoped to expose, contributed to the perceived treachery of homosexuals. They could, judging by widely held beliefs of the time, be anywhere and anyone. For as the young man's father, a prominent doctor, in The Drag laments: "In this civilized world, we are not civilized enough to know why or for what purpose these poor degenerates are brought into the world. Little did we know that a fine, strong boy, like Rolly, was one of them."⁸⁸ The most terrifying aspect of homosexuality in the 1920s was that it was everywhere, but it was often concealed behind images of respectability. Mae West indicated this belief in an interview in Parade Magazine (September 1929) when she described the casting of The Drag. Although West claimed that the play would "glorify" gay men, she reinforced the prevailing view that homosexuality was a form of "perversion." She explained: "Five thousand perverts applied for fifty parts when we were casting for Drag. One vice-president of a large bank begged me to let him act secretly in Drag because there only could he do what he was starving for--act like a woman and wear expensive, beautiful gowns."⁸⁹

Unlike other groups, which were identified by their racial or ethnic origin, the homosexual subculture lacked a designated ghetto in New York that would contain, separate, and put them on display. According to reports of the day, pockets of homosexuality were evident throughout the city making the gay and lesbian presence seemingly uncontainable and uncontrollable. As Chauncey reminds, even Greenwich Village and Harlem with their indentifiable gay and lesbian populations could not precisely be called "gay neighborhoods," because "in neither did homosexuals set the tone."⁹⁰ Therefore, it was not the fact that lesbians and gay men had gone *public* with their affections and culture, but it was their relative *invisibility* that was particularly frightful. As

the reporters of the “Nights in Fairyland” in Broadway Brevities righteously and dramatically sermonized:

Verily, in this year of our Lord, 1924, the question is--as a brilliant psychiatrist remarked to us the other day--not of “who is” but of “who isn’t.” Into the very warp and woof of our modern social fabric has eaten devastatingly this cancer of sexual inversion, wiping out manhood and womanhood, making a mockery of natural love, of normal behavior, wrecking homes and lives untold. The sickening stench of homosexuality is in the nostrils of all of us, and for all of us its menace is stupendous. It is, indeed, the pestilence that stalks alike at noonday and night, enfeebling and degrading our civilization, making a by-word of all that is clean and sweet and of good repute. If, in these articles, BREVITIES has been able to abate by one jot this epidemic of shameless lechery, then we feel that our efforts have not been in vain. And to such noble purpose are dedicated the still more relentless exposures to come!⁹¹

As Chauncey rightly contends, during the 1920s homosexuality became much more publicly visible, but so did a more concerted effort--as evidenced by the Broadway Brevities articles--to quash acceptance of this lifestyle.

Yet at the same time, more so than many other New York neighborhoods (except perhaps Greenwich Village), Harlem provided a degree of tolerance for lesbians and gay men. Drag balls, speakeasies catering to the drag subculture, and acts featuring “pansies” and “bulldaggers” were not altogether uncommon. As indicated earlier, lesbians and gay men felt a kinship with African Americans. In truth, however, Harlem residents were often bewildered by their presence, for as Lillian Faderman says, “blacks were generally as ambivalent about homosexuality as whites.”⁹² Claude McKay captured the essence of this confusion with a snippet from an untitled blues song overheard in a Harlem speakeasy. A character in Home to Harlem sings, “There is two things in Harlem I don’t understand/ It is

a bulldycking woman and a faggotty man.”⁹³ Similarly, a character in Carl Van Vechten’s Nigger Heaven refuses to go to a particular club because he feels there are “too many pink-chasers,” or black people who like associating with whites, as well as “bulldikers.”⁹⁴

In an era when there were no anti-homophobic organizations such as Mattachine Society, Daughters of Bilitis, or ACT UP, negative attitudes toward homosexual visibility accomplished exactly what conservatives and commentators feared: Many homosexuals were forced underground, and they hid behind veils of respectability and within the ghettos of large urban centers. Removed from the threatening public spotlight and severed from the fetishistic gaze of Harlem tourists who were aroused by their otherness, lesbians and gay men could monitor the range of hatred to fascination they inspired from the private fortresses they constructed. This relative safety within the confines of the ghetto validates David Savran’s argument that the closet “is both a means of concealment and a privileged perspective on both the dominant culture and what it seeks to police and contain.”⁹⁵ Escaping from public view, many lesbians and gay men developed elaborate social systems to avoid detection. In Harlem, for instance, private homes became exclusive places of homosexual congregation and performance for a night.

From tenement buildings to upscale apartment buildings, private parties in Harlem became the safest way for lesbians and gay men to meet, sing, dance, and drink plenty of bootlegged alcohol. In later chapters, I will look at specific public arenas where lesbians and gay men assembled and “performed,” and I will examine the limits of Harlem’s tolerance. But it is important to reiterate that the existence of public spaces claimed by lesbians and gay men should not imply that these women and men were seamlessly assimilated into the mainstream. Indeed, the lesbian, gay, and bisexual subculture remained, according to Kevin Mumford, “deeply marginalized.” Mumford argues that “the more visible and accessible a Harlem club became,” the clientele grew noticeably “more heterosexual.” He also reminds that individuals who frequented “the homosexual speakeasies were hypervigilant for good reason: they feared exposure and expulsion.”⁹⁶

Because of this dire concern, the homosexual subculture--particularly a burgeoning lesbian community--developed a flourishing social network operating out of private spaces.

While gay men tended to congregate in public spaces throughout the city, lesbians--although they also visited speakeasies, dance halls, and movie theatres (as indicated in Broadway Brevities)--more commonly tended to throw exclusive parties in their homes as a way to gather socially. Mabel Hampton remarked that lesbians often took rooms next to one another, and the “girls,” as she referred to them, had “parties every other night.”⁹⁷ And as Lillian Faderman explains, it may not have even surprised many residents of the era to know that there was “a whole boardinghouse full of lesbians who [were] allowed to live in Harlem undisturbed.”⁹⁸ A scene in Wallace Thurman’s The Blacker the Berry . . . bears this out. While searching for a room in Harlem, Emma Lou, the novel’s central character, meets an insistent unmarried landlady named *Miss Carrington* (italics in the original). The woman becomes surprisingly and--to the young heroine--“unexpectedly” intimate, by setting “her hand on Emma Lou’s knee,” and “put[ting] her arm around her waist.” *Miss Carrington* assures Emma Lou that she would be quite welcome in this apartment house, which she refers to as the “Old Maid’s Home,” claiming, “there are lots of nice girls living here.” As an added incentive she says, “We have parties among ourselves, and just have a grand time. Talk about fun! I know you’d be happy here.” Uncomfortable and apprehensive, Emma Lou makes a hasty retreat and continues her search.⁹⁹

Because of the intended secretiveness of parties staged exclusively for lesbians, there are few written accounts about them. These soirees received much less publicity than the heterosexual-organized equivalent parties in Harlem, which were often, as indicated earlier, announced by blind leafletting throughout the neighborhood. Invitations to a lesbian bash tended to be verbal and much more discreet, explaining why Faderman presumes that lesbians only “*sometimes* attended rent parties,” and adding that “those gatherings were generally predominantly heterosexual.”¹⁰⁰ But evidence now suggests that lesbians created their own circuit of parties. And to ensure that they remained relatively private, such parties

often "travelled" within the neighborhood, and individuals would take turns hosting. The mobility of the parties assisted in making the get-togethers more elusive, and neighbors might be less likely to complain if the parties did not become regular events. Only if the police were called in to break up a party would the event receive undue publicity.

This is exactly what happened in November, 1926. The New York Age, Harlem's most respected newspaper, reported the circumstances of a particular rent party that got out of hand and ended with a murder. Although the article does not specify directly, one may presume the participants in the tragedy are black. It seems that the rent party's hostess, Reba Stobtoff, "crazed with gin and a wild and unnatural infatuation for another woman," seized "a keenedged bread knife and with one fell swoop, severed the jugular vein in the throat of Louise Wright," who was also attending the party. According to witnesses, Stobtoff had accused Wright of paying too much attention to a woman named Clara, who was known in this "underworld" as "Big Ben" because of her "unusual size and from her inclination to ape the masculine in dress and manner, and particularly in her attention to other women." The article points out that "Big Ben" was not present at the affair, but witnesses overheard Stobtoff warn Wright "to stay away from the 'man' woman." When the fight broke out, Wright tried to escape, but Stobtoff "grabbed [her] by the hair, jerked her head back, and swept the knife across her bent throat, cutting the head almost off." The reporter adds, "Death was practically instantaneous." The police arrived shortly after and stated that "only women were present, and it is said that no men had attended the affair."¹⁰¹

Two weeks later the Age editorialized on the event using it as an opportunity to note the rise of rent parties in Harlem and the economic necessity behind them. Of the particular incident in question, the editor compares the situation to the plot of The Captive. Notably, the editor remarks that the similarities between the two indicate that homosexuality is not limited to Harlem. The editor writes: "That the story of The Captive should have found its parallel in this locality is a revelation of the fact that the frailties of human nature are much alike, whether in Paris or New York, regardless of complexions." The piece concludes

with the following moral: "In the meantime the combination of bad gin, jealous women, a carving knife and a rent party is dangerous to the health of all concerned."¹⁰²

The account reflects the often times violent and tragic interplay between the private and public realms of Harlem. Music, dance, and comedy routines that developed in tenement houses and apartment buildings frequently made their way to the stages of Broadway and into the popular imagination, and dramas based on supposed "scenes from Harlem life" found their way into the mainstream theatre. Yet responses to the "Rent Party Tragedy" described above, demonstrates that the process worked in reverse as well. The popularity of The Captive on Broadway influenced the way in which lesbians in the 1920s were recognized and identified. Sensationalism, melodrama, and moral lessons were the narrative tools used to represent them in the press, and the story confirmed images that had already been implanted in the cultural consciousness. Finally, the editor's description of universal "human frailties" from Paris to New York reiterates the popular notion that homosexuals could not conceal themselves within the ghetto. There would always be some indication that would expose their true identities. Like the racial performances of Harlem's private parties, traces of a homosexual existence continued to leak out into the mainstream. Such exposure was inevitably met with simultaneous fascination and abject disgust. And true to 1920s form, Harlem's ghetto could not contain the private world of the lesbian and gay subculture. Instead, it exploded on to the New York social scene in one of its grandest and most eagerly awaited annual spectacles. While lesbians and gay men forged new communities in private houses and apartments, they celebrated their identities publicly in Harlem's Hamilton Lodge drag balls.

ENDNOTES

¹ Qtd. in Angela Davis, Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday (New York, Pantheon Books, 1998), 281-2.

² Qtd. in Burns Mantle, "Realism and the Negro Drama," New York Daily News (March 1, 1929). Clipping in Alexander Gumbly Scrapbook Collection, Columbia University.

³ Langston Hughes, The Big Sea (1940). Excerpt reprinted in Voices from the Harlem Renaissance, Nathan Irvin Huggins, ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 373.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Michael Bronski, The Pleasure Principle: Sex, Backlash, and the Struggle for Gay Freedom (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997), 213.

⁶ Ibid., 199.

⁷ “Mme. A’Lelia Walker Entertains Friends,” New York Age (December 20, 1924), 10.

⁸ Interview with Joan Nestle, May 21, 1981. Transcript of interview in the Mabel Hampton Collection, Lesbian Herstory Archives.

⁹ Qtd. in Joan Nestle, “‘I Lift My Eyes to the Hill’: The Life of Mabel Hampton as Told by a White Woman,” in A Fragile Union (San Francisco: Cleiss Press, 1998), 36.

¹⁰ The New York tabloid Broadway Brevities contained the following blind item (the magazine often only provided the initials of the subject to protect it from libel and, of course, making the mystery a large part of the fun of the gossip), which undoubtedly referred to Joey: “Recently [Mrs. R.W.----] gave a birthday party to sixty guests, one of the attendant and not unbelievable catastrophes of which was the complete disembowellment--or rather disencandlement--of every candlemaker in the Fifties” (November, 1924: 34). Ruby Smith, Bessie Smith’s niece, recounted a similar “performer” at a Detroit party. She describes a woman who would “take a cigarette, light it, and puff it with her pussy.” She raved, “A real educated pussy” (qtd. in Eric Garber, “A Spectacle in Color: The Lesbian and Gay Subculture of Jazz Age Harlem,” in Hidden From History: Reclaiming the Gay and Lesbian Past, Martin Bauml Duberman, Martha Vicinus, and George Chauncey, Jr., eds. [New York: NAL Books, 1989], 323).

¹¹ Wallace Thurman, “Where Jazz Was Born,” Birmingham (England) Sunday Mercury (October 7, 1928). Clipping in Carl VanVechten Scrapbook Collection, New York Public Library.

¹² Hughes, 373.

¹³ Ibid., 377.

¹⁴ Wallace Thurman, Negro Life in New York’s Harlem (Girard, Kansas: Halderman-Julius Publications, 1928), 43.

¹⁵ Thurman, “Where Jazz Was Born.”

¹⁶ Thurman, Negro Life in New York’s Harlem, 41.

¹⁷ Ibid., 42.

¹⁸ In Alexander Gumby’s Scrapbook Collection (Columbia University Library).

¹⁹ Card in Mabel Hampton Collection, Lesbian Herstory Archives. In "'I Lift My Eyes to the Hill': The Life of Mabel Hampton as Told by a White Woman" (Included in A Fragile Union: New and Selected Writings by Joan Nestle [San Francisco: Cleis Press, 1999: 23-48]), Joan Nestle narrates the life of Mabel Hampton and her relationship with her wife Lillian through letters, documents, and personal interviews. Nestle writes: "Ms. Foster remembers in 1976, two years before her death: 'Forty-four years ago I met Mabel. We was a wonderful pair. I'll never regret it. But she's a little tough. I met her in 1932. September twenty-second. And we haven't been separated since in our whole life. Death will separate us. Other than that I don't want it to end'" (38-9).

²⁰ Garber, 321.

²¹ "High Rents and Overcrowding Responsible for Many of the Ills Suffered by Harlemites." New York Age (August 11, 1923), 1.

²² Lemuel F. Parton, "Harlem Becomes a Problem: Economic System Fails to Absorb the Negro, City's Ever-Growing Population" (May 10, 1929). Clipping in Alexander Gumbly Scrapbook Collection, Columbia University Library.

²³ Qtd. in Kathy J. Ogren, The Jazz Revolution: Twenties America and the Meaning of Jazz (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 83.

²⁴ "Jewish Landlord Tries to Force Sale of Property at Profit By Using Negro Tenants," New York Age (December 5, 1925), 2.

²⁵ David Levering Lewis, When Harlem Was In Vogue (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), 108.

²⁶ Gilbert Osofsky, Harlem: The Making of a Ghetto. Second Edition (Chicago: Elephant Paperbacks, 1996), 135-6.

²⁷ "High Rents and Overcrowding." Similarly, David Levering Lewis writes that "in its 1927 report on 2,326 Harlem apartments, the Urban League found that 48 percent of the renters spent more than twice as much of their income on rent as comparable white New Yorkers. For a four-room apartment (more than half the Urban League's sample), the average monthly rent was \$55.70; average family income was about \$1,300. The New York white equivalent was \$32.43 in rent on a family income of \$1,570" (108).

²⁸ "New Building on W. 139th St. To Set High Mark For Rental Prices In Harlem," New York Age (February 28, 1924), 1.

²⁹ "Unreasonable Money Exactions on Harlem Tenants by Janitors and Agents In The Form of Deposits of Extra Months' Rent as Security and Extra Bonus." New York Age (May 26, 1924), 1.

³⁰ "St. Nicholas Ave. Tenants Wage Fight For Reduction of Alleged Extortionate Rentals For Rooms Opened To Colored." New York Age (October 20, 1925), 2.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Lewis, 109.

³³ Qtd. in Steven Watson, The Harlem Renaissance: Hub of African-American Culture, 1920-1930 (New York: Pantheon Books, 1995), 7.

³⁴ Bronski, 188.

³⁵ Mel Watkins, On the Real Side (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994), 207.

³⁶ Bronski, 188.

³⁷ Qtd. in David Levering Lewis, When Harlem Was in Vogue, 107-8.

³⁸ Barry Singer, Black and Blue: The Life and Lyrics of Andy Razaf (New York: Schirmer Books, 1992), 121.

³⁹ David A. Jasen and Gene Jones, Spreadin' Rhythm Around: Black Popular Songwriters, 1880-1930 (Schirmer Book, 1998), 391.

⁴⁰ Ann Douglas, Terrible Honesty: Mongrel Manhattan in the 1920s (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1995), 426.

⁴¹ Carl Van Vechten, Parties: Scenes from Contemporary New York Life (Los Angeles: Sun & Moon Press, 1993; orig. 1930), 183.

⁴² Bronski, *n*36, 269.

⁴³ Douglas, 106.

⁴⁴ Thurman, “Where Jazz Was Born.”

⁴⁵ Douglas, 101.

⁴⁶ “The Slumming Hostess.” New York Age (November 6, 1926), 4.

⁴⁷ Qtd. in Kevin J. Mumford, Interzones: Black/White Sex Districts in Chicago and New York in the Early Twentieth Century (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 137.

⁴⁸ Qtd. in Luc Sante, Low Life: Lures and Snares of Old New York (New York: Vintage Books, 1991), 295.

⁴⁹ Una Chaudhuri, Staging Place: The Geography of Modern Drama (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1997), 28-9.

⁵⁰ Bronski, 239. He explains: “The wealthy who own homes in exclusive neighborhoods (that may even have their own security force) have more privacy than middle-class people who rent their apartments in nice neighborhoods (but are dependent upon a landlord and a lease). In turn, middle-class renters have more privacy than working-class people who live in a city-owned housing project (in which they may be subject to state surveillance or intrusion), who, in turn, have more privacy than homeless people, who have none at all” (239).

⁵¹ Lillian Faderman, Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers: A History of Lesbian Life in Twentieth-Century America (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 68.

⁵² Mumford, 178.

⁵³ George Chauncey, Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay World, 1890-1940 (New York: BasicBooks, 1994), 227.

⁵⁴ Hampton, 9.

⁵⁵ Bronski, 199.

⁵⁶ Jeffrey Escoffier, “The Political Economy of the Closet: Notes toward an Economic History of Gay and Lesbian Life before Stonewall,” in Homo Economics: Capitalism, Community, and Lesbian and Gay Life, Amy Gluckman and Betsy Reed, eds. (New York: Routledge, 1997: 123-134), 125.

⁵⁷ See Luc Sante, 282.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 283.

⁵⁹ Nicholas de Jongh, Not in Front of the Audience: Homosexuality on Stage (New York: Routledge, 1992), 19.

⁶⁰ February 23, 1927, 1.

⁶¹ “Nightcubs and Nudity Ban.” Variety (April 13, 1927), 38. Smith, who in 1928 was the first Roman Catholic presidential candidate, was a popular four-term governor in New York State. Although he was socially liberal and he opposed Prohibition, he was also a skilled politician, who knew that New York’s national image would be closely scrutinized if Smith were to take the Democratic nomination.

⁶² “Manager of Lafayette Theatre and Chorus of Revue Arrested in Drive on Indecent Shows in Greater N.Y.,” New York Age (April 23, 1927), 2.

⁶³ “New York’s Dirtiest Plays.” Variety (February 2, 1927), 1.

⁶⁴ Qtd. in Kaier Curtin, We Can Always Call Them Bulgarians: The Emergence of Lesbian and Gay Men on the American Stage (New York: Alyson Publications, 1987), 100. Throughout 1927, Variety reported on the raids of the “dirt plays” as well as the legislation that followed. For a complete discussion of the controversy surrounding The Captive and The Drag, see Curtin as well as William Hoffman’s Gay Plays: The First Collection (New York: Avon Books, 1979). Unavailable since it was performed in 1927, The Drag has recently been published. The script is available in Three Plays by Mae West: Sex, The Drag, and The Pleasure Man, edited by Lillian Schlissel (New York: Routledge, 1997), 95-142.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ New York of the late 1990s witnessed a similar conservative backlash. In an effort to “clean up” the streets, and improve New York’s “quality of life,” Mayor Rudolph Giuliani undertook similar conservative steps to rid the city of blatant sexual performances and material. New ordinances forced the closure of adult bookstores, theatres, and strip clubs throughout Manhattan. Ironically, many of these places occupied the Times Square theatres that in the 1920s were deemed the most respectable houses in the city.

⁶⁷ “Mgrs. Meet Today, Seeking Plan to Head Off Censor.” Variety (February 27, 1927), 41.

⁶⁸ Qtd. in Curtin, 136.

⁶⁹ Hoffman, xviii-xix.

⁷⁰ These items appear in a regular column called “Tryin’ To Find ‘Sally’ In Our Alley.” Broadway Brevities (January, 1925), 10.

⁷¹ Broadway Brevities (November, 1924), 7.

⁷² Quotes from “Night No. 11 in Fairy-Land.” Broadway Brevities (November, 1924), 32-36; and “Night No. 13 in Fairy-Land.” Broadway Brevities (January, 1925), 34-40.

⁷³ “Night No. 11 in Fairy-Land.” 32.

⁷⁴ Lee Edelman, “Tearooms and Sympathy, or The Epistemology of the Water Closet.” in Nationalisms and Sexualities, Andrew Parker et al. eds. (New York: Routledge, 1992, 263-84), 268; David Savran, Communists, Cowboys, and Queers: The Politics of Masculinity in the Work of Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992).

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 269.

⁷⁶ Cindy Patton, “Tremble, Hetero Swine!” in Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory, Michael Warner, ed. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993, 143-177), 158-9.

⁷⁷ de Jongh, 19.

⁷⁸ Huggins, 56.

⁷⁹ E.J. Graff, What is Marriage For? The Strange Social History of Our Most Intimate Institution (Boston: Beacon Press, 1999), 240. Graff notes that the drastic rise in divorce caused many commentators in the 1920s to “note that the only way to reduce the divorce rate would be to ban women (not just mothers but all women) from working--an option that no longer seems enforceable or even moral” (*Ibid.*).

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

⁸¹ Maurine Watkins, Chicago (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1997. First published by Alfred A. Knopf, 1927), 26.

⁸² Qtd. in de Jongh, 34.

⁸³ Qtd. in Curtin, 62.

⁸⁴ Brooks Atkinson, Broadway (New York: Macmillan, 1970), 248.

⁸⁵ “Zukor Stops ‘Captive,’” Variety (February 16, 1927), 1.

⁸⁶ Atkinson, 248.

⁸⁷ The Drag, 124.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 140.

⁸⁹ Qtd. in Richard Helfer, "Mae West on Stage: Themes and Persona" (Dissertation: City University of New York, 1990), 159. In the same Parade interview, West claimed that The Drag's controversy stemmed from the fact that the public was not mature enough yet to see a play that confronted "the problem of homosexuality." Hoping that the play would be socially beneficial, she explained, "The problem is here. It is the duty of the government to at least face this great truth and do something about it. Let them treat it like a disease--like cancer, for instance, discover its causes and if it is curable, cure it" (*Ibid.*). In the 1950s, her view was even less sympathetic toward gay men. In her 1959 autobiography, Goodness Had Nothing To Do With It (1959), she adopted the Cold War stance that homosexuality was a pernicious threat to American society: "In many ways homosexuality is a danger to the entire social system of western civilization. Certainly a nation should be made aware of its presence--without moral mottoes--and its effects on children recruited to it in their innocence. I had no objection to it as a cult of jaded invert, or special groups of craftsmen, shrill and involved only with themselves. It was its secret anti-social aspects I wanted to bring into the sun" (Mae West, Goodness Had Nothing to Do With It [New York: Prentice Hall, 1959], 94).

⁹⁰ Qtd. in Bronski, 198.

⁹¹ "Night No. 11 in Fairy-Land," 36.

⁹² Faderman, 69.

⁹³ Qtd. in Claude McKay's Home to Harlem (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1987; orig. published in 1928 by Harper & Brothers), 36.

⁹⁴ Carl Van Vechten, Nigger Heaven (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1926), 12.

⁹⁵ Savran, 109.

⁹⁶ Mumford, 84.

⁹⁷ Hampton, 2.

⁹⁸ Faderman, 70.

⁹⁹ Wallace Thurman, The Blacker the Berry... (New York: Scribner Paperback Fiction, 1996; orig. pub. 1929), 120.

¹⁰⁰ Faderman, 78. Italics mine.

¹⁰¹ "Women [sic] Rivals For Affection of Another Woman With Knives, and One Has Head Almost Severed From Body." New York Age (November 17, 1926), 1.

¹⁰² "A Rent Party Tragedy." New York Age (December 11, 1926), 4.

CHAPTER 3

“That’s the Kind of Gal I Am”

Drag Balls, “Sexual Perversion,” and David Belasco’s Lulu Belle

Flaming youth, tiger tooth,
That’s the kind of gal I am:
But when I’m in love with someone,
I can be a soft, sweet lamb--
When I’m through, “Toodle-oo”--
That’s the kind of gal I am:

Wilder than a wild, wild rose
And smoother than the Jordan flows,
I’m just a mad-cap baby, called Lulu Belle:
Everyone in dark-town knows
I’m fickle as the wind that blows,
But how they crave this baby, called Lulu Belle.

--“Song of Lulu Belle”¹

“Wilder than a Wild, Wild Rose”

In March, 1928, Variety reported a rather shocking situation: New York’s established homosexual community was getting so large that it could no longer accept any new members. Those refused entry into this “queer elite,” naturally retaliated and waged out-and-out insurrection. The article, entitled “Battle On Among Broadway Elite of the ‘Third Sex,’” begins: “New York’s sex abnormal males have developed caste and it threatens to break up this, the biggest colony of its kind, in the world. It is because of its increasing numbers that the trouble has arisen, the old guard refusing to recognize newcomers, with the new arrivals subsequently causing trouble by supplying information to the police, false as often as not.”² The battle lines between the opposing camps were drawn over a Harlem tradition, but the reverberations were felt throughout New York City.

It seems the brouhaha first erupted when the organizers of a drag ball at Harlem’s Rockland Palace, were forced to limit the number of tickets to participants and spectators because the semi-regular event had recently filled the hall to dangerous capacities. Therefore, the sponsors limited the number of “eligibles,” and announced that the “newcomers to the ranks must go it on their own if they cared to.” The edict aroused the anger of those who were refused admission, and they promptly informed the police of the soiree. Police barred the entrance to men wearing “feminine costume,” thereby destroying the event, because, as the reporter points out, “a drag isn’t a drag without skirts.”

The events surrounding the Rockland Palace debacle evidently caused a fiery debate within particular circles. The article explains: “It has left the homo-sexuals in a panic, with discussions nightly over the matter in a Fifth avenue restaurant near the park. Sometimes one of them even faints in excitement.”³ As intimated in the Variety article, the Rockland “drag” was one of Harlem’s grandest occasions and had all of the flourish of a genteel society affair. Typically the men frequenting one of these balls, whom the author identifies as “from all walks of life,” spent several weeks planning and sewing the most extravagant and fashionable gowns, which were intended to elicit cheers and rapturous gasps from the several thousand in attendance. Such was the magnificence of the finery that many of the leading dress designers of the day attended the drags to glean inspirations for their own newest creations. Likewise, conspicuously on view at the Rockland Palace were “certain women also of their own queer class” wearing the latest in stylish men’s clothing. Apparently, for a novice to the gay and lesbian subculture of 1920s New York, exclusion from the Rockland drag was the equivalent of social homicide.

As reflected by this sensational account, in addition to the covert gatherings of gay men and lesbians at private parties and in small cafeterias and restaurants throughout New York City, large public spaces such as dance halls and ballrooms were temporarily transformed into lavish get togethers for a thriving drag subculture. The drag balls consciously mimicked the opulent society affairs of the period, and the functions

incorporated the theatricality of fashion shows, beauty pageants, and nightclub floorshows. The drag ball phenomenon in Harlem demonstrates that not only did the ghetto influence popular culture, but the process worked in reverse as well. Imitations of cultural pageantry, well-known plays, and favorite performers circulated within the Harlem subculture and contributed to the development of a camp aesthetic. Camp, with its emphasis on style, artifice, and incongruity, was a means by which lesbians and gay men dealt with an oppressive environment while gleefully subverting social conventions and categories that marginalized them. Venerated traditions and respected figures of mainstream entertainment were adopted, recreated, or parodied by lesbians and gay men, and were then magnificently displayed at public revels such as the drag balls. As Richard Dyer indicates, this appropriation of elements from heterosexual society is a chief function of camp, which is "a characteristically gay way of handling the values, images and products of the dominant culture through irony, exaggeration, trivialization, theatricalisation and an ambivalent making fun of the serious and respectable."⁴

The clearest example of this circulation occurred around one of the most popular plays on Broadway in the 1920s. The play also turned out to be a major catalyst for the white throng that descended upon Harlem in this era. As countless newspaper articles from the period indicate, white fascination with Harlem was motivated in large part by a controversial, lurid melodrama called Lulu Belle, which wasn't precisely about the "third sex," but soon became identified with it. On February 9, 1926, two years before the tumultuous ball described in the Variety article, Charles MacArthur and Edward Sheldon's controversial Lulu Belle, a play about Harlem life, opened at the Belasco theatre. David Belasco's production packed audiences into the theatre for over two seasons, and it had tremendous success on the road as well. The play, which was written, produced, and staged by white men and starred white actors in blackface and black actors in supporting roles, is especially significant in that it sent whites scurrying in droves to experience "authentic" Harlem nightclubs and to witness events like the Rockland ball first-hand.

Evidence suggests that gay men in particular strongly identified with the wise-cracking, irrepressible black femme fatale title character.

The play does not contain any visible homosexual characters, but the gay male community in Harlem adopted the title character as its mascot. Gay men in drag referred to themselves and each other as "Lulu Belle," and they even named a Harlem speakeasy after her. At "Lulu Belle's," a drag bar, working-class black and white gay men and lesbians congregated nightly, and, similar to the Rockland drag ball, they parodied formal upper class society functions. Even in the late 1930s, "Lulu Belle" was still synonymous with male homosexuality (but as a fitting coda that finally reclaimed the character's heterosexual appeal, Humphry Bogart dubbed his desert tank the Lulu Belle in the 1943 film Saharra). Reactions to Lulu Belle in the press help explain why the play struck a chord among the disenfranchised. The white press generally disparaged the melodrama for its immorality, and the black press, while pleased that the production used so many black actors, regarded the sexually out-of-control title character (played by white actress Lenore Ulric) as a reminder to black women to remain pure for the sake of the race. As George Chauncey argues, the visible homosexual (that is, the cross-dressed man or woman) and the sexually unrestrained black woman, both associated with the working class, were particularly contentious figures to the African-American communities in the Harlem Renaissance. They both posed a perilous threat to the advancement of the race because of their "low-class" morality, and mocked the ideals of the middle-class family toward which the communities strove.⁵

Previously, little has been written about the play and the controversy it aroused, but the impact of Lulu Belle within Harlem's drag subculture is significant in American theatre history. To many, Lenore Ulric's blackfaced performance of Sheldon and MacArthur's title character represented an insidious threat to racial purity, chaste womanhood, and sexual normalcy. Moreover, the discourse stimulated by the play echoed prevailing attitudes toward same-sex desire, and the responses to Lulu Belle depicted Harlem as a "perversion"

of both race and sexuality. But to the working-class gay male community in Harlem of the 1920s, the madcap Lulu Belle epitomized a derisive and defiant rejoinder to the anti-homosexual criticism hurled from pulpits and political platforms, and the “flaming youth, tiger tooth” title character became a symbol of rebellion against repressive middle-class ideals.

“Everyone in Dark-Town Knows”

The drag ball phenomena, according to George Chauncey, began in Harlem as early as 1923, in which the annual Hamilton Lodge Ball, established in 1869, evolved from a “Masquerade and Civic Ball” into what was commonly referred to as “The Fairies Ball.” And as John L. Fell and Terkild Vinding explain, the annual divertissement was variously referred to as “The Dance of the Fairies” and the “Faggots Ball.”⁷ These events were advertised in Harlem’s papers, but they were discreetly promoted as “masquerades.” For instance, in February 1926, the New York Age printed the following notice:

HAMILTON LODGE
 No. 710, GRAND UNITED ORDER OF ODD FELLOWS
 Will Hold their Original Celebrated Old-Fashioned
MASQUERADE AND CIVIC BALL
RENAISSANCE CASINO, 138th ST., & Seventh Ave.
FRIDAY NIGHT, FEBRUARY 26, 1926
\$30 IN GOLD CASH PRIZES GIVEN AWAY as follows: First
Prize \$15 in Gold; Second Prize \$10 in Gold; Third Prize \$5 in Gold
Will be given to the persons wearing the most artistic Masquerade
Costumes. The Judges will be well-known disinterested persons.
 In case of a tie prizes will be given each.
Music By JOHN C. SMITH’S Modern Dance Orchestra
While this the 58th Masquerade given by Hamilton Lodge No. 710,
it will be the Biggest and Best of all
Tickets and Boxes on Sale at Odd Fellows’ Headquarters, 214 West
135th St., S.C. Patterson, 109 West 137th St., Apt. 10, Telephone
Aud. 6068; Palmer’s Store, 200 W. 129th St.; W.D. Brown’s Estab-
lishment, 2315 Seventh Ave.
General Admission \$1.00
Reception Begins at 8 p.m.

Boxes \$5.00
(Seating 8 Persons)⁸

There is little in this advertisement to indicate that this "old-fashioned" masquerade would offer anything diverging far from the standard garden variety civic ball. Their name notwithstanding, the Odd Fellows, who sponsored the event, were not unlike several other auxiliaries of the Hamilton Lodge organization that presented huge dances in Harlem. In fact, the Odd Fellows were comprised of reputable, black middle-class men, and they were a rough equivalent to the Elks or Kiwanis Clubs. Moreover, there was nothing unusual about John C. Smith's Modern Dance Orchestra playing the event either. This group was a customary fixture at spring dances, charity balls, and socials. Nevertheless, this ball was quite different from most others to take place at the Renaissance Casino at 138th Street and Seventh Avenue.

According to a report in the New York Age a week after the masquerade and civic ball, 1,500 people packed the Renaissance Casino. Although the event was presented by a black organization, at least fifty percent in attendance were white. Bohemians from Greenwich Village, and, as stated in the article, "of the class generally known as 'fairies.'" The reporter points out that the male contestants "in their gorgeous evening gowns, wigs and powdered faces were hard to distinguish from many of the women." Of particular note to the article's author is the fact that the "unusual spectacle" apparently sanctioned and encouraged racial intermingling. At a time when Harlem's most popular nightclubs, including the Cotton Club and Connie's Inn, enforced strict segregation among its clientele, at this Hamilton Lodge Ball, the author indicates that white people "danced with and among the colored people." The news item does not provide a great deal of detail about the ball and winning costumes, but it does list the names, addresses, and races of the top three winners. The first and third prize winners were white, while second place went to a black man. All of them lived above 50th Street in Manhattan.⁹

Five years later, the annual "Fairies Ball" was stronger than ever. At the February 24, 1933 masquerade, attendance at the Rockland Palace reached nearly six thousand people. In fact, by 1:00 AM the crowd grew so large and unmanageable that the police and

fire officials were forced to close the doors, refusing admittance to anyone else. On that occasion, two people were arrested, the first charged with “knocking” a woman to the floor, and the second for opening a door to let people “sneak into the hall.” And for a few tense minutes, it seemed that the huge number of spectators would destroy the *raison d’être* of any drag ball: the judging and presentation of the awards. As the Age reported:

Special police had a time keeping the crowd back while the grand march was in progress and the officials of the lodge were judging as to whom to award the prizes. For a time it looked as though some of the contestants would take matters into their own hands but stern action on the part of judges and the special police broke up any demonstration over the awarding of the prizes.

Again, the crowd represented a diversity of race and class. The article states that in addition to the black Hamilton Lodge members, “thousands of white spectators from Park [A]venue to Greenwich Village came up and took part in the spectacle and mingled with the members of the third sex of both races.”¹⁰

For an excellent description of a typical drag ball one need only look in Blair Niles’ 1931 novel, Strange Brother, which offers a historically accurate picture of gay men in Harlem of the late 1920s. In Chapter 11, Niles sends one of the protagonists, June, a white woman journalist (most likely modeled after the author herself), to a drag ball; the other protagonist, Mark, a self-loathing gay white man, declines the invitation because of the exploitive nature of the event. With the thousands of onlookers gawking over the men from the “shadow world,” Mark feels it would be too “painful . . . to see his kind thus on exhibition, like animals in the Zoo, like freaks in the side-show of a circus.”¹¹ To Mark, if gay men are ever to earn the respect and acceptance of society at-large, they must conform to the expectations of respectable masculine behavior of that society. This respectability would include the masculine dress, values, and employment of “normal,” middle-class men.¹²

The narrator of Strange Brother describes the ball from one of the boxes in the cavernous dance hall, estimating that thousands of "black people and white people and all the intervening combinations" were in attendance. Word spread that stars of Broadway and the literary world were present, and at one point someone indicates the box where stage and film comedienne Beatrice Lillie was rumored to be. An orchestra played on one side of the hall, and people thronged the dance floor. Similarly, in another novel of the period, The Young and the Evil (1933) by Charles Henri Ford and Parker Tyler, the gay narrator surrealistically describes a drag ball he attended thus: "The dancefloor was a scene whose celestial flavor and cerulean coloring no angelic painter or nectarish poet has ever conceived."¹³ To the narrator of Strange Brother, the dance floor below the boxes was a mass of feathers and sparkling bangles, and the costumes represented every period and style of women's formal dress. Some of the participants wore immense powdered wigs with the regal habiliment à la Marie Antoinette, and others wore bobbed wigs with modish straight-cut evening gowns of the 1920s. Still others exhibited plumed headdresses and revealing show costumes that were either created specifically for the occasion or borrowed for the night. In fact, Ethel Waters once wrote that gay men often borrowed some of her "best gowns" to wear at Harlem's drags. In her autobiography, His Eye is on the Sparrow, she amusingly recounts, "One night I lent my black velvet dress, trimmed with ermine, to one of these he-she-and-what-is-it-types. But he got to fighting with his 'husband' at the affair and was locked up in a cell."¹⁴ To her humiliation, her dress smelled like carbolic acid, "the Chanel No. 5 of the cell blocks," and she says she was unable to wear it for a month.

The exhibition of the alluring, the stylish, and the outrageous was a principal purpose (and attraction) of the affair. After kicking off the evening with music and dancing, the highlight of the drag ball arrived. The organizers cleared the dance floor so that the "parade of fairies" and the subsequent competition could begin. Because the masquerade was a licensed affair, the police offered their protection and assistance (as George

Chauncey notes, the police could often be quite helpful on such occasions, or they might harass the contestants).¹⁵ As the narrator of Strange Brother explains:

All violations of the Penal Code of the State of New York [were] scrupulously avoided. Thus it was the officers of the Law who cleared the floor for the parade of 'fairies,' holding back the crowd, while a long elevated platform was set up in the center of the hall. They held back the crowd, too, while the 'fairies' came on in single file, to mount the platform and slowly walk its length, pausing now and then to strike attitudes, to stiffen into statuesque poses, to drop curtsies or to execute some syncopated phrase.¹⁶

A committee of judges, which often included a wide range of celebrities such as writer Carl Van Vechten and prize fighter Jack Johnson, then selected six finalists from the often hundreds of competitors. In 1939, Ethel Waters was the celebrity judge.¹⁷ The finalists then walked the platform again so the judges and crowd could determine the most unique, glamorous, and graceful of the "fairies" to cross the stage. The winner, who received two hundred dollars at the ball Niles depicts, was chosen from the audience's response. In Strange Brother, the audience's favorite was a man in a white wig and low-cut, black evening gown, and who had won the prize at previous drags. After the awarding of the prizes, the platform bisecting the dance floor was removed, and the dancing resumed.

Although the focus of the drag balls tended to be on the competitive spirit, they were also one of Harlem's grandest social functions. The Harlem balls attracted gay men from all over, as indicated by poet Langston Hughes who called the drags "spectacles in color." He claimed they were "very famous among the male masqueraders of the eastern seaboard, who come from Boston and Philadelphia, Pittsburgh and Atlantic City to attend."¹⁸ In addition, thousands of spectators filled the hall's upper boxes to view the colorful extravaganza from above, and members of the upper classes included them on their social calendars. As black socialite Geraldine Dismond gushed in her "Social Snapshots"

column in the Inter-State Tattler: "Of course, a costume ball can be a very tame thing, but when all the exquisitely gowned women on the floor are men and a number of the smartest men are women, ah then, we have something over which to thrill and grow round-eyed."¹⁹

As Dismond's quote implies, costume balls, as well as the similarly-structured popular fashion shows, were familiar events in the Harlem Renaissance, and the drag balls parodied these functions. The "unusual spectacles" sponsored by the Hamilton Lodge tapped into a cultural phenomenon in Harlem, and they mirrored the pageantry, form, and austerity of their "straight" counterparts. Just as the Hamilton Lodge balls were crucial sites of display for the drag subculture, the (straight) costume balls, fashion shows, and beauty contests were no less important for the black ghetto at large. During this era such spectacles were associated with a rising black middle class, and more significantly, reflected a distinct change in the ways black bodies had been generally regarded prior to the 1920s. In the cultural consciousness, black women tended to be represented as overweight, full-bosomed Mammy figures, or grotesque, rolling-eyeballed "pickaninny" Topsy characters; and men were either shuffling Uncle Toms, loose-limbed Jim Crows, or feminized dandies.²⁰ These images were left over from minstrelsy, and although they did not disappear in the 1920s, other representations began to work their way into the popular imagination.

As Shane White and Graham White explain in Stylin', their study on the significance of changing fashion and cultural expression trends from African origins to the 1940s, the 1920s reflected not only a period of increased political, literary, and artistic possibilities for African Americans, but "this shift in consciousness also entailed a deliberate and prideful display of black bodies, particularly those of women, in a manner that transcended hoary white stereotypes."²¹ The manufacture of beauty products, such as skin lighteners and hair straighteners, targeted specifically at black women, became a profitable and pervasive business. This, of course, was the era in which Madame C.J. Walker capitalized on black women's desire to conform to traditional images of beauty, and Walker became America's first black, self-made millionairess from her hair products.

White and White explain that "the clearest evidence of this concern with African American beauty comes in the form of two institutions that rose to prominence in the 1920s: the black beauty contest and the black fashion parade."²² The authors document numerous examples of "bathing beauty balls" and "prettiest girl competitions," which gave way to the even more adored black fashion shows that flourished in major cities throughout the United States. Huge clubs, including Harlem's Savoy, and legitimate theatres, such as the famed Lafayette, hosted elaborate fashion parades, and soon the fashion show became a hallmark of the emerging African-American middle-class. As White and White illustrate, the fashion parades in particular were usually "sponsored by middle-class clubs and charities, organized by respectable society matrons, and [used] debutantes or society women as mannequins."²³ Yet the shows played an important social function as well: The middle class presented the fashion shows "to establish itself as the authority on what respectable blacks should wear, and thus to differentiate itself from working-class African Americans."²⁴ Middle-class black women were concerned that the women of the working class were violating the social rules of the black community if they developed a preoccupation with clothes, and they were protective of preserving fashion as a domain for the middle class. In their view, working-class black women who tried to wear the latest styles were attempting to transgress social delineations by displaying the accouterment of the upper classes. Even so, the same women argued that these working-class women were only mimicking the fashion of the middle class, and they lacked the moral respectability necessary for inclusion in that class. Social advancement was not simply a matter of how well one wore clothes.

Yet the fashion shows of the 1920s played a significant role in promoting African-American social and political progress. The black press frequently advertised and covered the shows as a way to publicize an image of opulence and autonomy among the black middle class. The increased proliferation of these images and the amount of coverage in the black press suggest that by the 1920s, the shows had become a sacrosanct Harlem

tradition. And like all venerated traditions, they seemed to demand parody. As White and White acknowledge, "Perhaps the surest sign of the way in which the fashion show quickly established itself as an African American, middle-class institution was the way in which it was satirized and burlesqued in the famous Harlem Drag Balls of the 1920s and 1930s."²⁵ Ironically, society folk attended these affairs in great numbers, and they did not seem to notice that the drag participants tended to come from the working class. The fashion parade with the runway walkers and its display of expensive clothing was at once an appropriation and a parody of the "society" fashion show form.

The balls appear to be the source of those in present day Harlem,²⁶ which are the subject of Jennie Livingston's 1991 documentary film Paris is Burning. There are important distinctions, though, because of the very different cultures in which they take place. As depicted in Paris is Burning, the contemporary balls tend to be rather exclusive, the audience derived mainly from the gay and lesbian communities in which the balls are presented. They do not attract, nor do they invite, the large numbers of wealthy curiosity-seekers. The balls now also have a rather complex organization, in which the predominantly black and Latino participants represent "houses," and are part of "families." An appointed "mother" presides over these houses, which take their names from famous fashion designers. Rather than prizes given for a category of unspecified qualifications, the recent competitions award winners in several different categories, including Women's Runway, Femme-Queen Face, Butch Queen Realness, Best Bangee Boy, and Best Bangee Girl. As Peggy Phelan explains in Unmarked, the emphasis of these contests is on the participants' "realness," a term that she links with "passing." She writes: "Realness is determined by the ability to blend in, to not be noticed. Like the performance of passing more generally, the performance at these balls represents that which cannot be seen precisely by underlining that which is seen."²⁷ The "hypervisibility" of the runway walkers, gives them an "invisibility" because they rehearse the physical appearance and behavior of being socially "normative" (or "unmarked").

This sense of "invisibility" was also a key factor in the balls of the 1920s, but the stakes for the participants were different. Inside the halls, the rules of society were temporarily reversed, and the men in drag were afforded the benefits usually associated with the privileged classes. Whereas appearing in drag on the streets and at unlicensed affairs in New York City could lead to heavy fines or jail time, at the drag balls, the costumed men were generally "invisible" to the police. Even the press, which regularly published the names, ages, and addresses of men arrested for wearing women's clothing, or other acts that might indicate homosexuality, did not publish the personal information of the cross-dressed men and women in attendance (except, of course, the "winners" of the contests). A cross-dressed man on the street would not have been as fortunate or as celebrated. In February 1928, for instance, the Amsterdam News reported the arrest after a long chase of an individual thought to be a "she" who was discovered to be a "he" in court. The 21 year-old black man, of 85 West 134th Street, was sentenced to six months in the workhouse for disorderly conduct. When he was arrested, he was wearing, according to the report, "a large, expensive fur coat, blue dress, black stockings and green slippers," as well as "a black-and-orange-striped sweater." The article explains that this was the young man's third arrest under similar circumstances. Apparently, he had been "arrested twice before on charges of disorderly conduct--once for degeneracy, for which he paid a fine of \$10, and once for masquerading as a woman, for which he served three months in the workhouse."²⁸

The fact that the police granted permits for the balls and allowed those in attendance to cross-dress does not mean, however, that they offered the drag participants *carte blanche* treatment on the nights of the balls. As indicated in the Variety article above, the relationship between the homosexual community and the law was tenuous at best. On one hand, permits for such occasions could be obtained, but on the other, gay men and lesbians knew that the police might turn on them at any moment. A police report for the same ball described in Variety reflects the careful watch the police maintained:

About 12:30 A.M. we visited [the Manhattan Casino] and found approximately 5,000 people, colored and white, men attired in women’s clothes, and vice versa. The affair, we were informed, was a ‘Fag (fairy) Masquerade Ball.’ This is an annual affair where the white and colored fairies assemble together with their friends, this being attended also by a certain respectable element who go here to see the sights.²⁹

The report mentions that because of the large number of officers, inside and outside the club, uniformed and in plain-clothes, the three men filing the report stayed only a short time. They witnessed a number of intoxicated guests, but saw no reason to make any arrests. They conclude: “Prior to leaving [officers] B and S questioned some casuals in the place as to where women could be met, but could learn nothing.”³⁰ The “women” here refers to prostitutes (one would assume that their prospects for making any money at an event populated mostly by gay men would be slim), but it points to the cultural connection between whores and “fairies.” Ethically and legally, prostitutes and homosexuals stood outside the boundaries of respectability. To middle-class Blacks, both groups were regarded as “low-class” in terms of their morality and their social outsidership.³¹

The emphasis on images of class was an important trait at these balls. The runway walkers proudly exhibited, and often parodied, the effects of high fashion, underscoring the fact that they did not have social or political clout. In the article discussed above from Variety, the reporter claims that “the well-to-do votaries of the ‘drags,’ or the one who is being supported by a man of means will plan weeks in advance on a gown to wear, and will spend hundreds of dollars on the creation.”³² As implied by this article, the central characteristic of the “male abnormal” was not their sexual attraction to other men, but their obsession with expensive drags and dresses. Images of class subsume the representations of a deviant or rampant sexuality. The immorality or the “perversion” of the individuals was marked more by transgressing one’s class than the sexual exploits they pursued. Also notably, the participants’ parade of tremendous wealth also belied the fact they did not

work (in the conventional sense). That is, the most successful drag participants according to the Variety article, were unemployed, but they were backed by rich men.

Visibly, the positioning of the social classes was also transposed and social customs were inverted. At the Rockland Palace and other drag ball venues, the wealthy patrons sat in the overhanging boxes looking down upon the event, shifting the standard spectatorial zones of the social classes. In theatrical parlance, the upper class spectators were seated in the equivalent of the "colored gallery." This was a far different sight from what one would see in a typical Broadway theatre of the time in which the black spectators and members from the lower classes sat in the uppermost gallery (or "nigger heaven" as it was often called). The rules governing preferential class treatment were remanded on these nights.

It must be emphasized that the drag subculture's hypervisibility at the Hamilton Lodge balls was not at all the norm during the Harlem Renaissance. Cross dressing in public was punishable by fines or sentences to the workhouse. Indeed, much of the congregating took place covertly (or *relatively* covertly, in any case) at illegal speakeasies that catered to the "pansy trade." There were several such places in and around Jungle Alley, and drag performers often developed a coterie of followers wherever they appeared. One of the most colorful of these personalities was female impersonator Gloria Swanson (née "Mr. Winston"). Swanson, who was famous for his rendition of "Get 'em from the Peanut Man (Hot Nuts)," could be seen performing most nights in a Harlem basement speakeasy. Tastefully dressed in sequins and net, entertaining with his risqué song parodies and coyly demure dancing, Swanson often fooled unknowing audiences about his male gender. In his tight corset, which gave him a "swelling and well-modeled bosom," he was also loud, buxom, and the favorite of the underworld-set. People generally referred to him with the feminine pronouns "she" and "her," and as Bruce Nugent wrote, it was rare indeed that anyone ever saw Winston in male attire: "Seldom coming on the street in the daytime, breakfasting when the rest of the world was dining, dining when the rest of the

world was taking its final snooze before arising for the day, his public life was lived in evening gowns; his private life in boa-trimmed negligees.”³³

One of the most popular drag nightclubs of the era was a basement speakeasy called “Lulu Belle’s” on Lenox Avenue. Black poet, artist, and actor. Bruce Nugent, one of the few openly gay black intellectuals of the period, recalled “Lulu Belle’s” as a hangout for “female impersonators.”³⁴ And Carl Van Vechten visited the club on at least three separate occasions in 1928, which is evident in his diaries. The club apparently shut down for a period in 1928, perhaps because it was raided. On August 16, Van Vechten went to the “reopened Lulu Belle” with Louis Cole, a black entertainer who sometimes appeared in drag, and he found it as “spirited as ever.” Van Vechten and Cole stayed there until after three in the morning.³⁵

A story on the front-page of the Amsterdam News in February 1928 confirms the club’s notoriety. The report explains that within a two week period, more than thirty men in drag had been arrested at the Lulu Belle Club. One particular evening, two undercover police detectives were dining at the club when five men dressed as women approached them and invited them to “take an auto ride.” The detectives agreed and “told the ‘girls’ they knew a ‘nice place’ at 152nd street and Amsterdam Avenue.” When the group arrived there, “the ‘girls’ were horrified to learn they had driven to the police station.” With an amusement typical of the press, the reporter explains: “[The five defendants] confronted the Lieutenant in silk stockings, sleeveless evening gowns of soft-tinted crepe de chine and light fur wraps.”³⁶ As was typical, the names, ages, and addresses of the men were printed in the paper to increase their humiliation, and prohibited them from working in the public sector. The five men were unable to use “feminine wiles” and avoid the inevitable: They were sent to jail because they could not pay the \$25 fine.

In a notable parallel, Strange Brother contains an account of a young man arrested for wearing drag. A plain-clothes police officer visits a club (that bears striking resemblance to Lulu Belle’s) where he entraps a young man named “Nelly.” In night court,

the officer explains that while at the club he saw "a bunch o' fairies. A whole nest o' them." He prides himself on being able to distinguish men in drag immediately by their actions, specifically in the way they "cock their hats" and "swing their hips" when they walk. He contends that he has a special talent for distinguishing "fairies" from "real women." His game, he implies, is to make the men betray their genders and class through errors in performance. Echoing arguments that black people attempting to pass for white would sooner or later publicly expose their true identities (no matter how much they appeared to be white), he says about men in drag: "A lot o' them are actually built like women. I know 'em all right. But the trick is to get the goods on 'em. Make 'em give 'emself away. That's the trick."³⁷ Nelly proves he is not a respectable woman when he propositions the police officer: real women of class are not arrested for soliciting.

The novel also includes information about prison conditions for men convicted of homosexual-related crimes like those arrested at Lulu Belle's might have faced. Near the end of the book, "Lilly-Marie," a young man who had been arrested for wearing women's clothing, describes his experiences. He states that on Welfare Island the men with such proclivities were segregated from the other male convicts. But he notes that he and his consorts took especial pride in decorating their jail cells with ornaments and pictures, and many of the inmates hung curtains made from paper or cheesecloth over the metal bars. Among this group of "girls," as they referred to themselves, the prisoners adopted the names of Broadway show characters, movie actresses, and opera singers. One of the "girls," he informs the protagonist, was called "Lulu Belle" after the character from the hit Broadway show.³⁸

Lulu Belle was arguably the most befitting symbol for masquerade and transformation than anything else in the 1920s. This mutable, irresistible, and insatiable character, who described herself in song as "fickle as the wind that blows," willfully challenged middle-class ideals and morals. Like a Hamilton Lodge drag ball contestant, she was never quite what she seemed to be. In fact, by herself she was a spectacle in color. As

performed by Lenore Ulric in blackface. Lulu Belle was a white woman passing for black who had a voracious sexual appetite not bound to any race. To many spectators, she was despicable, representing a perversion of race and sexuality. Black theatre critic Theophilus Lewis described her as "a diabolical automaton which the mere humans she comes in contact with are impotent to resist."³⁹ And not unlike the cross-dressed Harlem "fairy," she seemed to mock the principles of polite society, and she symbolized a threat to African-American advancement. But when the play that could barely contain her opened on Broadway in 1926, Lulu Belle unleashed a host of racial and sexual desires and let loose a maelstrom of anxieties revolving around black womanhood.

Flaming Youth, Tiger Tooth

In the world of drag balls, gay nightclubs, and crossed-dressed black men and women, Lulu Belle was indeed an icon. In theatre history, however, the play Lulu Belle is especially important for its use of a racially integrated cast, which was a rarity on Broadway in the 1920s. The production boasted a cast of 115, one hundred of whom were black. While white actors played the major parts in blackface (there are also a few minor white characters), African Americans took on the supporting and supernumerary roles. Both white and black critics singled out the white actors for their ability to pass for black. Arthur Hornblow in Theatre Magazine wrote, "Lenore Ulric outdid herself as the dusky wanton," and according to black author, lyricist, and statesman James Weldon Johnson, "The role of George Randall, the principal Negro male character, was finely played by Henry Hull, a white actor, whose make-up and dialect were beyond detection."⁴⁰ As Freda L. Scott explains, many of the black critics objected to the base depiction of Harlem life, but they applauded its efforts to provide greater theatrical prospects for Blacks in the theatre. For instance, Hubert H. Harrison wrote in the Urban League's journal, Opportunity, that the production "makes it easier for the next step--an all Negro cast in a serious presentation of some other and more significant slice of Negro life."⁴¹

As Arthur Dorlag and John Irvine, the editors of Charles MacArthur’s plays, point out, Lulu Belle stands very little chance being revived today.⁴² Besides its often offensive references to Blacks (including descriptors such as “real nigger style,” “ascetic negresses,” “young bucks,” “darkies,” and other derogatory expressions), it is a pretty dreadful play. In performance it runs over three hours, the melodramatic plot is confusing and meandering, and the characters exhibit little development in the course of the four acts. When it opened on Broadway in 1926, the production did have going for it, in addition to an exciting performance by Ulric, a striking visual design that one came to expect from Belasco. Brooks Atkinson reviewing the play in the Times wrote that Ulric “vibrates like a taut wire,” and he paid tribute to the “precise and accurate photography” of the scenography. Atkinson contrasted the extreme attempts at reality of Belasco’s mise-en-scene to the highly stylized “New Stagecraft” then in vogue. Whereas Belasco sought to recreate the visual minutiae of a play in his design, practitioners of the “New Stagecraft,” including Robert Edmond Jones, Lee Simonson, and Norman Bel Geddes, attempted to capture a text’s “spirit” by using iconic objects, such as masks and imposing geometric shapes, as well as atmospheric lighting. Atkinson wrote:

Not for [Belasco] the esthetic spurs to the imagination now practiced by our newer scenic designers and directors. Not for him the bewildering symbolism of masks and ominous shadows. To Mr. Belasco, “seeing is believing”; he leaves nothing out. At any rate, nothing except plot and story. These two elements of drama, the property of Mr. Sheldon and Mr. MacArthur, are quite lost in the jumble of exact detail.⁴³

In brief, the play’s Carmen-like plot involves a scheming black woman who betrays the affection of her devoted lover and moves from Harlem to Paris to become a wealthy (white) count’s mistress. Several years later, her rejected beau, now released from prison after a fight over the shameless Lulu Belle, tracks her down, confronts her, and strangles her. A

few of the key moments from the play demonstrate why the play was taken up by the drag subculture.

The play opens in a black neighborhood on West 59th Street in New York’s “San Juan Hill” neighborhood. As the stage directions inform, “Everything is gay and lively and black.” Flickering bar signs, “dingy tenements,” fire escapes, a high-class, “pretentious” apartment building, and a movie theatre currently showing--what else?--Glory Champagne in A Lovely Sinner set the scene; and crap-games, singing drunks, and arguments about a prize-fight create the mood. As the play opens, final preparations for a “Society” wedding are underway, and the hero of the play, dashing and well-dressed George Randall (the best man in the wedding), is visiting from White Plains, New York, with his wife and two children. An evangelist, Brother Staley, accompanied by Sister Sally and Sister Blossom emerge from the crowd and begin leading the gathered families in prayer and song. Enter into this admixture of wealth, squalor, and religious fervor Lulu Belle.

From her initial appearance, Lulu Belle stands outside of traditional morality and middle-class values. As the evangelist leads the crowd in “The Old Time Religion,” she makes her first entrance through the processional:

LULU BELLE: ‘Lo, boys! Whoopie! Le’s all git religion.

MRS. FRISBIE: Good Lawd, ef that ain’t that low down Lulu Belle!

And as the stage directions state:

(Lulu Belle is young and beautiful and bad. Her hair is bobbed, her clothes are the last word in [N]egro elegance.)⁴⁴

When the preacher scolds her for her sinful dancing and tells her she is going to go to hell, she mockingly replies, “Yo’ bet I’m goin’ t’ hell, brothah . . . goin’ t’ hell in a bandwagon! An’ when I git theah, I’m gonna walk right up t’ dat ole debbil, jes like I’m doin’ now . . . (She approaches the minister.) . . . an’ I’m gonna jiggle mah hippies dat way.”⁴⁵ Lulu Belle then publicly humiliates him by exposing his hypocrisy. She announces that Brother Staley himself is no stranger to Harlem’s nightlife having encountered Lulu Belle at the

Elite Grotto where she is a hostess and dancer: “Membah de night yo’ come in plaste’ed an’ you rolled dem loving eyes at me.”⁴⁶

Later in the act, immediately before she seduces George Randall, causing him to leave his respectable life as husband, father, and barber in White Plains, Lulu Belle proves that the law poses no threat to her either. When a white police officer breaks up a fight Lulu Belle has started, she taunts him too:

POLICEMAN: (with conviction) Yer a wise-cracker, ainch’a?

LULU BELLE: (virtuously) I’m a li’l widow mothah, dass whut I am, as anybody but a slewfoot h’ness bull could see by lookin’ at me . . .

(Glancing at her wrist watch) My, my, time to go home an’ nurse th’ baby! How time flies talkin’ wid a charmin’ unifo’m man!

S’pose yo’ could walk a piece wid me an’ finish th’ convusation as we go along?

POLICEMAN: (suddenly) Let’s see yer hands. (He seizes them.)

LULU BELLE: Quit ticklin’ my wrist!

POLICEMAN: (Still holding one) Soft as dough. . .you don’t work!

LULU BELLE: Suttinly I wu’k!

POLICEMAN: Where?

LULU BELLE: In de Brownskin Bakin’ Comp’ny.

POLICEMAN: (sourly) Whadda y’ bake?

LULU BELLE: (Triumphantly) Jelly rolls! (She executes a shimmy. A window full of darkies and the ones at the back howl at this.)⁴⁷

Because the officer does not want to have to go to court the next day, his day off, he lets her go with a stern warning (not to mention exposing his own hypocrisy): “If I find ya hangin’ ‘round here again I’ll throw ya in th’ hoosegow, day off or not! (He enters the bar.)”⁴⁸

Before examining the appeal this scene would have for the drag subculture in Harlem--certainly the camp element requires little discussion--it is important to look at this through a feminist critique. As Chauncey indicates, within conservative circles, the visible homosexual and the lascivious black woman were often linked because of their moral depravity, and they were viewed as hindrances to the race's progress. As Steven Watson argues, on the one hand Harlem provided a measure of tolerance for lesbians and gay men, but on the other, the powerful Harlem church was "strictly anti-homosexual."⁴⁹ Therefore, the criticism hurled at the dissolute Lulu Belle echoed similar arguments that lesbians and gay men encountered regularly.

The exchanges between Lulu Belle and the evangelist and police officer enact a familiar narrative of the degenerate urban black woman in the 1920s. In "Policing the Black Woman's Body in an Urban Context," Hazel V. Carby traces this developing perception prevalent not only among whites, but also among the black intelligentsia and the black middle class.⁵⁰ Beginning at the turn of the century, northern cities saw a huge rise in migration of African Americans from the South. The anxieties associated with "social displacement and dislocation" produced a host of "moral panics," which were then transposed on to black women's bodies. Carby explains, "By using the phrase 'moral panic' I am attempting to describe and to connect a series of responses, from institutions and from individuals, that identified the behavior of these migrating women as a social and political problem, a problem that had to be rectified in order to restore a moral social order."⁵¹ The "problem," as she documents with essays and autobiographies from the turn-of-the-century through the 1920s, was traced to single, jobless black women who turned to vice and depravity because of "increasing inefficiency and desire to avoid hard work."⁵²

In an age when white women were making gigantic social and political strides, black women were held back by the prevailing ideology and stereotypes. In Ain't I a Woman, bell hooks explains that white women reformists did not come to the aide of black women because of economic and social rivalry. In particular, they were concerned that

aligning themselves with black women would taint their cause for advancement. She documents the "competition" engendered between black and white women entering the work arena early in the century. She writes: "White women saw black women as a direct threat to their social standing--for how could they be idealized as virtuous, goddess-like creatures if they associated with black women who were seen as licentious and immoral?" According to hooks, white women workers enforced segregation so that they wouldn't catch a "private," "Negro" disease, which was a result from their sexual promiscuity.⁵³ Similarly, Kate Davy explains that historically white women rationalized that black women should be excluded from certain women's organizations in order to assure "respectability" and "credibility" for their groups. She says, "In this and many other ways, white women were able to serve the cause of justice while maintaining their allegiance to whiteness."⁵⁴ By the mid-1920s, the image of the easily corrupted and impure young black woman had been forcefully ingrained in the public imagination, and the "problem" was addressed in numerous articles and essays.

In 1925, black writer Elise Johnson McDougald responded to the moral indictment directly in Alain Locke's collection of essays, The New Negro, and she demonstrated how wide-spread this characterization of black women as sexual deviants and prostitutes had become. McDougald does not refute the charges against black women's morality in her essay "The Task of Negro Womanhood," but she argues that the result was not essentially a symptom of the young women's race. Their inclinations were instead related to their class. She writes that a poor black woman's tendency to have sex without the benefit of marriage is a reaction to the enormous economic pressures "exerted upon her, both from without and within her group." McDougald vehemently rejects the implication that black women are more prone to prostitution than other ethnic or racial groups faced with the same "overpowering conditions." She writes:

The Negro woman does not maintain any moral standard which may be assigned chiefly to qualities of race, any more than a white woman does.

Yet she has been singled out and advertised as having lower sex standards. Superficial critics who have had contact only with the lower grades of Negro women, claim that they are more immoral than other groups of women. This I deny. This is the sort of criticism which predicates of one race, to its detriment, that which is common to all races. Sex irregularities are not a matter of race, but of socio-economic conditions.⁵⁵

She further explains that studies of African tribes have rigid sexual standards, which implies that there is clearly not an intrinsic fault in black women. The problem derives, therefore, from the unfortunate social conditions that are assigned to black women due to racial and sexual inequality. Because of their limited economic options, many black women have little choice but to turn to prostitution to support themselves.

Kevin Mumford shows that in the 1920s the rate of prostitution arrests was indeed statistically much higher for black women than among white. Although theories of the day fluctuated between black women's ostensibly inherent proclivity and the societal pressures that forced women to turn to prostitution, sexual racism also played a key role in the numbers. Mumford points out that "the available historical evidence reflects a bias in the policing of prostitution."⁵⁶ He argues that black women were more conspicuous on New York's streets, making them more susceptible to arrest. And as efforts to clean up New York City heightened in the 1920s, the police, Mumford explains, were most likely urged to "inflate their numbers," and black women proved to be simple targets. Records also indicate that upon conviction, black prostitutes received harsher sentences than their white counterparts, and they were more likely to return to prostitution upon completion of their sentences.⁵⁷ This data concerning black working-class women and prostitution contributed to the "sexual conservatism" that pervaded the middle-class black community that sought to distance itself from the behavior.

Black anthropologist and writer, Melville J. Herskovits, viewed it from a different angle and spoke out against the rising sexual conservatism of the era. His appeal for greater

sexual freedom was greeted with distinct disdain. In his essay, "The Negro's Americanism" (1925), also in The New Negro, he argues that Blacks in Harlem and across the United States have gradually become increasingly acculturated to American ideals and habits. At one point in the essay to show the extent of this "Americanization," he posits as example the reaction he received while speaking with a group of African-American men and women on the subject of "sex relations." When the conversation shifted to the "treatment of the Negro woman in literature," he "inadvertently remarked that even if the sexual looseness generally attributed to her were true, it was nothing of which to be essentially ashamed, since such a refusal to accept the Puritanical modes of procedure generally considered right and proper might contribute a welcome leaven to the conventionality of current sex *mores*."⁵⁸ The group was flabbergasted by his remarks, and he claims the "prompt and violent" response he received "was such as to show with tremendous clarity the complete acculturation of these men and women to the accepted standards of sex behavior."⁵⁹ He argues that the rigid sexual standards have nothing to do with an innate quality of black women, but of the cultural standards that blacks had also adopted as a result of their "Americanization." Even more interestingly, he implies that such behavior could effectively make Americans (white and black) less uptight about sexuality in general and allow for more experimentation.

Yet the attitude that black women possessed an inborn tendency toward sexual "looseness" and efforts to reign them in persisted throughout the 1920s. When blacks were still not successfully integrated into American society, the blame was often placed on the women of the race. It was still a widely held belief that a race's moral stature resided in the purity of its women, so it stood to reason that black women's supposed natural inclinations for sensual indulgences prevented African Americans from moving forward. Carby states that the need to "police and discipline" the bodies of black women arose from this viewpoint. Critics contended that the difficulties Blacks faced in the cities were rooted in

the unpoliced, undisciplined, and unemployed bodies of single black women, which prohibited the race’s advancement. As Carby explains:

White and black intellectuals used and elaborated this discourse so that when they referred to the association between black women and vice, or immoral behavior, their references carried connotations of other crises of the black urban environment. Thus the migrating black woman could be variously situated as a threat to the progress of the race: as a threat to the establishment of a respectable urban black middle class: as a threat to the formation of black masculinity in an urban environment.⁶⁰

In this context, Lulu Belle’s “soft as dough” hands are particularly significant. Because she works in a nightclub and not (ironically) in a subordinate menial position, her body betrays her as not belonging to the “respectable” middle-class. Even worse, she lewdly displays her effrontery to middle-class values--represented above in terms of motherhood, and respect for the church and law. That is, to show her contempt at efforts to rein her in, Lulu Belle demonstrates the extent of her undisciplined body (“jigg[ing] [her] hippies” and “executing a shimmy,” for example). To black middle class communities of the 1920s, Lulu Belle personified the tremendous barriers Blacks faced in cultural advancement and securing approbation from white society. Lulu Belle’s assault on respectability made the black community even more protective of the division between the social classes. The middle class intended to distance itself from the working class to bolster its own image of virtue and uprightness.

It is important to remember the central irony of Lulu Belle as representative of a problem to her race: The play was written by two white men and performed by a white woman in blackface. Also, the audiences attending the Belasco Theatre would have been predominantly white. Generally working-class Blacks did not attend live theatre productions, particularly on Broadway, but they would, however, have read about Lulu Belle in black newspapers such as the New York Age and Amsterdam News. The black

press was quick to respond to the danger that women like Lulu Belle posed to the race and viewed the play as a morality tale. In March, 1926, a month after the show opened on Broadway, the Amsterdam News printed an article by Ruth Dennis called "Lulu Belles-- All?" An editorial statement frames the article and registers full support for the issues Dennis raises: "We have never aimed to assume a position of moralist or to preach morality, but there are certain truths which we, as a race, must recognize if we hope to attain those heights which we so blatantly tell the world we are aiming for." And he adds, "Not since William Hannibal Thomas wrote 'The American Negro' have we [sic] ran across an individual with enough bravery to come forth with the unvarnished truth as Miss Dennis."⁶¹

Ruth Dennis's exposé of the "unvarnished truth" poses the question: "Is 'Lulu Belle' based on the life of the average Negro girl?" She believes that it is. The crux of the problem, as she defines it, is that single, black, working-class women spend all of their time concentrating on their appearance when they should be supporting themselves. Their preoccupation with fashion causes a "passionate discontent" with their economic caste, and they can focus only on how they can acquire "social recognition." Dennis points out, however, that fashion itself is not the enemy. In fact, it is a distinguishing mark separating the lower and middle classes. The problem exists because women without respectability (those from the working class) are masquerading as respectable. She asks, "Is there any strong incentive for virtuous living when the pure and impure are received on an equal footing in society, and the ability to wear good clothes is the sole criterion of individual social standing?" The "impure" Lulu Belles are transgressing the social boundaries by posing as respectable women, when they actually have not earned the right to be middle-class. The proof of their unfitness for society is how they violate the moral codes of the middle class. In order to obtain fashionable finery, they often resort to "all sorts of reprehensible follies" (such as becoming mistresses to white, French counts in Lulu Belle's case), or "even crime" (theft or prostitution, for example). She writes, "The majority of

Negro women are evading honest toil to live in licentious ease. 'Clothes, clothes, more clothes' is their one ambition."

According to Dennis, middle-class decorum and respect for motherhood have also been assaulted by the working-class "Lulu Belles" in the black community. Proper, feminine behavior has been replaced by a passion for gambling, drinking, and dancing, and other activities inspired by "questionable novels and rotten theatricals."² Dennis's argument recapitulates the familiar moral complaint that theatre presumably adversely influences social behavior, especially among the lower classes. As Jonas Barish explains, the theatre promoted idleness, and it exposed spectators to wanton characters, who acted upon their darker passions.³ According to anti-theatrical tracts, mimetic representations provide unsatisfactory models for everyday conduct, and these should be carefully regulated by morally superior individuals.

Dennis prophesies that if the Lulu Belles in the community are not rooted out and reformed, the race will perish. She explains: "So great a responsibility rests upon Negro womanhood that it is imperative that serious consideration be given the condition of things as they stand in reference to her. The moral status of a race is fixed by the character of its women. If 'Lulu Belle' is typical, then the Negro is doomed." The future of the race, therefore, is dependent upon the unceasing and righteous work of the "anti-Lulu Belles," or those black women who have not yet succumbed to the temptations of vice and folly. In an earnest plea to cherish the few upstanding black women in the community, Dennis writes:

These heroines [the anti-Lulu Belles] must realize that between good and evil conduct there is a great gulf. They must be God fearing teachers of truth and righteousness. They shall lead the Lulu Belles into chaste living and the race will forever call them "blessed."

The "chaste living" here refers to preserving black women's roles as wives and mothers. She claims it is the principal duty of black women to serve as the "custodians of the souls as well as the bodies of their children."⁴

An even greater crime than acquiring wealth and becoming a mistress to a count is Lulu Belle's devastating blow to the symbol of middle-class respectability: the family. In one of the more excessively melodramatic moments of the play, the extent of this is evident. While sitting in a Harlem nightclub, George realizes he cannot go back home to his wife even after he has been told that his son Walter has died. In his efforts to support his mother and sister by selling newspapers in the rain, the young boy caught and succumbed to pneumonia. A letter from George's wife imploring him to go home, along with her apology for not being a "better wife," cannot persuade him. And he cannot even be impelled to return after he hears his daughter's heartbreaking postscript to the letter: "Dear Daddy: Please come home." Lulu Belle has long since tired of George and commands him to go back (she tells him, "Ev'ry daddy has his day an' yo've had six months!"), but he cannot leave her. Inexplicably, George cannot escape Lulu Belle's charms: it turns out that he loves her more than he does his whole family. "put t'gethah."⁵ Like the "little black hunchbacked creature," Skeeter, that follows Lulu Belle everywhere, fetching her cigarettes and taking her insults, George's manhood has deteriorated. By Act III, Lulu Belle has destroyed a man and his entire family.

Just as the archetypal, lascivious black woman spelled doom for the race, homosexual men and women presumably threatened the stability of Harlem's two strongest institutions: The Church and the family. George Chauncey charts a campaign in the 1920s, which was directed at homosexuals, focusing on the threat they posed to black communities. The crusade was fought primarily in the white press and led by Harlem's most renowned minister, Adam Clayton Powell. On November 16, 1929, the New York Age printed the following headline: "Dr. A.C. Powell Scores Pulpit Evils: Abyssinian Pastor Fires a Broadside into Ranks of Fellow Ministers, Churches . . . Denounces Sex Degeneracy and Sex Perverts." In a well-publicized sermon, Powell railed against the evils infiltrating society as a result of the activities in which many young people were engaging in Harlem's nightclubs and dance halls. Continuing the trend to lay the predicament of the

race on women, he said he was particularly troubled by the rise in "sex perversion" among females, claiming it "has grown into one of the most horrible, debasing, alarming and damning vices of present day civilization, and is [...] prevalent to an unbelievable degree."⁶⁶ In a sermon the following week, he stated that the Negro family was particularly vulnerable to sex perverts because they induce "men to leave their wives for other men, wives to leave their husbands for other women, and girls to mate with girls instead of marrying."⁶⁷ Homosexuality was not just a moral problem; it signaled an end to the propagation of the race.

Although this public attack on "sex perversion" occurred three years after Lulu Belle opened, the Church's anti-homosexual position was not new to lesbians and gay men. Certainly, the black minister's admonition to Lulu Belle that she will go to hell if she does not alter her lifestyle, echoes the vilification lesbians and gay men had customarily received from the Church. For the gay men who had adopted Lulu Belle as an icon, her subversive impudence in the face of the minister must have registered a vicarious joy for those who saw or heard about the moment in the play. She does not cower when he criticizes her lifestyle; instead, she remains defiant and continues her quest for greater wealth and more fabulous clothes. A gay man in 1920s Harlem could only have fantasized about such a moment. Moreover, Lulu Belle's attitude toward the law, although comical and subversive on-stage would have resulted in arrest and jail time if someone from the drag subculture had attempted a similar ploy.

As newspaper accounts and police records indicate, an impudent young black woman or defiant cross-dressed black man on the streets of New York in the 1920s would not nearly have been so fortunate as Lulu Belle, who got away with a stern warning from the police officer. This fact is reflected in a Variety story dated April 21, 1926. The brief article states that Gene Mosely, a 26-year-old vaudeville entertainer and "female impersonator" of 337 West 59th Street (coincidentally, the same street as the setting for the first scene in Lulu Belle), was arrested for disorderly conduct. Like Lulu Belle, Mosely

apparently infuriated the police officer with his inappropriate sexual advances. Variety reports:

Policeman George Meyers, West 17th Street Station, said he was passing in front of the 59th street address early one morning when Mosely stepped up to him, threw his arms around his neck and tried to kiss him. Meyers said he pushed him aside and then recognized him as a man who had been arrested last December for a similar act.⁹⁸

Mosely refuted the accusation, but when he could not provide "a satisfactory answer" why he was on the street at that time, the judge found him guilty. Mosely's punishment further demonstrates the perceived conjunction between charges of immoral behavior and indolence: He was sentenced to sixty days in the workhouse.

The most profound and well-documented effect Belasco's production had in the 1920s was its on-stage presentation of "authentic" Harlem atmosphere, which was characterized by a raucous nightlife. At the same time Lulu Belle opened on Broadway. Carl Van Vechten's Nigger Heaven was a national bestseller. As discussed in Chapter 1, Van Vechten's novel, like Lulu Belle, depicted an exotic, thrilling world of jazz and bootlegged liquor and a life infinitely more exciting than the one whites endured below 125th Street. The two works created an insatiable desire among whites to experience the "real thing," and they traveled en masse to Harlem where they could take a vacation from their everyday middle-class morality. Press coverage of the goings-on in Harlem perpetuated the appeal and often credited Lulu Belle and Nigger Heaven for initiating the vogue.

In the comfort of the Belasco Theatre on 44th Street and Broadway, the spectators were afforded a view of the after-hours activity above 125th Street as seen by David Belasco. And with the legendary impresario as their guide, the audiences vicariously "slummed" amid the Harlemites. Percy Hammond of the New York Herald Tribune articulated this aspect in his review of the play:

Piloted by Mr. Belasco, the playgoers last night did some slumming in the black belt. It was a rowdy evening among the wicked colored folk, with frequent exhibitions of their more scandalous depravities. We saw them committing nearly all the popular intemperances from murder to the Charleston, and doing so in the ardent fashion common to the Afro-American temperament.⁶⁹

Later in the review, Hammond cautions that those who object to the company of “tawny courtesans,” and find the salacious behavior of certain women distasteful should not go see the production. He writes: “But in case you are weary of gender, whether saffron or ivory, and the cultural processes of a topaz harlot irk you, ‘Lulu Belle’ is a good show to stay away from.”⁷⁰ Nevertheless, he claims that the play allows the more inquisitive theatregoers the chance to witness “the Negro New Yorker in his more animal aspects.” To this critic, Belasco’s production offered a photographic and cinematic portrait of black life in Harlem. In a similar effect that Thurman and Rapp’s Harlem would achieve two years later, voyeuristic audiences could receive the same titillation that the real Harlem afforded without having to associate with African Americans directly.

In particular, Act III of Sheldon and MacArthur’s play attempts to recreate the wild abandon that people expected from Harlem’s nightlife. As he was known to do, the producer/director went to incredible extremes to capture the minute details of the environment in his stage design. Writing in Liberty magazine, he states that with his star and production staff he “made journey after journey into the night life of the Harlem Negro section” in order to replicate the milieu precisely.⁷¹ The act takes place in the Elite Grotto, a fictional “black-and-tan” nightclub (reportedly based on one of the pioneering nightclubs, Barron Wilkins’ cabaret at 133rd Street and 7th Avenue) where Lulu Belle performs. The lengthy set description reflects Belasco’s careful attention to detail, and he made every effort to replicate a basement speakeasy with all of its characteristic “evil and exotic charm.”⁷² Several tables line a small, circular dance floor; there is a small bandstand with a

piano and several chairs for the small orchestra; and an old pool table is up-stage left.

Covering the wall are pictures of Lulu Belle, who was the main attraction at this club, and signs that warn, “No Improper Dancing or Actions Will Be Tolerated.” “No Shimmie.” and “Profane Language Not Permitted.” As one would expect (and hope), all of these rules are violated in the course of the act. Harlem’s appeal for whites was its promise that all regulations of polite society would indeed be broken.

Of particular interest is a not very subtle reference to the liberated atmosphere of Lulu Belle’s world. Belasco strategically placed a reminder on his set indicating that the defiance of rules takes on many different forms in New York’s “Black Belt.” A prominently displayed advertisement on the wall publicizes the active gay and lesbian subculture. It says: “Sheiks, Flappers and Dapper Dans! The pleasure of your company is requested at 14 Karet Boys Masquerade Ball and Dance at the Harlem Casino, January 26. Admission 75 cents. Boxes \$3.” Those familiar with Harlem’s drag subculture would have immediately recognized the allusion to the Manhattan Casino balls. In addition, the reference to “14 Karet Boys” is no doubt code for the young gay men in their expensive and glittering creations.⁷³ The sign may be taken to signify that while the activities in Lulu Belle’s Elite Grotto are emancipating, they represent only a small part of the exhilarating possibilities in Harlem.

Jazz music, sultry singing, and wild, pulsating dancing punctuate the act. At one point the waiters break into a routine during which they balance their trays above their heads and “undulate” with the music, which was performed by a small on-stage band. A few moments later the entire cast breaks into a feverish dance, trying to out-do each other with impressive new dance steps. In between Lulu Belle’s arguments with George, there are fist fights, crap shoots, and more songs, including “Miami” and “Remember.” But the high point of the act is Lulu Belle’s Charleston, which she uses to entice the Vicomte. The excitement of the dance and the enthusiasm with which it is greeted is evident in the script:

(The music quickens, Lulu Belle starts to dance, holding her dress above her knees. She goes faster and faster, ending in a furioso of clatter and applause.)

HAPPY: Dass th’ gal!

HERMAN: Shake it up!

MILTON: Do yo’ stuff!

HERMAN: Shake that thing!

BUTCH: Burn my clothes--Lemme die now!

BRYANT: Zowie!

CORBIN: Bing!

The crowd begs her to do an encore, and she obliges. Even in print, the seductiveness of the musical junctures comes across.⁷⁴

The effect that Lulu Belle had on white pleasure seekers was almost immediate. Playwright and novelist Wallace Thurman satirized the craze the play Lulu Belle stimulated in his 1929 novel, The Blacker the Berry, Mid-way through the novel, Emma Lou, the dark-skinned heroine, becomes a maid for a white actress named Arline Strange. Arline is appearing as a “mulatto Carmen” in Cabaret Gal, “an alleged melodrama of Negro life in Harlem.” Like Belasco’s production of Lulu Belle, the play within Thurman’s novel centers around a reckless young black woman who eventually becomes the mistress to a “wealthy European.” Emma Lou, who lives in Harlem, watches Cabaret Gal frequently from the wings, and the narrator explains:

[Emma Lou] never tired of watching the so-called dramatic antics on the stage. She wondered if there were any Negroes of the type portrayed by Arline and her fellow performers. Perhaps there were, since there were any number of minor parts being played by real Negroes who acted much different from any Negroes she had ever known or seen. It all seemed to her like a mad caricature.⁷⁵

At one point, the actress's brother comes to New York for a visit, and insists on going to Harlem to test the veracity of his sister's performance. Privately, Arline asks Emma Lou to go with them to several cabarets because her brother would "enjoy himself more" with Emma Lou, an authentic Harlemit, as their leader. When Emma Lou tells Arline that she has never been to a cabaret, the actress is shocked: "What? You in Harlem and never been to a cabaret? Why I thought all colored people went?"⁷⁶ Arline then promises that Emma Lou will receive a "big tip" if she pretends that she is a regular at the clubs. That night at Small's Paradise, an actual nightclub and famous jazz locale that was patronized almost solely by whites, Emma Lou notes the "artificiality" of the environment. The customers revel with an exaggerated lack of restraint that strikes her as false, which parallels the feeling she had while watching the actors on-stage in Cabaret Gal. In a form of double mimesis, the actors and the club patrons duplicate the popular (stage) version of Harlem nightlife. As Emma Lou indicates, the atmosphere at Small's is highly theatrical, "only the proscenium arch had been obliterated," and "the audience and the actors were as one."⁷⁷ In the theatricalized environment of Small's Paradise, the white customers re-enacted the uninhibited behavior of the actors in Cabaret Gal.

The attention whites lavished on the seamier side of Harlem, however, aroused the consternation of many in the black community and press. They viewed such works as Lulu Belle, and its depiction of Harlem as a "paradise for cheap sport" with dismay. They felt these works perpetuated stereotypical images of African Americans as morally corrupt and scandal driven. This was a small element of Harlem life, they argued, and the more dominant "good" and "decent" side of their neighborhoods were ignored. David Belasco did not see it this way, though. He publicly stated that his presentation of African-Americans and Harlem was not only completely accurate, but also beneficial to the race. In addition, his production of Lulu Belle, whose company was composed of "representatives of all walks of Negro life," was the first to tap into the instinctive "dramatic urge that runs through all of the life of these apparently care-free people."

Belasco expounded upon these notions in an article he wrote for the August 7, 1926 edition of Liberty magazine. In Margaret Mead-like manner, the producer/director details his experiences of observing, noting, and eventually interacting with "the black folk in their hours of play." His ethnographic "study" depicts the blacks he encounters as dehumanized, purely emotional (rather than intellectual) creatures with remarkable physical attractiveness. He begins the article with a lengthy narrative of "the Negro in his native environment," an African veldt, preparing for battle with an unnamed, approaching enemy. The pounding drumbeats, gyrating bodies, and appeals to the "war god" recapitulate the popular image of the African primitive. Unsurprisingly, Belasco's description of the nearly naked black men borders on the erotic as he imagines their body parts in close-up. For example, prior to the war dance, he says that "muscles tense and flex," and he calls attention to the chief's "massive chest" and the "supple black forms" of the warriors with their "huge-muscled hands." As he sets the scene: "Flickering firelights mark off silhouettes of massive torsos, rippling shoulder muscles, flash of glittering teeth and rolling eyes."⁷⁸ Belasco uses this anthropological depiction to explain that the physical reaction to pounding drum beats with the attendant wild, mimetic war dances is psychologically innate to African Americans, and that this "emotion-expression" will find its outlet in the American theatre. He explains that he is qualified to forward this theory because, as he states, "Fate has decreed that I should know the Negro of our modern days; that I should know him and his psychology intimately." And this knowledge forces him to prophesize that, "The Negro, from today onward, will compel recognition through the sheer power of his instinctive mime talent." He writes:

I will go further and declare that no race, even the sorrow-swept Jew, can surpass the Negro for instinctive stage ability. The same receptivity that drove their African ancestors to battle frenzy at the sound of war drums, has been translated by generations of contact with civilization into terms of emotion-expression, delicate and sensitive in the extreme.⁷⁹

Belasco's insight, he claims, is a result of having worked with over one hundred black people on Lulu Belle.

The article goes on to show how the producer/director with his star, Lenore Ulric, and members of the production team "made journey after journey" into Harlem nightclubs so they could accurately represent the neighborhood and its inhabitants on the Broadway stage. Through his investigations, he found that blacks, who are "emotion chameleons," were particularly "susceptible" to music, which alternately made them docile or combative, depending on the type of music played. He also concluded that they were instinctive actors and he instantly knew that his production would be more successful if he used African Americans in the supporting roles rather than whites in burnt-cork. But he would have to recreate their milieu precisely, so that the black actors would be more inclined to act naturally. This came to him when Ulric questioned their ability to play characters:

"But will an audience frighten them into stiffness? Will they forget their roles?" she asked.

"Are they less natural because we are here?" I retorted. "What we must do is to make each one so visualize and actually live his part that distractions will be impossible."⁸⁰

The rehearsal process for Belasco was particularly gratifying, and he illustrates how much he learned from his cast. He remarks on the "sing-along" he led on the first day of rehearsal to "cement the community of interest" and their "rough-and-tumble" eating habits when lunch arrived. When one of the cast members says, "Boss-man, us craves to exercise our bones," Belasco mistakenly thinks that he means they need to go outside for a few minutes to stretch. The joke is on him when he discovers that the fellow didn't intend for the company to leave the rehearsal room at all. He meant only that they take a brief gambling break and shoot dice ("Bones gets dey exercise right here!").⁸¹

As evidenced by the hard work of the black cast during the rehearsal process, Belasco praised their ambition, their spirituality, and above all, their "childish devotion."

Even the original “Miss Doubter,” Lenore Ulric, had to admit she was impressed. When Belasco asked her how she felt about working with black people after the show opened, she remarked: “They give me something indefinable out of their enthusiasm and their devotion to us all—a something which makes my work truly easy. Such loyalty and devotion as they lavish on you! I respect them greatly—and I always will.” With the success of the show, Belasco proudly concluded:

I am glad to be the first producer to show the Negro, not in caricature, but as he really is. It is a far cry from native kraal to cosmopolitan stage--but--
The Negro has made the journey. Watch him during the next decade!⁸²

Surprisingly, the most vocal black supporter of this statement was the black intellectual leader of the period, W.E.B. DuBois, who three months earlier maintained a similar position about the importance of Lulu Belle. In an editorial in the black journal The Crisis, he stated that “for the first time on the American stage the Negro has emerged as a human being who is not a caricature and not a comedian, and who reacts to the same impulses and emotions as other folk.”⁸³ The comment shows how such strides in representation, although the images may seem racist today, were appreciated and publicized. As Steven Watson argues in The Harlem Renaissance, assistance from a deprecating and self-promoting white impresario like David Belasco, was crucial in providing much-needed visibility for African-Americans.⁸⁴ Even more importantly, the show provided more than one hundred black actors with work for over two years.

Belasco’s remarks about the primitive, childlike qualities of the black actors echoes the prevailing view of the era, and the response to it from black leaders shows the fraught circumstances of dealing with it. As David Krasner explains, the end of the nineteenth century and a rise of social Darwinism had offered for many anthropologists, but not all, “scientific proof” that African Americans were “inferior, barbaric, and incapable of socializing with whites.”⁸⁵ Black people were regarded as “savages,” who had not yet biologically advanced to the civilized state that white people had reached. As Rebecca

Schneider shows, these Darwinian theories centering on biological determinism and survival of the fittest were applied to gender as well. The theories offered tangible “proof” for what many had already believed about white male superiority. She says, “When science moved with Darwin away from teleological theories of nature’s grand design toward a concept of evolution based on random adaptability, this concept articulated in a new way the old hierarchy of black as lower than white, and woman as lower than man--it did not dismantle that hierarchy.”⁸⁶ For many, Darwin’s theories offered a scientific rationale for institutional racism and sexism. It allowed for charting race and gender on a continuum in which white men were biologically destined to lead, because they were the most fully evolved and civilized in the human hierarchy.

When some people in the black community protested the stereotypical and base depictions in Lulu Belle, several white critics claimed that African Americans were being far “too sensitive.” They did not think that it should be discussed as anything more than what it was: a piece of popular theatre (and a not very good one at that). The New York Herald Tribune, for example, published a rebuttal to the claims of African Americans that the play was a “libel on their race,” and “an unfair indictment of an entire people.” The unnamed author concedes that, yes, black people have been oppressed, but they have made great strides in their artistic and cultural accomplishments in which they rightly take “modest pride.” He adds that they are not without help in their pursuits either: “Aiding them in their endeavor to justify themselves is a band of New York white folks, who, led by Carl Van Vechten and other intrepid abolitionists, clasp them hand in hand and help them over the rough places.”⁸⁷ He also agrees that the portrait of black life as represented by Lenore Ulric is not “pleasant propaganda.” On stage at the Belasco Theatre, “she is a smart viper, weaving her cankerous way from Harlem to Paris. . . . ‘Lulu Belle’ is not a pretty picture of a lady of color, or of the circles in which she wiggles.” But this is no reason to protest, he says, for the history of the world’s stage is filled with unpleasant images of every race, religion, and ethnic group. He cites several examples including Cradle

Snatchers, which “exceeds in its traduction of blonde life”; The Shanghai Gesture, “a bitter, unjust lampoon of the Chinese character and practices”; and “the Scandinavians may well consider themselves insulted by Hamlet and Hedda Gabler, and the Jews and Irish by Abie’s Irish Rose”; and so on. He closes with the following rejoinder: “So the Negroes, like other persons, should take the abuses of the drama laughingly, and not waste their time in protest.”⁸⁸

Lenore Ulric herself commented on the objections to the play and her performance, stating that the work was not meant to be scandalous, but “socially constructive.” In an interview following the opening, she argued in defense of Lulu Belle, saying that it had higher purposes than mere melodrama. Audiences could learn from the character and how Lulu Belle responds to her given circumstances, which would socially improve the spectators by seeing her “type” represented on stage naturalistically. She saw in the character a universal significance that people of all the races could identify and might therefore understand better.⁸⁹ This understanding could lead to better relations between (and among) the races and sexes. She explained:

The character of Lulu Belle increases our knowledge of life, and therefore creates tolerance and sympathy. [...] No matter how much we disapprove of the type, we must admit that there are real Lulu Belles in the world and that they’re not all mustard-colored, either. A study of the emotional reactions of such a woman broadens our own horizons, and I believe that anything which adds to our knowledge makes us better. I never yet knew a person with understanding who hadn’t a higher character than one who remained good merely through living in a shell of ignorance.⁹⁰

The play was not intended to cast aspersions upon the lives of African Americans at all, according to Ulric, rather it was meant to provide enlightenment for its Broadway audiences.

The most vocal objections to Lulu Belle did not concern the play's unfavorable representations of African Americans, though. The greatest concern in the press was its blatant immorality. In its tryout run in Philadelphia, for example, the play's "vulgar language" incited calls for censorship, especially because the transgressions were committed by a woman.⁹¹ A few of the more egregious offenses cited in the press included Lulu Belle's sexually suggestive lines: "Did you ever have your momma run her hand down your neck, down your spine, and around your solar plexus?"; and "If I were to take my Saturday bath in champagne, would you stick your head in and drink it up with me?"⁹² These lines were subsequently cut. After its Broadway run, the play toured the United States, but, as reported in the New York Amsterdam News, Lulu Belle was banned in Boston. The mayor of the city refused to grant a license to the Colonial Theatre on the basis that the play was deemed indecent and immoral.⁹³

Particularly offensive to some critics was the integration of Blacks and whites on the same stage, and similarly, in the same nightclub. Conservative opponents of the Harlem nightclubs cited the immoral sexual behavior that seemed to result from the intermingling of the races. Black and white critics and moralists suggested that by allowing the two races to mix socially would invariably lead to any number of possible couplings between races and genders. Issues of purity of race usually delineated the arguments, but just below the surface were concerns that racial intermingling might lead to deviant sexuality. In their reasoning, interracial desire, a form of sexual perversion, was only one step removed from same sex desire. Out of control and unregulated, Harlem became the arena in which whites experimented with such activities, and Lulu Belle metaphorically reflected this trend.

In Interzones, Mumford argues that in the 1920s the black-and-tans were synonymous with sexual unrestraint and inversion. First, the atmosphere was sexually charged because of the music playing in the background. Jazz, which was the primary form heard in these clubs, encouraged close dancing and bodily movements that duplicated the sensuous syncopations of the music. In addition, the predominantly black clubs

"represented and symbolized the prevailing racial order turned upside-down."⁹⁴ In these clubs, reformists argued that whites were the unwitting captives of the primitive black enchantment. But the greatest anxiety that the clubs produced was the threat that all of this would lead to miscegenation. Conservative whites again used Darwinian theory to stress the "unnaturalness" of this, the greatest taboo. According to some, biological mixing of the races would taint the purity and superiority of the white race. As David Krasner explains, in the early twentieth century, "intermarriage was viewed as the ultimate violation of the social order."⁹⁵ Many white social scientists at that time, such as Alfred P. Schultz writing in 1908, argued that the mixing of the races would diminish the power of the nation by tainting its racial purity.⁹⁶ Mumford states that between 1900 and 1930 with the advent of the Great Migration and increased immigration, "Anglo-Saxons" feared that their "100 percent Americanism" might be threatened.⁹⁷

The black-and-tans produced an anxiety among Freudian proponents as well. Believing that barbaric drives lurked behind every civilized personality, conservatives feared that these clubs might release the hidden, sinful desires that respectable whites suppressed. But amid the pulsating rhythms of the jazz music and the suggestive dancing of uninhibited black bodies, whites could be tempted to discard their vestments of civilized behavior. According to this view, commingling with black people might cause whites to "forget themselves" and give in to their base desires, causing them to slip into acts of sexual perversion. Because African Americans were associated with potent primitive sexuality, whites were powerless to resist the urges released in the black-and-tans. Wendy Martin describes the black jazz culture as "the cultural equivalent of the American libido." According to Martin, "The black body represented unrestrained, illicit desire, and black sexuality was associated with satanic chaos and bestiality."⁹⁸ And as Ann Douglas explains, "If the savage lay in wait behind the civilized man, the Negro lay, repressed but potent, behind the white man."⁹⁹

The fears of miscegenation and black sexual depravity regarding Lulu Belle is particularly evident in Arthur Hornblow’s review in Theatre Magazine (April 1926). Linking it with two other controversial plays on Broadway, The Glass Slipper and The Shanghai Gesture (the three of them together forming “an unholy trinity of theatrical filth”), Hornblow rants: “All the ordures of brutal concupiscence, the noisome scrapings of the sexual garbage can, the shameless, abandoned jargon of the brothel, raucous ribaldry, rape, lewdness, the whole gamut of depravity and lechery--such is the putrescent drama served to-day for the entertainment of your sons, and daughters, not secretly, furtively in some obscure East Side dive, but openly, brazenly in Broadway theatres of the first class.”¹⁰⁰ He singles out Lulu Belle as particularly reprehensible amid the other “erotic exhibitions of its kind.” At least previous “bawdy” shows had casts “confined to white players,” so “if indecencies of dialogue or situation were committed, at least it was among one’s own, in the family so to speak.” “But now,” he says, “emulating the example of certain cabarets, where black-and-tan performers draw the midnight pleasure seekers, an added thrill is sought at the Belasco by mixing the colors.”¹⁰¹

Harlem’s small speakeasies and integrated nightclubs particularly riled social and religious conservatives. As a result, committees were formed and social scientists were interviewed to determine the long term social effects these cabarets might have. The Hartford Times, for example, analyzed the trend in the article, “Harlem Negroes Run Dives for White Folks” (July 23, 1927). It contends that because of plays like Lulu Belle, “cabarets, with a suggestion of abandoned wickedness” have sprung up in astonishing numbers. And worse. “These places have multiplied so rapidly that they are virtually unregulated and unsupervised, which cites grave social evils as a possible result of this haphazard mingling of races.”¹⁰² The “grave social evils” are not mentioned by name (perhaps because they are unmentionable), but prostitution and sexual deviance are the implied outcome of whites interacting with African-Americans. This moral depravity that unsegregated clubs caused was thought to stem from the “primitive” or “savage” urges that

Blacks released in whites. While mixing with African Americans and taking part in their “Dionysian” dances, Caucasians discarded their layers of civilization and social constraints. As James Weldon Johnson noted, Harlem was a place where whites took a “moral vacation.” He wrote:

At these times, the Negro drags his captors captive. On occasions, I have been amazed and amused watching white people dancing to a Negro band in a Harlem cabaret; attempting to throw off the crusts and layers of inhibitions laid on by sophisticated civilization: striving to yield to the feel and experience of abandon: seeking to recapture a taste of primitive joy in life and living: trying to work their way back into that jungle which was the original Garden of Eden; in a word, doing their best to pass for colored.¹⁰³

Harlem became a playground in which whites could indulge their passion to experiment with racial taboos. The nightclubs offered the possibility of transcending the socially codified barriers of race and class, and this experimentation resulted in the arousal of sexual pleasure.

Magnus Hirschfeld, “the Einstein of Sex,” and co-founder of the World League for Sex Reform with Havelock Ellis, also forwarded this argument. In an interview that appeared in the Chicago Herald and Examiner, Hirschfeld, a German sexologist and proponent of homosexuality, discussed the reasons why white patrons attended black clubs and the erotic desire these clubs stimulated. Black erotic desire, however, is not included in his Freudian analysis. Although he was recognized as an early homosexual emancipationist for his theories on homosexuality as a “third sex,” his analysis is very similar to Belasco’s in the Liberty article in his dehumanized view of the club patrons. He frequently compares young black people to animals, such as thrush, dogs, goats, and lambs. And like Belasco, he regards their physical actions as purely non-intellectualized responses. He says, “The insects that buzz about our heads express the joy of living by describing circles and curves in the air. These young people dance as happily as young animals.” Similar to Belasco as

well, he characterizes African Americans as primarily instinctual and emotional. In short, primitive. Their “primitive urge,” Hirschfeld claims, is given release through dance, which also serves as a “safety valve” for “their repressed desires and ambitions.” He explains, “If their emotions could not spend themselves comparatively safely in the Lindy Hop and similar dances there would be more violent outbursts and explosions.”¹⁰⁴

Whites, on the other hand, lack the emotional impulsiveness that characterize black people, which is a result of whites having become excessively civilized. White intellectualism has made them “sex-conscious” and “self-conscious,” according to Hirschfeld, and whites go to black nightclubs in order that they may once again experience the primitive joy of living, which blacks still possess. To whites, the exhilarating dancing through which this joy manifests itself is equated with “eroticism,” while for the innocent blacks it is merely “play.” Hirschfeld’s theory is typical of the psychological discourse of the time, because in this discussion Blacks are the objects upon which whites cast their fantasies. He explains:

The white man or the white woman who seeks love beyond the border line of color is thrilled by the sense of being subjugated by the more savage passions, the more dynamic life urge of a primitive race. In the man who thus surrenders his race pride it bespeaks a somewhat feminine attitude toward love. In a woman it is clearly an exaggeration of the normal desire for subordination.¹⁰⁵

Within this framework, sexuality is intricately linked to race and gender. Hirschfeld equates black and female with the “primitive” (i.e. subordinate), and associates white and male with the “civilized” (i.e. superior). He classifies sexual desire as either active (*civilized/white/male*) or passive (*primitive/black/female*). If one extends this formula to the Harlem nightclubs, then it becomes clear as to how a mixing of the races leads to moral depravity. Because whites submitted to their “primitive” and “feminine” urges (compare this to the earlier discussion surrounding the presumed weaknesses and uncontrollability of

single black women). "grave social evils" were sure to follow. Therefore, sexual perversion and *inversion* were a natural corollary of whites' rejection of middle-class morality.

Mumford shows that historically reformists used race as a way to conceptualize sexual inversion, or homosexuality.¹⁰⁶ Sexologists and doctors equated homosexuality with "gender inversion," or in other words, a man with feminine characteristics was attracted to other men instead of women. In Hirschfeld's hierarchy above, a white man who is attracted to African Americans has feminine characteristics in his desire to be subordinate in a relationship and forsake his position of natural superiority. As Mumford also documents, the "unnatural" coupling of people of the same sex was likened to the "unnatural" coupling of different races. He says that "one observer of a social gathering and ball including black and white homosexual men termed the event a *miscegenation ball*."¹⁰⁷ Through much of the 1920s, sexual attraction that went against the grain of normative relations was subsumed under the prevailing theories of race and gender inferiority. As I will show in later chapters, individuals who publicly violated the expectations associated with their race and gender were considered racial and sexual outlaws.

The controversy that Lulu Belle provoked revolved around the title character's status as a cultural trickster. The appeal Lulu Belle had for the gay community is not hard to imagine. As a white actress, playing a black working-class single woman, who is also sexually liberated and wears gorgeous frocks, Lenore Ulric gave the ultimate drag performance. In late 1990s parlance, Lulu Belle embodies the definition of "queer" because her identity is an amalgamation of difference. Lulu Belle represents the entanglement of racial difference (black/blackface), gender exaggeration (woman/female impersonator), and class transgression (low class/mistress to wealth). This mixture caused the most contention among conservative critics. The combination of these usually discreet categories could result in "immoral" social desires, such as "sexual perversion." For champions of

maintaining social order based on traditional, heterosexual roles, this mixture of identities posed a palpable threat.

Unlike black and white gay men and lesbians of the Harlem Renaissance, who were forced into the margins and shadows of 1920s society, Lulu Belle defiantly rejected concerted efforts to control and discipline her and forceful attempts to conform her to religious and social expectations. Even when George kills her, and, indeed, she must die for her unconventionality and her assault on middle class ideals, she remains obstinate to the end. Immediately after George chokes her, the stage directions in the play state: “Lulu Belle screaming ha-ha, crawls out of bed, picks flowers up from floor and throws them at George, then drops dead.”¹⁰⁸ If Lulu Belle has to be punished and destroyed for violating convention, she will go without a single regret. In her demise, she is remorseless, brazen, and--bedecked in ermine and diamonds--exceedingly glamorous. And as members of the drag subculture who took her name would have agreed, that is exactly as it should be.

ENDNOTES

¹ “Lulu Belle,” words by Leo Robin and music by Richard Myers (Authorized by David Belasco and dedicated to Miss Lenore Ulric). Sheet music in Music Collection, New York Public Library at Lincoln Center.

² “Battle On Among Broadway Elite of the ‘Third Sex.’” Variety (March 7, 1928), 45, 47.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Richard Dyer, Heavenly Bodies: Film Stars and Society (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1986), 178. Similarly, Esther Newton says in her pioneering work on drag queens in the late 1960s, camp is a strategy for coping with social stigmatization. Newton explains, “Only by fully embracing the stigma itself can one neutralize the sting and make it laughable” (Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America [Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1972], 111). See also Susan Sontag, “Notes on Camp” in Against Interpretation (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1966); Jack Babuscio, “Camp and the Gay Sensibility,” in Camp Grounds: Style and Sexuality, David Bergman, ed. (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1993).

⁵ Chauncey, 253.

⁶ Ibid., 257.

⁷ John L. Fell and Terkild Vining, Stride!: Fats, Jimmy, Lion, Lamb, and All the Other Ticklers (Lanham, Maryland: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1999), 64. See also Emily Wortis Leider, Becoming Mae West (New York: Farrar, Strous, and Giroux, 1997), 154.

⁸ New York Age (February 20, 1926), 6.

⁹ “Hamilton Lodge Ball An Unusual Spectacle,” New York Age (March 6, 1926), 3.

¹⁰ “Third Sex Hold Sway At Rockland When Hamilton Lodge Holds 65th Masquerade Ball And Dance; Police Arrest Two,” New York Age (March 4, 1933), 1.

¹¹ Blair Niles, Strange Brother (Reprinted London: GMP Publishers Ltd., 1991: orig. 1931), 210-11.

¹² This attitude is similar to the tension between the effeminate-acting and masculine-acting gay men that Esther Newton describes in Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972; revised 1979), her ethnography of 1960 drag queens. The “masculine,” “straight-acting” homosexual is prized over the effeminate or cross-dressed man because, as Newton states, the stereotype of a gay man is “the stigma of effeminacy.” She explains, “Homosexuality is a splotch on the American moral order: it violates the rooted assumption that ‘masculinity,’ a complex of desirable qualities, is ‘natural’ for (appropriate to) the male. Masculinity is based on one’s successful participation in the male spheres of business, the professions, production, money-making, and action-in-the-world” (2).

¹³ The Young and the Evil (New York: Masquerade Books, 1996: orig. 1933), 152.

¹⁴ His Eye is on the Sparrow, written with Charles Samuels (New York: Da Capo Press, 1992: orig. 1951), 150.

¹⁵ Chauncey, 294-6.

¹⁶ Strange Brother, 213-14.

¹⁷ “Hamilton Lodge’s Masquerade Ball Draws Large Crowd,” New York Age (March 7, 1939), 5.

¹⁸ Qtd. in Garber, 324.

¹⁹ Qtd. in Steven Watson, The Harlem Renaissance: Hub of African-American Culture, 1920-1930 (New York: Pantheon Books, 1995), 136.

²⁰ Eric Lott discusses the significance of these body images and their containment by white audiences in Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

²¹ Stylin’: African American Expressive Culture from Its Beginnings to the Zoot Suit (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998), 191.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid., 213.

²⁴ Ibid., 212-13.

²⁵ Ibid., 215.

²⁶ The Fall 1998 Metrosource, a free gay and lesbian guide to New York City, includes a pictorial of contemporary Harlem’s drag balls. The photographs depict contestants putting on wigs and make-up, walking down the “runway” and proudly standing behind their trophies (“A Walk in the Park,” photographs by Gerard H. Gaskin and text by Jungwon Kim, vol. 9, no. 3, 40-58).

²⁷ “The Golden Apple: Jennie Livingston’s Paris Is Burning” in Unmarked: The Politics of Performance (London and New York: Routledge, 1993, 93-111), 96. Similarly, in her discussion of Livingston’s film, Judith Butler examines “realness” by the way an individual approximates the ideals associated with phantasmagoric identity categories. She explains that “the effect of realness is the ability to compel belief, to produce the naturalized effect. This effect is itself the result of an embodiment of norms, a reiteration of norms, an impersonation of a racial and class norm, a norm which is at once a figure, a figure of a body, which is no particular body, but a morphological ideal that remains the standard which regulates the performance, but which no performance fully approximates” (Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex, New York: Routledge, 1993, 129).

²⁸ “‘She’ Turns Out to Be a ‘He’ in Court: Fur-Coated ‘Woman’ Gives Cop Liveliest Chase of His Life.” (February 8, 1928), 16.

²⁹ “New York City Police Report: Commercialized Amusement. February 24, 1928” in We Are Everywhere: A Historical Sourcebook of Gay and Lesbian Politics, Mark Blasius and Shane Phelan, eds. (New York: Routledge, 1997), 228.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Chauncey develops this comparison quite fully in Gay New York. He explains that the two groups also had in common an ability to be “sexually exploited” by men without compromise to their manhood. He writes: “The belief that fairies could be substituted for female prostitutes--and were virtually interchangeable with them--was particularly prevalent among men in the bachelor subculture whose opportunities for meeting ‘respectable’ women were limited by the moral codes, gender segregation, or unbalanced sex ratios of their ethnic cultures” (83).

³² “Battle On Among Broadway Elite of the ‘Third Sex.’”

³³ Bruce Nugent, “Gloria Swanson,” from Biographical Sketches: Negroes of New York (Schomburg Collection, New York Public Library: WPA Writers Program, 1939), 1. I am indebted to Thomas Wirth, the executor of Nugent’s papers, for sharing this with me.

³⁴ Referred to in Garber. “A Spectacle in Color.” Bruce Nugent explained that homosexuality was generally tolerated within the Harlem Renaissance. In an interview with Thomas Wirth, he said: “I have never been in what they call ‘the closet.’ It has never occurred to me that it was anything to be ashamed of, and it never occurred to me that it was anybody’s business but mine. [...] There was a great admixture--the mixture of blacks and whites during that particular two or three years. Whites making p-i-l-g-r-i-m-a-g-e-s to black Harlem, doing the cabarets or Clinton Moore’s private parties. Whites being able to mingle freely in every way, including sexual, with blacks. Blacks suddenly having the freedom to have white sex partners. . . Blacks [were] very sought-after for everything,

from cabarets, to everything” (Interview in Richard Bruce Nugent: Gay Rebel of the Harlem Renaissance. Selections from his Work. Thomas H. Wirth, ed. Unpublished manuscript, 1998).

³⁵ Van Vechten also records going to drag balls, and he frequently went to the Clam House to see Gladys Bentley perform. Giving a sense of the exhausting night life he led here is a rather typical entry. On February 15, 1929, he wrote: “I went to a drag in Harlem with Harry, Hal, Emily, Virgil [Thomson] and [indecipherable], we picked up Eadie and went to the Lenox Ave Club where I danced with Louis Cole in drag. And then to Pods and Jerrys. Home at 7:30 A.M.--Saw millions of people I know.” (Carl Van Vechten Papers. New York Public Library.)

³⁶ “Citizens Claim That Lulu Belle Club on Lenox Avenue Is Notorious Dive,” New York Amsterdam News (February 15, 1928).

³⁷ Strange Brother. 97.

³⁸ Ibid., 272.

³⁹ Theophilus Lewis, “Dissension on the Left,” The Messenger (March, 1926), 85.

⁴⁰ Arthur Hornblow, “Mr. Hornblow Goes to the Play” in Theatre Magazine (April 1926), 15. James Weldon Johnson, Black Manhattan (New York: Da Capo Press, 1930, 1991), 205. Variety (April 28, 1926) reprinted black intellectual W.E.B. DuBois’ praise for the white actors from the black journal The Crisis: “I knew, of course, that Miss Ulric was white. The exaggerated dialect fixes the racial status of the doctor. I was in doubt as to the prizefighter, and the lover absolutely deceived me. I was sure he was colored.” The Variety reporter added: “The ‘lover’ is played by Henry Hull. This tribute coming from Dr. DuBois as to Hull’s characterization is without a precedent among white theatricals” (72).

⁴¹ Qtd. in Freda L. Scott, “Black Drama and the Harlem Renaissance” in Theatre Journal (December 1985), 432.

⁴² References to the play and the editors’ introduction come from The Stage Works of Charles MacArthur, eds. Arthur Dorlag and John Irvine (Tallahassee: Florida State University Foundation, 1974) 3-75.

⁴³ “Wages of Sin in Four Acts.” New York Times (February 10, 1926).

⁴⁴ Lulu Belle, 20.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 21.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 28.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Watson, 134.

⁵⁰ Hazel V. Carby, “Policing the Black Woman’s Body in an Urban Context.” Critical Inquiry (Summer 1992), 738-55.

⁵¹ Ibid., 739-40.

⁵² Ibid., 741.

⁵³ bell hooks, Ain’t I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism (Boston: South End Press, 1981), 131-33.

⁵⁴ Kate Davy, “Outing Whiteness: A Feminist/Lesbian Project.” Theatre Journal (May 1995), 203.

⁵⁵ “The Task of Negro Womanhood,” in The New Negro: Voices of the Harlem Renaissance, ed. Alain Locke (New York: Touchstone, 1997; orig. 1925), 379.

⁵⁶ Kevin J. Mumford, Interzones: Black/White Sex Districts in Chicago and New York in the Early Twentieth Century (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 94.

⁵⁷ Ibid. See also Ruth Rosen, The Lost Sisterhood: Prostitution in the Progressive Era (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982).

⁵⁸ In The New Negro, 355-6.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 356.

⁶⁰ Carby, 741.

⁶¹ Ruth Dennis, “Lulu Belles--All?,” in The Amsterdam News (March 24, 1926), 5.

⁶²The connection Dennis makes to “rotten theatricals” is a familiar argument. Throughout history, the theatre has been considered a repository of sin and vice, and dramatic literature is viewed as the instigator. Actresses have traditionally taken a great deal of reproach for they have often been regarded as whores who offer their bodies up for display (and sometimes more) to the paying public. See Jonas Barish’s The Anti-Theatrical Prejudice (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), and Kristina Straub’s Sexual Suspects: Eighteenth-Century Players and Sexual Ideology (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992).

⁶³ Barish, 235-43.

⁶⁴ Dennis, 5.

⁶⁵ Lulu Belle, 51.

⁶⁶ Qtd. in Chauncey, 254.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 255.

⁶⁸ “Colored Impersonator Tries Kiss Cop--60 Days,” 11.

⁶⁹ Undated review in Lulu Belle Clipping File, Museum of the City of New York.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ David Belasco, "Tomorrow's Stage and the Negro," Liberty (August 7, 1926), 18. (Article in Alexander Gumby Scrapbook Collection. Columbia University).

⁷² Lulu Belle, 44.

⁷³ Chauncey reprints two advertisements for drag balls at the Manhattan Casino that bear a striking resemblance to Belasco's mock notice. In both cases, the wording of the invitations imply that the festivities would be gay in nature by encoding them with implications such as "Reunion and Costume Ball of the Tom Boys and Girls" in one, and "come over and be merry with the WE BOYS" in the other (270).

⁷⁴ Lulu Belle, 55-6.

⁷⁵ Wallace Thurman, The Blacker the Berry... (New York: Scribner, 1996; orig. 1929), 105.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 110.

⁷⁸ "Tomorrow's Stage and the Negro: The Producer of 'Lulu Belle' Makes a Discovery and a Prophecy," Liberty (August 7, 1926), 18. In Alexander Gumby Collection. Columbia University.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 18.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 21.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Ibid., 23.

⁸³ "The Theatre: 'Lulu Belle.'" The Crisis (May 1926). Clipping in Alexander Gumby Collection. Columbia University.

⁸⁴ Watson, 95-8.

⁸⁵ David Krasner, Resistance, Parody, and Double Consciousness in African American Theatre, 1895-1910 (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997), 19.

⁸⁶ Rebecca Schneider, The Explicit Body in Performance (New York: Routledge, 1997), 135.

⁸⁷ "Oddments and Reminders." New York Herald Tribune (February 21, 1926). In Carl Van Vechten Scrapbooks, New York Public Library.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Of course, Ulric's comments echo the arguments behind the naturalistic movement developing in the nineteenth century. One of the principal theorists behind it, Émile Zola, claimed that the theatre's true power could only be tapped by presenting "life as it is" on stage. In regard to depiction of "real people on stage," Zola wanted the stage to be a scientific laboratory for examining how individuals react in certain situations. He wanted

“the surroundings to determine the characters, and . . . characters to act according to the logic of facts, combined with the logic of their own temperament” (“Naturalism on the Stage,” reprinted in Bernard F. Dukore’s Dramatic Theory and Criticism: Greeks to Grotowski [New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich College Publishers, 1972], 711). Just as Ulric saw the educational and enlightening possibilities of the true-to-life Lulu Belle, Zola explained that the development of naturalism in the theatre would allow audiences to “see then that the highest and most useful lessons will be taught by depicting what is, and not by oft-dinned generalities, nor by airs of bravado, which are chanted merely to tickle our ears” (718).

⁹⁰ Elsie McCormack. “Looking at the Star,” undated, unidentified source in Lulu Belle clipping file (Museum of the City of New York).

⁹¹ “Society Shocked by Belasco Play; Revision Asked.” Daily Mirror (January 28, 1926).

⁹² “‘Lulu Belle’ Replete in Vulgarisms” (clipping from Alexander Gumby Scrapbook Collection, Columbia University).

⁹³ Monroe Mason. “Boston Bans Belasco Play.” New York Amsterdam News (April 4, 1928).

⁹⁴ Mumford, 62.

⁹⁵ Krasner, 141.

⁹⁶ Described in Krasner, 141.

⁹⁷ Mumford, 162.

⁹⁸ Wendy Martin. “‘Remembering the Jungle’: Josephine Baker and Modernist Parody.” in Prehistories of the Future: The Primitivist Project and the Culture of Modernism, eds. Elazar Barkan and Ronald Bush (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), 318.

⁹⁹ Ann Douglas. Terrible Honesty: Mongrel Manhattan in the 1920s (New York: The Noonday Press, 1995), 49.

¹⁰⁰ “Mr. Hornblow Goes to the Play.” 15.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Clipping in Carl Van Vechten Scrapbooks. New York Public Library.

¹⁰³ Qtd. in Mel Watkins. On the Real Side: Laughing, Lying, and Signifying--The Underground Tradition of African-American Humor that Transformed American Culture, from Slavery to Richard Pryor (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994), 209.

¹⁰⁴ From an interview with George Sylvester Vierick. “Harlem’s Emotional Beauty Charms ‘Einstein of Sex.’” in Chicago Herald and Examiner (December 3, 1931). In Carl Van Vechten Scrapbooks. New York Public Library.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Mumford, 74-6.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 76. Italics in the original.

¹⁰⁸ Lulu Belle. 75.

trollop who works her way up to a count and a boudoir in Paris by her diligent whoring. In my take-off on Miss Ulric I sang 'You Can't Do What the Last Man Did.'"² The second layer of the parody was a satirical look at Josephine Baker, who not unlike Lulu Belle, "ended up with a chateau, an Italian count, and all Paris at her feet permanently."³ In fact, there was speculation at the time that Lulu Belle was actually modeled on the two of the most famous women of the Harlem Renaissance, Josephine Baker, and even more precisely on Florence Mills. Both women had risen from obscurity with alarming speed.⁴ But the Africana sketch subverted the prevalent criticism that linked black women with sexual looseness and immorality. Poking fun at Baker's trademark costume, the women in the chorus (dubbed "banana maidens" in the program) wore banana headresses and garishly exotic costumes, while Waters, dressed smartly in diamonds and fur, wooed the dignified count. This disparity in representations as well as the conflation of Lulu Belle and Josephine Baker was a highpoint in the show. The critic of the New York World Telegram was generally unimpressed with Africana, but he pointed out: "The only real laughs came in the [last] scene, when [Donald Heywood] and Miss Waters played Josephine and her 'Count' husband. The only real belly laugh came when one of the comics asked Miss Waters if she were trying to 'pass.' This got laughs from those who have read [Carl Van Vechten's] 'Nigger Heaven' or live in the neighborhood."⁵ For those in the know, the sketch parodied the presumption that only by whoring and willful deception can a black woman transcend her lowly caste.

Generally, the black musical revues of the 1920s were the most accommodating popular entertainment form for black women. Yet the women who achieved success in these shows were faced with a nearly impossible situation. On the one hand, the musical revue provided the most prominent commercial arena in which they might find lasting fame, and perhaps even a modicum of fortune. The careers of some of the most illustrious black women performers of the 1920s, including Florence Mills, Ethel Waters, Josephine Baker, and Adelaide Hall, all developed from their appearances in musical revues of the

1920s. On the other hand, the form upheld stereotypical notions about black womanhood. In such musical revues as Put and Take (1921), Strut Miss Lizzie (1922), Blackbirds of 1928 (1928), and Hot Chocolates (1929), black women were generally represented as either exotic, primitive African natives; smiling, subservient “mammies”; or as sexually voracious, social-climbing “Lulu Belles.” When productions and performers resisted these images of black femininity and appeared to buck the cultural expectations of “authenticity,” white critics reacted negatively and doomed the shows to failure.

Two of the most famous black women entertainers to emerge from the Harlem Renaissance, Florence Mills and Ethel Waters, successfully negotiated these conflicting attitudes.⁹ At times reinscribing the stereotypical representations of black women and at others reversing or parodying these images, Mills and Waters managed to find voice within the oppressiveness of the black musical revue form on Broadway. Responses to Mills’s performance in Dixie to Broadway (1924) and Waters’ in Africana (1927) Blackbirds of 1930, and Some Americans Abroad (1935), their most significant Broadway appearances in musical revues, indicate that while working within the genre, they occasionally disrupted and critiqued the expectations of black women on the New York stage, and potentially opened a space for new representations.

The balancing act for Mills and Waters was a difficult one because of the constrictions of the form. When, for example, white producers and directors tried to make the shows comparable to the genteel fare audiences expected on Broadway, critics nostalgically lamented the absence of black stereotypes that they associated with a racial “essence.” In 1925, for instance, white author and socialite Carl Van Vechten blamed a string of unsuccessful black musical revues on the fact that the shows did not have the fundamental quality that separated them from other Broadway musical fare: He claimed the shows lacked the unique characteristics that only genuine black women can deliver. In an article written for Vanity Fair Van Vechten details his “Prescription for the Negro Theatre,” which would once again make African-American performers and productions commercially

successful in a white-dominated show business. He bemoans the tendency of black musical revues to cast more and more light-skinned women in the chorus, a situation making the shows all but indistinguishable from Florenz Ziegfeld's Follies or George White's Scandals. He claims, therefore, that prospective producers must, if they have any interest in saving the black revue from disappearing into obscurity, "advertise for a dark chorus." Yet he adds: "I don't think it will be necessary to look for 'chocolate to the bone' cuties. Indeed, a fascinating effect might be achieved by engaging a rainbow chorus: six black girls, six 'seal-browns,' six 'high Yellas,' and six pale creams."⁷ He goes on to explain that in order to capitalize on black shows, (white) producers must assure that the chorus girls are noticeably (and literally) black:

There are certainly many Negroes who prefer dark girls: white people who go to Negro shows expect to see them and are disappointed when they don't. Seek beauties who can dance and sing, and see that the lightest is about the shade of strong coffee before the cream is poured in, and I guarantee that your show will be a success even if you throw in all the old stuff, the cemetery scene with the ghost, the moon song rendered by the tenor who doesn't know what to do with his hands, and the "I want to be in Dixie," or the cotton-bale song.^b

This recipe for success, according to Van Vechten, would surely rescue the African-American presence on Broadway from certain extinction and—to extend the food metaphor a bit further—make it once again palatable for white consumption.

The elements comprising "the old stuff" that Van Vechten describes here are the vestiges of minstrelsy that were continuously recycled in the black musical revues throughout the decade. For example, in 1930 when another Lew Leslie Blackbirds edition opened (there were a total of five between 1926-1939), which was one of the last revues of the period to employ the familiar formula, the customary aspects of the minstrel show were still in evidence. In his Times review, Brooks Atkinson described the performers in one of

the show's comic sketches thus: “Black as the ace of spades, with those enormous white circles around their lips, [the Negro comedians] have questioning eyes which flutter and roll with comedy eloquence.”⁹ At the pinnacle of the Harlem Renaissance when African Americans had made gigantic social, economic, and literary strides, the debasing minstrel mask was still a prominent feature on Broadway.

In fact, Nathan Irvin Huggins contends that minstrelsy was ultimately “crippling” to the development of a national black theatre. The images were so forcefully engrained in the American psyche and rehearsed so often in the popular theatre, particularly in the musical revues, that undermining racist attitudes seemed insurmountable.¹⁰ Yet this predicament did not necessarily negate the possibility of creating brilliant works of art within these constraints. For example, contemporary cultural theorist Houston Baker concedes the power of the minstrel mask, but he points to the limitless artistic possibilities that “mastery” of the mask affords.¹¹ He argues that Bert Williams and George Walker, the great black song and dance men at the beginning of the century, demonstrated the possibility of adopting the rudiments of the minstrel form and using them to great advantage. According to Baker, in the musicals they brought to Broadway and presented on tour, Williams and Walker, triumphantly reclaimed the humor, dance styles, and music of white minstrel performers, all of which was supposedly derived from authentic black forms, and advertised it as the genuine article.¹² For as David Krasner points out, Williams and Walker brilliantly “capitalized on the concept of authenticity by making use of white performers’ vernacular.”¹³ Krasner describes this process as “reinscription,” or the conscious imitation of black stereotypes constructed by whites in order to find work in the popular theatre.¹⁴ Black performers’ “mastery” then “reinscription” of the stereotypical and degrading minstrel caricatures not only earned Williams and Walker fortune and fame, but they also blazed a trail for other black acts to follow.

The notion of “mastery” that Baker applies to Williams and Walker resonates with Henry Louis Gates’s concept of “mimicry.” In The Signifying Monkey, Gates argues

against the widely held belief that mimicry and imitation necessarily imply unoriginality. Imitation, he says, is not a disavowal of one's own voice and identity, rather it is a means of "modification" and "revision." "Signifyin(g)," or engaging the familiar archetype with a slight difference, is a method of opening a space for new forms.¹⁵ According to Gates, artists work within certain known or acknowledged formalist criteria. Artists may pay tribute to their artistic forebears by employing familiar characteristics in their work, a process Gates describes as "unmotivated Signifyin(g)." Artists may also parody particular forms, which he calls "motivated Signifyin(g)." In either case, the artists slightly modify the forms of the original works, thereby allowing for the invention of new artistic traditions. By reiterating and referring to recognized forms and images, authors, performers, and artists call attention to the mutability of these forms, rather than verifying an ostensibly rigid reality behind them. Repetition, mimicry, and parody are devices at a performer's disposal that potentially subvert the presumption of racial authenticity. And if Krasner is correct, then these tools may be regarded as "subversive strategies that call attention to the instability of the status quo by portraying authentication as instances of textual excess rather than 'truth,' as slippages within the system of representation rather than mimesis."¹⁶ By pointing to the supposedly "authentic" elements as performance, then entertainers can show the lack of truth, or the *inauthenticity* behind the representations.

Yet as the black musical revues developed throughout the 1920s, the "system of representation" became more and more codified. Featured women performers and chorus girls, for example, were regularly costumed in grass skirts, and they danced to jazz-inflected "jungle beats." Or they donned colorful plantation attire and pined for "dear old Dixie days." These elements of the revues, or as Van Vechten refers to as "the old stuff," had become so calcified, so inscribed, and such parodies in themselves, that the caricatures themselves had been accepted as "truth." When performers and directors attempted to discard or undermine these elements, the critics balked. According to white producer/director Lew Leslie, they dismissed a show claiming, "It's great entertainment,

but it isn't strictly Negro."¹⁷ The most successful productions of the era were the ones that were apparently "strictly Negro."

Herein lies the remarkable talents and contributions of two of Broadway's brightest stars of the 1920s. Just as Williams and Walker mimicked and perfected recognizable notions of the minstrel mask, Florence Mills and Ethel Waters "Signified" on cultural assumptions about black womanhood in their separate musical revues of the 1920s. Most notably in Dixie to Broadway, the show that made Mills an international sensation, and Africana, the black musical revue which introduced Waters to Broadway and set her on the way to stardom, the performers exemplified Houston Baker's definitions of "mastery" and "deformation" of form. Within the confines of the prescribed theatrical genres, Mills and Waters reflected the possibility of challenging the racist status quo. For as Baker argues, through "manipulations of form . . . there are rhetorical possibilities for crafting a voice out of tight places."¹⁸ In the musical revues in which they appeared, Mills and Waters found ways to open spaces--however small--for black representation, and at times they resisted the primitive, exotic, and licentious presumptions about black womanhood while succeeding in the predominantly white commercial theatre.

Yet in order to analyze the success of Mills and Waters, it is necessary to examine the constraints of the form and how the entertainers negotiated these in performance. The productions in which Mills and Waters appeared in the 1920s were in many respects "strictly Negro." That is, these shows contained the kinds of sketches, dance numbers, and formats that distinguished the black musical revue. Therefore, before examining the ways in which Mills and Waters responded to the expectations of the black musical revue, I will first look at the development of the genre and analyze the images of black women the shows typically presented. A greater appreciation for their "mastery" and "deformation" may be gleaned if one recognizes the manner in which Mills and Waters mimicked, adapted, and sometimes parodied the generally degrading representations of black women in these shows while at the same time they capitalized on them.

“Doin’ the New Lowdown”

Essentially a “hybrid” form, to use Homi Bhabha’s term, the “black” musical revue of the 1920s was a response to the “white” musical revue, which was a familiar genre on the Broadway stage with its bevy of beautiful women, elaborate scenery, and showcases for popular entertainers. Structurally, the revues were comprised of a series of song and dance numbers, comedy sketches, and specialty acts (such as rope twirlers, jugglers, and animal acts.). In addition to Ziegfeld’s opulent, star-studded Follies, which were initiated in 1907 and encompassed twenty-four consecutive editions, other producers benefitted from the popularity of the form. George White’s Scandals, which boasted scores by George Gershwin for many of the shows, were similar in style and content to the Follies: the Shuberts’ Passing Show and Artists and Models series were notable for their use of female nudity in stage tableaux; and John Murray Anderson’s Greenwich Village Follies, having transferred from downtown to Broadway in 1921, initially intended to offer more intelligent and culturally high-brow fare, but gradually took on the popular characteristics of the competition.

The abundance of extravagant musical comedies and revues on Broadway was feasible and affordable in this age of prosperity, and the mostly white, middle-class audiences flocked to see them. In particular, the fragmented format of the musical revue was well-suited to the atmosphere and public tastes of the time. As Cecil Smith explains, audiences in the 1920s “wanted their pleasures to be easy-come-easy-go, swift, and full of kicks, like jazz music and bathtub gin . . . And so, although a procession of musical comedies also shared the theatre sector, the revue was the archetype of postwar jazz-and-prohibition entertainment.”¹⁹ Indeed, the 1920s was the hey-day of frothy entertainment as Smith points out: “For one mad, magical decade the Broadway theatre could afford to produce as many musical shows as it wanted to, and to market them at box-office prices that the audience could pay without feeling any pinch.”²⁰ As this period coincided with the

Harlem Renaissance and because African-American performers began to emerge from the black vaudeville circuit and the up-town New York clubs, including Mills and Waters who both began their entertainment careers in vaudeville, it was inevitable that Broadway producers looking for additional and varied ways to entertain would seek to profit from the newest vogue. Hence, a new trend in musical entertainment arose.

The black musical revue of the 1920s evolved from the success of Shuffle Along, which ran nearly two years on Broadway and spawned a number of imitations and sequels. Like Shuffle Along, a few of the productions in the wave of new musicals that followed had a thread of a plot to join the songs and sketches together, but most were structured like their white counterparts, which often revolved around the talents of one or more performers. And of course, the shows featured a chorus of beautiful women appearing in a variety of dance numbers. The revues were generally produced by white men, notably Lew Leslie, who had a number of successes, especially with Blackbirds of 1928.²¹ Because blacks had little artistic or economic control over the shows, the revues perpetuated stereotypical representations of blackness. Still, more so than ever before, black entertainers were a major attraction on the Great *White Way*.

In the decade leading up to the opening of Shuffle Along in 1921, the presence of African Americans on Broadway was something of a rarity. After a surge of black musicals at the turn of the century featuring vaudeville transfers, notably Bert Williams and George Walker, there were few shows featuring black comedians, singers, and dancers. Darktown Follies (1914) played briefly on Broadway after a successful engagement at a Harlem nightclub, but it failed to spark a renewed interest in the form for white audiences. Yet Florenz Ziegfeld, who often included black segments in his revues (Bert Williams became a regular installment in the Follies after the death of George Walker), attended the show up-town and bought the song "At the Ball" from its black creator, J. Leubrie Hill, to incorporate into the latest Follies. Hill's name was not listed in the program, nor did Ziegfeld enlist any of the original company, presumably because they lacked the

sophistication required of his revues, as dancer Ethel Williams recalled several decades later. Ziegfeld had, nevertheless, requested her involvement with the dance routine as the show prepared for its opening. Williams, who frequently worked with Ethel Waters in vaudeville, recalled: "I went down to the New York Theater and showed the cast how to dance it. They were having trouble. None of us was hired for the show, and at that time I was supposed to be the best woman dancer in the whole country."²²

Although this situation reflects the rather typical denigration toward black musicals from white producers, the incident is noteworthy in that it represents the common exchange between black and white entertainment. Many critics, both black and white, of the time sought to distinguish the essential elements of the two forms, attempting to locate the roots in familiar and popular aspects of musical entertainment. Black journalist Theophilus Lewis, for instance, commends Darktown Follies for its incorporation of genuine black singing and dancing, as opposed to a series of white-influenced numbers one normally saw. Lewis regards Darktown Follies as a foundational work because it transcended the inscribed boundaries of minstrelsy. He differentiates the show's focus on authentic black song and dance from the former emphasis on typically exotic locales and themes, which dominated the Walker and Williams shows. These elements, he claims, were appropriated from white popular theatre. As explained in the Philadelphia Courier (March 5, 1927), J. Leubrie Hill's show was consequential for the effects it had on "the relations existing between the white stage and the colored stage":

Before that time the Negro theater had borrowed its materials and methods from the white stage. Our comedians had accepted the minstrel tradition without questioning its merit or authenticity. . . [Hill] turned aside from Indian themes and South Seas motifs when he wrote the music and arranged the dances for the show, and *it was the singing and dancing that carried it over.*²³

Lewis praises the show for its rejection of white forms and regards it as superior to other

black musicals because of its authentically black music and dance.

The presumed authenticity of the numbers raises important issues regarding the perceived borders of the forms. Paul Gilroy explains the slipperiness of trying to trace indigenous cultural and racial elements in black music, specifically spirituals. In his discussion of black music in the early twentieth century, he supports Alain Locke’s universalist attitude that the spirituals have a “classic quality,” because “the very elements which make them uniquely expressive of the Negro make them at the same time deeply representative of the soil that produced them.”²⁴ This attitude contrasts with Zora Neale Hurston’s, who claimed that one could trace an authentic basis in spirituals, but she recognized the mutability of these forms: “The spirituals that have been sung around the world are Negroid to be sure, but so full of musicians [sic] tricks that Negro congregations are highly entertained when they hear their old songs so changed. They never use the new style songs, and these are never heard unless perchance some daughter or son has been off to college and returns with one of the old songs with its face lifted, so to speak.”²⁵ For this reason, it is problematic to assume that black entertainment nurtured in black environments automatically retained an ontological superiority over that which was not created under such circumstances. A variety of influences, including the contributions of black dancers who had worked in predominantly white houses, for example, may have had an important effect on the evolution of these elements.

Ziegfeld’s “borrowing” of “At the Ball,” nevertheless, precipitated a new rapport between black and white musical theatre. Black acts and performance styles, which had developed in black clubs for primarily black audiences and by black composers and libretists, indirectly found their way into the mainstream of white-controlled Broadway. The success of Shuffle Along in 1921 secured this new relationship and reinvigorated a familiar form. When Shuffle Along opened, its unforeseen popularity demonstrated to white producers that shows centering around the talents of African-American singers, dancers, and comedians transposed from the Harlem clubs and vaudeville into Broadway

musicals could be extremely profitable.

Shuffle Along was essentially an expansion of a vaudeville comedy act about a mayoral race in a fictional southern town written by performers Flournoy Miller and Aubrey Lyles; the songs, including its most famous, "I'm Just Wild About Harry," are by Noble Sissle and Eubie Blake. A popular success when it played in New York, Shuffle Along is often referred to as an initiator of the Harlem Renaissance. Langston Hughes wrote, "For nearly two years it was always packed. It gave the proper push--a pre-Charleston kick--to the vogue that spread to books, African sculpture, music, and dancing."²⁶ Although the show was created and directed by African Americans, Allen Woll argues that the stereotypical representations in the musicals of the 1920s were actually promulgated by Shuffle Along, and established the tone and style for the white-created black musicals that followed.²⁷ This is in large part due to the fact that in order to be successful in a white-oriented milieu, the creators recognized the necessity of catering to the expectations of a mostly white audience. Miller and Lyles, like Williams and Walker before them, "blackened up" and deliberately reinscribed racial stereotypes because this allowed them greater access to more prestigious theatres.²⁸ This trend continued in the black musicals throughout the 1920s.

Stereotypes of black women were also rampant in these shows, and the musical numbers drew attention to the chorines' physical features rather than their singing and dancing abilities. While the costumes and dances in the white revues stressed the women's physical features as well, including such shows as the Follies or the Scandals, the women were usually placed amid sumptuous settings, and they wore sophisticated, glamorous, and sparkling (albeit negligible) costumes. In the black musicals, however, the effect was closer to what Dale Cockrell refers to as "grotesque."²⁹ The shows often contained several dance numbers in which scantily-clad black women danced within African or plantation settings. Palm trees, watermelon moons, and cotton bales were familiar set pieces, and the dancers' outfits matched these accordingly. The costumes often consisted of colorful,

stylized bandannas and aprons, and the women frequently wore revealing savage, jungle-like fashions, which drew attention to their legs, bare midriffs, and near-naked breasts. The costumes effectively accentuated the sensual dancing of the chorus. For as New York critic Robert Littell once described the typical choreography of these shows, the black chorus girls usually "kicked and squirmed and wiggled" their way through their numbers.³⁰

This emphasis on African-American physicality continued the tradition from nineteenth-century minstrelsy in which Blacks, particularly black women, were perceived as pure corporeality, or in Eric Lott's description, as "the world's body."³¹ Black women characters (usually played by white men), were referred to as "wenches" in minstrel shows, and they were characterized by their excessive body parts, such as thick lips, protuberant noses, large feet, and "enormous bustles." As Lott says, this was "a child's-eye view of sexuality," which he refers to as a "pornotopia."³² Black women in these stage shows were represented entirely as objects of male desire. And as Annemarie Bean explains in her analysis of the minstrel song standard "Miss Lucy Long," African-American women "were assured in their value as sexual objects and they occasionally needed to be reminded that they had the status of property, not personhood."³³ Black women were represented in these shows not as individuals, but as commodities to be looked at, degraded, and owned.

Sandra L. Richards points to the perpetuation of black bodies being offered up for public consumption in the 1920s. She explains that literary and theatrical works tended to "posit black people solely as bodies and thus as negative signifiers on the scale of civilization, or that on the other hand, celebrate[d] black people as delightful examples of the primitive."³⁴ In fact, often the all-female choruses of the black musicals upheld the popular primitive images of African-American womanhood in such jaunty production numbers as "Hula, Hula" in Strut Miss Lizzie (1922), "Gee Chee" in My Magnolia (1926), and "Monkey Land" in Rang Tang (1927). These numbers, as Carl Van Vechten implied in his appeal for a chorus of "chocolate to the bone cuties," fulfilled an audience's erotic

desire to gaze upon the flesh of the near-naked body parts of black women. In fact, critics often remarked on the physical attractiveness of the chorus rather than on their individual or collective talents. Describing Liza (1922), for instance, one critic praised the "chorus of brownskin maidens who are decidedly easy on the eyes, easily the best looking colored chorus that Broadway has seen." And Percy Hammond wrote about Rang Tang that "the stage at times swarmed with undressed ladies, whose exposed skins ranged in tint from topaz to maroon."³⁵ The attention audiences and critics paid to the exotic, differently-colored bare flesh of the women corresponded with and protracted the notion that black women amounted to nothing more than the sum of their body parts.

These exotic images simultaneously confirmed and reinforced constructions of white, middle-class femininity and heterosexuality. During a period in which immigration from southern and eastern Europe and the migration of African Americans from the South were particularly high, and the development of lesbian and gay subcultures became increasingly more visible, the infiltration of diverse ethnicities and sexualities challenged the notion of a superior "American identity." In her recent book Ziegfeld Girl, Linda Mizejewski convincingly argues that the Ziegfeld Follies, with its "Glorification of the American Girl," was a central site of defining a "national white race" through its depiction of an idealized femininity. Stabilizing these distinctions, the Ziegfeld Follies paraded the carefully chosen representatives of American beauty, who exhibited "perfect" Nordic features, upper-class refinement, and indisputable heterosexuality.³⁶ Unlike their black chorus girl counterparts, the women of Ziegfeld's shows seemed pure, dignified, and "ladylike." In these shows, the white chorus girls were also presented as erotic objects to look at and fantasize about, but they seemed "untouchable" and precious. Catcalls, wolf whistles and loud cheers were unheard of responses for these would sully the beauty and purity the women projected. Such behaviors were not uncommon, however, in the parallel, but reversed negative world of the black musical revues. In these shows the African-American chorus girls were presented as untamed, primitive, and sexually available.

This distinction was made abundantly clear during a performance of Lew Leslie's black musical revue, Blackbirds of 1928. The show, which opened at Broadway's Liberty Theatre in May 1928, was the longest running of all of the black musical revues of the 1920s (it ran 518 performances). It starred Bill "Bojangles" Robinson, Adelaide Hall, and Aida Ward, and featured such hit songs as "Doin' the New Lowdown," "I Must Have That Man," and "I Can't Give You Anything But Love." Needless to say, the show also offered numerous opportunities to see women "of all the colors in the Harlem rainbow"³⁷ wearing next to nothing at all. As Adelaide Hall said in an interview, "I wear so little that I have to laugh to myself. I'm a big girl, and when I dance, I'm all legs: so 'Let 'er go!' I say."³⁸ This display of so much black flesh evidently was powerful enough to arouse the passions of several white men during a performance of the show.

In September 1928, the Amsterdam News reported that about sixty white men shouted obscene remarks and "unmanly queries" at Hall and the chorus girls. The men reportedly bellowed, "I'd give you \$5 to be with you!" and "How would you like to have that nigger wench?" Apparently Hall ended one of her numbers abruptly because of the offensive comments slung at her from the house. The unlikely hero of the tense situation, however, was dancer Bill "Bojangles" Robinson, who was then 50 and generally regarded as a gentle, soft-spoken man. Nevertheless, the article reports:

Complaining backstage about the indignities to which they were subjected, the girls found a champion in Bill (Bojangles) Robinson, one of the stars. He stopped the show, rushed to the stage, and upbraided the disorderly whites, who, he declared were from Dixie, and surely had never seen a colored show. His tirade was greeted by a shower of programs, pennies and other small objects. "Bojangles" stood his ground, however, and declared he would personally return the admission fee to all who would leave the house.

The article goes on to explain that a race riot nearly erupted when several of the "crackers"

started toward the stage, but were rebuffed by a contingent of "[N]egro patrons, who comprised a large portion of the house." The reporter also points out that several whites in the boxes applauded Robinson's actions and afterwards vigorously congratulated him. The police arrived on the scene soon after the incident began and restored order to the theatre. The article reports that there were no arrests made, but "the police remained in front of the house until the final curtain."³⁹

It is difficult to imagine a similar occurrence during an edition of a Ziegfeld Follies, for instance, which were intended to "glorify the American [white] girl." In those productions, the women appeared to be of a higher class and were more refined in costume and movement. Hence, they would be less likely to receive the vocal disrespect of lecherous men in the audience. Important as well is that the offenders (all sixty of them) in the Blackbirds incident are identified as "Dixie visitors." As outsiders to the New York theatre community, the Amsterdam News article implies that these "disorderly Southerners" lack the class--both in terms of Broadway etiquette and social status--to understand the extent of their inappropriate behavior.⁴⁰ Yet the episode also reaffirms the volatile results of the sexual excesses of working class black women. Similar to the rowdy displays in pre-twentieth-century public theatres in which women in varying degrees of undress were greeted with catcalls and lewd propositions, the Blackbirds performers were equated with whores by the Dixie coterie because of their willingness to publicly exhibit themselves for paying customers. As Kristina Straub writes about the eighteenth-century stage in England, for example, "Actresses from the working, servant, or peasant classes [were] often represented as the most actively sexual."⁴¹ As Straub explains, these women players were figured as both "victims" and the "carriers of a disease." And she observes that this "disease," or "malady," "is of course, a sexuality rendered excessive by its relatively uncontained, public nature."⁴² Likewise, the women of the black musical revues reinscribed the notion that lower class black women were by nature sexually promiscuous. Their public behavior and exhibitionist costumes on-stage confirmed this attitude.

Just as the defamation of working class black women surrounding the Lulu Belle brouhaha was received with general "I told you so's" in the press, a letter to the editor of the Amsterdam News after the Blackbirds incident justified the behavior of the unruly spectators. While not actually defending the actions of the white men, Blanche Watson, who identifies herself as a white woman in her letter, says that the black chorus girls got just what they deserved. She writes: "Without any thought of excusing the atrocious manners and inexcusable ignorance which prompted this crass discourtesy, may I conjecture, aloud, would this incident have taken place had it not been for the vulgar dancing in the show? If I had been one of the chorus, I should have said that I had laid myself open to what occurred." She goes on to explain that it is incumbent upon these black women not to threaten the advancement of the race with their "vile" performances, for they are "making progress difficult on a road that is difficult enough, heaven knows." She does, however, see some hope as a result of the unfortunate incident, claiming, "I am glad that these ill-mannered white Americans from the South did what they did. Perhaps it will bring a few Negro girls to their better selves."⁴³

Watson's letter reflects the fraught circumstances for young black women working in the musical theatre of the 1920s. On the one hand, the shows permitted black women access to the white commercial venues, but on the other, the roles perpetuated familiar stereotypes. And contrary to Watson's belief that black women "can dictate--if they will--as to the kind of entertainment they shall put on," they had little agency in the form. White men usually produced, directed, and wrote these shows, and they catered to the desires of a theatre-going public that demanded the shows be black, blue, and sexy. There seemed to be precious little room for intervention within the culturally ascribed expectations for black women entertainers. The performances of Florence Mills and Ethel Waters proved otherwise.

"Put Your Old Bandanna On"

One of the most successful revues of the period, Dixie to Broadway, is perhaps best remembered as the show that catapulted Florence Mills, already famous in Europe, to stardom in the US. The show was particularly notable because for the first time, a black revue was constructed to showcase the talents of a woman and not designed around two blackface male comedians. Even more impressively, it played at a respectable, choice house in the "very heart of Broadway," rather than "on the fringe of the theatrical district" as all-black shows tended to play (Shuffle Along, for instance, played at Daly's on 63rd Street).⁴⁴ Dixie to Broadway was quite successful, garnering generally excellent reviews and running seventy-seven performances on Broadway, which makes it also noteworthy as the first black revue to "pay back its cost."⁴⁵ In addition to the accolades awarded Florence Mills, the show established white producer-director Lew Leslie as a major presence on Broadway, one who "capitalized on the growing interest of New York's elite in the culture and history of black Manhattan."⁴⁶

Dixie to Broadway began as an entertainment catering to a white, middle-class audience and remained so throughout its evolution from a nightclub setting to two separate Broadway incarnations. The production began at an exclusively white "Harlem club," where Mills often performed. The Plantation Club, as it was called, was actually a restaurant over the Winter Garden Theatre on 50th Street and Broadway, but earned its distinction by featuring black performers, who regularly appeared in up-town clubs. As it was located just a few blocks north of the heart of New York's theatre district, this venue was especially convenient for Broadway patrons looking for after-theatre entertainment. Lew Leslie revised the Plantation Club show for Broadway, and the Plantation Revue ran a disappointing forty performances during the summer of 1922 at the 48th Street Theatre. Critics noted that the production lacked a characteristically Broadway slickness, but its presentation of blacks was typically derogatory, as Bernard L. Peterson explains: "Set on a plantation, black life was depicted as happy and carefree; a large watermelon suspended from the flies dominated the stage motif, adding to the stereotypical atmosphere."⁴⁷

Plantation Revue underwent further development when Leslie took the show to London, where it became the second half, following a British revue, of From Dover Street to Dixie. The new production traveled to Paris as From Dover to Dixie and later returned to tour England, "with a view to reaching Broadway."⁴⁸ Reviewers praised Florence Mills wherever she played, and Leslie sought to use her European popularity when he brought the revue back to the States. The British segment of the show was eliminated, and after a pre-Broadway tour which included stops in Chicago and Boston, Dixie to Broadway finally reached Broadway.⁴⁹ Although its seventy-seven performance run is quite short by modern standards, the show was an unqualified success. The unanimously favorable notices accorded Florence Mills, billed "The Sensation of Two Continents" in program listings and newspaper advertisements, are responsible for the profit the revue turned. The show was Mills's third Broadway appearance, and regrettably, it was also her last.

Florence Mills was born in Washington, DC in 1895, and by the age of three, she was already making a name for herself in show business. As "Baby Florence Mills," she entertained Washington diplomats in their drawing rooms, performing an adroit cakewalk and singing such songs as "Don't Cry, My Little Pickaninny." At eight, she made her professional stage debut in Sons of Ham, in which she received a rave notice from the Washington Star that noted: "As an extra attraction is Baby Florence Mills singing 'Hannah from Savannah.' Baby Florence made a big hit and was encored for dancing."⁵⁰ After touring with this show briefly, Mills and her two sisters, Olivia and Maude, put together a vaudeville act, and the Mills Sisters or the Mills Trio, as they were variously known, traversed the country. She joined legendary cabaret owner Ada "Bricktop" Smith and dancer Cora Green in 1914, and they billed themselves as the Panama Trio after the Chicago club in which they performed.⁵¹ In 1916, she joined the "Tennessee Ten," which was then playing the influential Keith vaudeville circuit. While appearing with this act, she met dancer U.S. "Slow Kid" Thompson, whom she later married, and as Theophilus Lewis wrote, "they were considered one of the most happily married couples in the

profession."⁵²

Her big break, though, came in 1921 when she replaced Gertrude Saunders in Shuffle Along. Almost immediately, Mills captured the attention of director/producer Lew Leslie, who cast her in his Plantation Revue at his newly opened Plantation Club. A very young Paul Robeson was part of this show and wrote, "How thrilling it was to listen to Florence Mills sing nightly--'Down Among the Sleepy Hills of Tennessee.'"⁵³ In addition to her acclaim on Broadway and in London, Mills also has the distinction of being the first African American to "headline" at New York's Palace Theatre, the most prestigious vaudeville venue of its day.⁵⁴ A year later in 1926, she made a rather surprising debut at the Aeolian Hall in New York, which was primarily known for its programs featuring operatic and classical selections, and occasionally traditional black spirituals sung by individuals like Robeson and Roland Hayes.

Mills's magnificent career came to an untimely end, though. While readying Lew Leslie's Blackbirds of 1928 for Broadway, she was struck with acute appendicitis, and she died on November 1, 1927. She was 32. As James Weldon Johnson wrote, "It is not an exaggeration to say that her death shocked the theatrical world."⁵⁵ Five thousand mourners packed the Mother Zion Church in Harlem for her funeral (it could comfortably fit only about two thousand), and over 150,000 people lined Lenox and Seventh Avenues to pay respects as the procession took her body to Woodlawn Cemetery. The newspapers reported that Harlem had never seen such a public outpouring of grief as it had during this funeral, and all were amazed at the spectacle of the occasion.⁵⁶ Thirty women from the various choruses of Mills's shows served as flower girls leading the coffin out of the church, and eight notable female stars from the black theatre, including Ethel Waters, Gertrude Saunders, and Cora Green were honorary pallbearers. Celebrities and family members eulogized her, read poems, and sang hymns to her memory. And presumably because of the overcrowded conditions combined with the heightened emotion, about fifty people fainted in grief. The papers also reported that a cornet player in the band "collapsed from

heart disease on Seventh Avenue and died before an ambulance surgeon arrived."⁵⁷ But by all accounts, the coup de grâce occurred when lyricist Andy Razaf dedicated his song, written with J.C. Johnson, "All the World is Lonely (For Our Little Blackbird)" to her, and a thousand blackbirds were released from a plane overhead.⁵⁸ It was a breathtaking and stunning tribute to a young woman who had been hailed "the pride of the race."

The last flourish was a reference to Mills's trademark song, "I'm a Little Blackbird Looking for a Bluebird," which she sang to great enthusiasm in Dixie to Broadway. Although she had appeared on Broadway previously, this was the show that sealed Mills's success in show business and confirmed her as a source of pride for African Americans. As James Weldon Johnson wrote about her, "She had made a name in Shuffle Along, but in Dixie to Broadway she was recognized for her full worth."⁵⁹ In fact, with the opening of Dixie to Broadway, Florence Mills emerged as both an extraordinary entertainer and as a national spokesperson for her race. For her performance, she was hailed as a unique and forceful new talent on Broadway, and her sudden fame allowed her the opportunity to publicly speak out against racial prejudice. And although Mills "reinscribed" stereotypical representations of black women in the show, she exemplified Houston Baker's idea that the "mastery" of a debased form can yield beneficial results. Appropriating the deprecatory representations, and "immersing" herself in images of race, to use Carole Marks and Diana Edkins' expressive term,⁶⁰ Mills metaphorically used the "master's tools" to whittle away at the exclusionary and formidable master's house.

Dixie to Broadway opened at the Broadhurst Theatre in New York on October 29, 1924, and as was customary of the musical revues of the 1920s, the show included comedy sketches, company dance numbers, specialty dance acts, and solo singers. A script for the revue is not available, but it is possible to glean the overall effect of the show on the basis of the reviews and program listings of the New York production. In his Black Musical Theatre: From Coontown to Dreamgirls (1989), Allen Woll is especially thorough in his description and reconstruction of the show, act by act and song by song.⁶¹ The act

and song titles are in fact indicative of the stereotypical milieu the show evoked. For example, the production's prologue, "Evolution of the Colored Race," was intended to introduce a motif for the entire show, and it shoehorned in references to Salome, Madame Butterfly, and Abraham Lincoln. After the first few numbers, including "Put Your Old Bandanna On" and "Dixie Dreams," the show dropped this framing device. Familiar features of the black musical revue followed, such as a haunted house sketch, "Treasure Castle," which played upon the notion of superstitious, easily spooked black people. There were several big, energetic dance numbers, such as "Jazz Time Came from the South" and "Darkest Russia." And the show included a customary "Oriental" skit, called "The Sailor and the Chink," performed by Henry Winfred and Billy C. Brown, or as one critic described the team, "the former being vaudeville's best known Chinese portrayer and the latter a 'cork' artist [i.e., a performer in blackface] of class and a vocalist of ability."²

The New York critics tended to focus on particular numbers more than others. Several reviews single out dancer Johnny Nit, whose first significant appearance in the show was as part of a trio of dancers chained together by the ankles in "Prisoners Up-To-Date." Alexander Woolcott of the New York Sun referred to this former vaudvillian as the "dark Mr. Nit with the toothful smile," and claims that "the lisp of his feet on the floor is rhythm's self, and it was out of the efforts of the honky-tonk pianists to bend their measures to the likes of him that the thing called ragtime was born."³ Other dancers, including Willie Covan and Mills's husband U.S. Thompson, were praised by the critics for their remarkable energy. Gilbert Gabriel of the New York Telegram and Evening Mail wrote that Covan and Thompson "shuffle up to a hysteria of motion, bouncing and cavorting on every inch of their bodies that will afford a landing place."⁴ Another highpoint was the homage to and imitation of such performers as George M. Cohan ("Georgia Cohans"), Eva Tanguay, and Walker and Williams in the "If My Dreams Came True" segment.

But the focus of attention was clearly on twenty-nine year old Florence Mills, who

had six numbers in the show. From her first appearance in the show to her last, audiences responded rapturously to this unlikely new star. Often describing her as "birdlike," "beautiful," and "grotesque," the critics went to some pains to explain Mills's mysterious, but undeniable appeal and unique talents. Mills's unexplainable charm produced by these contradictory qualities is perhaps best exemplified by Heywood Brown's description in the New York World:

Curiously enough there are not particularly good voices in Dixie to Broadway but there is a striking one. The method of Florence Mills is like that of no one else. She does not precisely sing but she makes strange high noises which seem to fit somehow with a rapidfire sort of sculpture.

Sometimes the intent is the creation of the grotesque and then it fades into lines of amazing beauty. Now I have seen grace.⁵

Others described her as a "nimble microbe," "intensely lively, and agile, and industrious," "strung on fine and tremulous wires," and "a flashing and beautiful woman who lights up like a Christmas tree when she dances and is quite as festive."⁶

Most of the reviews for Florence Mills and Dixie to Broadway are noteworthy in that they demonstrate the critics' joy at seeing black entertainers performing stereotypically racial images. Critics applauded numbers set in plantations or among glittery jungle backdrops, and they singled out such scenes for their "authenticity" and warm nostalgia. For example, in two of the most successful numbers in Dixie to Broadway, Mills and her chorus-girl ensemble, the "Plantation Chocolate Drops," paid tribute to a romanticized pre-Civil War South. At these moments, Mills and her ensemble energetically recreated the representations of singing and dancing "darkies" for the amusement of the Broadway audiences.

It is important to remember that the majority of the audiences at Dixie to Broadway tended to be white and middle-class. Although the Broadway theatres were no longer formally segregated at this time, few blacks attended the productions. Of course, there

would be a greater number at the black revues than there would be at standard white fare, but the percentage was still rather small. In a 1928 article written for The Messenger, a monthly black periodical, Randolph Edmonds described the usual composition of a Broadway show audience when he wrote, “There is very little, if any prejudice on Broadway now. But if the managers suddenly decide to put us in the gallery, there will be too few of us to make any difference, for we pay very little of the thousands of dollars necessary to run them for a year.”⁶⁷ In addition, the white audiences who frequented the Broadway shows were often the same audiences who travelled up-town to sample the talent in the Harlem clubs.⁶⁸ So even though this was the first musical on Broadway that Florence Mills headlined, many in the audience were familiar with her work from other venues.

Androgynously dressed, wearing stylized tramp’s clothing, including loose-fitting, brightly-striped short pants, a baggy white shirt, a beggar’s hat, and toting an over-the-shoulder hobo’s kit bag (i.e. a handkerchief-bundle tied to a stick), Mills made her first appearance singing “Dixie Dreams.” The bittersweet song evokes the tradition of Stephen Foster, recalling such standards as “Old Folks at Home” and “My Old Kentucky Home.” Similar in tone and style to those songs, “Dixie Dreams” begins with the lyric, “Dear Old Dixieland, how I long for your sunshine/ Gee, I’m sorry I ever started to roam,” and it includes references to “sunny southern bowers,” “fields of white” (i.e. cotton), and nostalgic recollections of “mammy’s songs and stories.”⁶⁹ Set on a plantation with the ensemble wearing straw hats, the number reflects the show’s unabashed lineage to minstrelsy. In fact, “Plantation Melodies,” as Eric Lott describes the songs of this genre, were integral to minstrel shows of the nineteenth century. In these numbers, blackface entertainers pined for the carefree, rustic, and far less complicated life of slavery. The south was posited as wholesome and familial, and the north, where the narrators in these songs have regretfully arrived, is corrupt and lonely. Lott claims that these numbers often elicited a sentimental yearning to return to the south or to slavery.⁷⁰ Blackface performers generally had great success touching a collective emotional nerve in their urban audiences by

lamenting the missed pleasures of “de ol’ plantation.” According to Lott, the songs metaphorically played upon the desire to return to an insouciant childhood, as well as helped mollify white guilt over the treatment of black people.

In the “Dixie Dreams” number, Mills recapitulated, or--to employ Gates’s terminology--“signified on,” the simple, sentimental minstrel caricature. As a woman taking on the formerly male persona, she also demonstrated the remarkable malleability and fluidity of the minstrel mask. Invented by white male performers in blackface, adopted and perfected by African-American male performers in blackface, including Williams and Walker who billed themselves as “two real coons,” the minstrel mask took on a new veneer with Mills’s rendition. A columnist from the Amsterdam News compared the effect of her “boylike character” to Williams and Walker “in the old days.” He describes Mills’s mesmerizing performance as transporting the audience to a peaceful southern setting: “Her singing, coupled with the music of Bill Vodery’s Plantation Orchestra, unfurls to your gaze filled with wonder Aurora Borealis rising over yon distant green hill in old Virginny and the sweet nectar of roses wafted to you on zephyric breeze, and you are only released from your hypnotic state at the volume of applause which crashes about you as Florence leaves the scene, though forced to come back again and again.”⁷¹ To other critics, Mills’s next number in Dixie to Broadway produced a similar transitory experience.

In a bizarre merging of representations of the African savage and the Ante-Bellum “mammy,” Mills and the Plantation Chocolate Drops performed an exuberant dance number called “Jungle Nights in Dixieland.” The dancers wore colorful grass skirts and large white wigs, and they shuffled, shimmied, and shook accordingly. Beneath the grotesquerie of the costumes and dancing, though, several critics pointed to the glimpses of a presumed black authenticity that the number offered. To them, “Jungle Nights in Dixieland” provided a transparent view of the supposedly “real” cultural distinctions between the races. That is, although Florence Mills was born in Washington D.C. thirty years after slavery was abolished, she could effectively convey a seemingly authentic representation of black

people. And according to one critic at least, Florence Mills embodied the entire history of her race within "Jungle Nights in Dixieland." He wrote: "[Mills] can shift from the frenzied war whoops that takes one back to the days of her ancestors on the Congo to the soft easy dribbles of hummed speech that were intoned on the plantations back in those dear old southern times before the war."⁷² Like Bert Williams before her, Florence Mills conquered Broadway by splendidly performing black stereotypes. It is no exaggeration to state that Mills established her reputation, first at the Plantation Club and then on Broadway, based on these conceptions of black people. Still, African Americans of the 1920s extolled her as an icon for the race despite the manner in which she capitalized on these stereotypes.

It seems that a large part of her artistic brilliance stemmed from the manner in which she was able to incorporate racist ideology into her performance, yet make it a transcendent, liberating experience for the audience. Two years after Mills's triumph in Dixie to Broadway, critic George Jean Nathan claimed that she embodied an essential image of black womanhood. According to Nathan, she was the quintessential American Negro. In his tribute to her, he applauds the intrinsic "blackness" in her performance as opposed to other entertainers who "practice a music show miscegenation" by exhibiting the strong suits of the other race. In other words, he finds it offensive when black or white entertainers try to adapt performance styles and genres associated with the other race, such as blacks performing "toe dances and high C's," and whites trying to pull off "Charlestons and blues songs."⁷³ Florence Mills, on the other hand, represented a purity of black performance. He writes:

When Florence Mills sings, the voice of her Negro people is in that singing, even when the lyrics of her songs are out of the Yiddo-American Broadway music publishers' shop. When she dances, the feet of all the pickaninnies since the Civil War are in her shoes. And when, in the argot of her own people, she struts her stuff, you get in her the spirit of our colored Americans off on a gala holiday. She is surely worth seeing.⁷⁴

Like many of the other white critics of the time, Nathan asserts the authenticity behind the image of the grinning, "eye rolling," and unrefined black woman, a contrasting picture to the typically sophisticated and graceful white woman of the *Follies and Scandals*. As several critics attested, Mills artfully appropriated the grotesque image of the stereotypical "pickaninny," but with her ingratiating manner and bird-like voice, she refashioned it to a thing of rare beauty and grace.

While *Dixie to Broadway* generally presented an "authentic" view of black life, history, and entertainment, that is, through its presentation of popular stereotypes, there were times when the revue, according to some critics, failed as a black revue. When some of the sketches pulled away from plantation settings, jungle costumes, and tap-dancing chain gangs, and when the cast performed in elegant evening wear and in front of an oversized, white grand piano, critics accused the show and the performers as trying to "pass" for white. The most noteworthy example of this is during the "Mandy Make Up Your Mind" number. The segment appeared near the end of the first act of the show, and it strongly recalls the spectacular wedding finales of the *Ziegfeld Follies*.⁷⁵ Lew Leslie, however, put an interesting spin on it. In this version, Mills played the groom and was surrounded by a full, formally-dressed wedding party as she sang to the reluctant bride:

Marchin' down the aisle,
 Your style will make 'em all stare.
 With a little black-eyed Susan
 Stuck in your hair.
 Gee, but your candy, Mandy
 Won't you decide?
 Ev'rything is dandy, once you're a bride.
 In a year or two, there may be three of a kind.
 Mandy, make up your mind.⁷⁶

Again, Mills's performance in this number left a lasting imprint on her public. The image of

the star wearing a full tuxedo proved so enduring that after her death, Lew Leslie included an act in his Blackbirds of 1928 featuring a woman similarly dressed as homage to Mills.

The co-mingling of identity representations, a musical miscegenation, to employ George Jean Nathan’s term, proved to be the most unsettling part of the show for many of the critics, who claim that the show is most successful when the performers play it “black.” Not only does the act conjure images of the “white” wedding Ziegfeld trope, but the dignified costumes contrast sharply with the bandannas, convict outfits, and grass skirts worn by the cast earlier in the show. A complete role reversal had been accomplished by the conclusion of this act. In “Jungle Nights in Dixieland,” Mills performed the picture of a displaced jubilant African woman celebrating the joys of plantation life: in “Mandy,” she depicted the image of a sedate, sophisticated, and domineering white, upper middle-class American man. Mills calls attention to the image of the active, dominant man who tells the passive, indecisive woman to “make up [her] mind” and marry him.

In her analysis of Josephine Baker, Wendy Martin documents the transitional images of Baker, who first made a name for herself wearing “savage” costumes, which often included strategically placed bananas and leaves to cover parts of her anatomy, while in her later years, she appeared in jewelry laden gowns. Martin convincingly argues that one may view the visual narrative of Baker’s career as “the living embodiment of the civilizing process.”⁷⁷ Similarly, Mills also represented a familiar Darwinian trajectory. At first she appears as a jungle maiden, but by the end of the show, she is playing the image of a white man. The show’s distorted vision of the well-established social hierarchy and its assault on essentialist ideals appear to be the causes of anxiety for many of the critics reviewing the show. Heywood Broun, for example, wrote:

There is a passionate fidelity to the eternal verities of tempo not in the inheritance of Nordics. When I see a Negro child two or three years old come out and dance a little better than anybody at the New Amsterdam or the Winter Garden I grow fearful that there must be certain reservations in

the theory of white supremacy.⁷⁸

When the show transcended hoary stereotypes and undermined racist beliefs that blacks were naturally and eternally inferior, several critics reacted hostilely.

As Martin explains, the tremendous social change that occurred after World War I released a host of anxieties about the "demise of civilization" because of the tainting of white blood. A host of "scientific" studies, including Madison Grant's The Passing of the Great Race, or the Racial Bias of European History (1918), Lothrop Stoddard's The Rising Tide of Color: Against White-World Supremacy (1920), Emile Fournier-Fabre's The greatest Shock, or the Mixing of the Races (1921), and Maurice Muret's The Twilight of the White Races (1926), depicted the downfall of the white race and society because of miscegenation.⁷⁹ And as Kevin Mumford documents, "Espoused by politicians, scientists, and eugenicists, one key trend in racial thought linked the survival of civilization to encouraging reproduction between civilized whites and, conversely, discouraging all intimate contacts between blacks and whites."⁸⁰ The responses to Dixie to Broadway reflected this fear of musical and racial miscegenation.

The heading of Alexander Woolcott's notice for Dixie to Broadway in the New York Sun called attention to the show's "hybridity" and light skinned performers, announcing, "Florence Mills, Johnny Nit, and Others in a Mulatto Revue." Heywood Broun states in the New York World, "All the members of the company are according to the American definition, Negroes, although there are only a few dark skins among the men and none at all among the women." To these critics, the color of an individual's skin represents the degree of one's race. A show, therefore, had less authenticity if the performers were noticeably light skinned. A production which offered a view of "authentic Negro life" contained dark-skinned actors, an argument for blackening faces. "Corking-up" was still a common practice of black performers at the time and this gave them "authenticity" when it was needed; otherwise, they could easily compete with the white musical revues.

While most critics were bothered by the whitening of these shows, several argued that blackness, no matter how hard a producer or a performer tried to suppress it, would emerge. The “in-born” talents of an African American could not be squelched. The critic from the American wrote:

In these colored entertainments there is a growing tendency to obliterate race peculiarities as much as possible and to ‘make-up’ white. I think that a pity. After all, we go to these entertainments for the sake of differences--just as we travel to find something alien to our own customs. But of course there are still qualities that cannot be deleted, and on these we can bank.⁸¹

The critic obviously enjoys the foreignness and cultural variations the productions offered--he surely does not have the opportunity to see black women in blue grass skirts and white wigs every day. But the quote also indicates a popular belief that no matter how diligently an African American tried to pass as white, there would always be tell-tale signs, or an essence, which would expose the pass. Ironically, the critics failed to acknowledge the performers’ ability to “make-up black” as well. By embodying and parodying the often absurd images of exaggerated blackness, the actors indeed performed a different kind of pass. They performed representations that suited the critics’ prescribed notion of “Negro”: they passed for an acceptable and non-threatening personification of the (stereo)typical African American.

Curiously, most of the black critics of the production did not object to the stereotypes presented in the show. Variety’s George Bell, who was invited as a “Negro first nighter” to review the show, called it a “credit to the colored race, rather than a ridicule.”⁸² Tony Langston, drama critic of the African-American paper the Chicago Defender, had only raves for the show, referring to it as, “The great review [sic] is one of the best shows of its kind ever seen in a Loop theater. It surpasses everything of the type shown in Chicago in the past several years.”⁸³ In neither of Langston’s two consecutive reviews of the show was race an issue. Only Theophilus Lewis of the Messenger, also an

African-American newspaper, criticized it negatively, stating that "Mr. Leslie impudently thrusts his show forward as an apologist for the Negro race."⁸⁴ Black critics' reluctance to criticize the show perhaps had to do with the increased acceptance and visibility of the black performers that the show afforded, as well as the practical factor--serious roles for black actors were not easy to find. More importantly, Lott's explanation of self-commodification seems to apply here as well: The black performers, critics, and audiences had grown accustomed to this proliferation of stereotypes presented on stage because these were the only means for artistic and economic success in the white popular theatre. Characteristic of the jazz-age, audiences craved thrilling, fast-moving, and larger-than-life performances. Spectators and critics expected this from the jazzy and sexy black revues, which fabricated a simple, entertaining, and ultimately demeaning picture of African Americans.

Many out-spoken black intellectual leaders of the Harlem Renaissance, including W.E.B. DuBois and Alain Locke, vehemently opposed the perpetuation and commodification of racial stereotypes in these musicals, however artfully they were done. DuBois, for instance, argued that the shows confirmed derogatory black representations for white audiences, and they increased attitudes of black inferiority. He argued that the ridicule of blacks was evident in the musicals by the "loud ejaculations and guffaws of laughter [that] broke out in the wrong places."⁸⁵ Yet the performers often willingly performed these stereotypes, knowing that they lacked authenticity. History has generally been unkind to artists for accommodating these images, but as recent cultural theorists have pointed out, the situation is much more complex. The musicals provided access to the mainstream for many of the performers with the attendant benefits of appearing in a commercial show. As Samuel Hay writes, "The musicals made it possible for thousands of self-taught African-American theatre professionals . . . to support and educate their families." He explains that one black actor known for his stereotypical "clowning" in these musicals "even expressed the hope that the clowning would help 'break down the ill feeling that existed toward the colored people.'"⁸⁶ And even more crucially, the success allowed a

platform for many black entertainers to speak out against social inequality. Or as Houston Baker observes, by working within and obliging the expectations of white audiences, the voices of black performers could effectively emerge from the racist “types and tones of nonsense” for which they were hailed.⁸⁷

While engulfing herself in familiar racial images, Florence Mills subtly challenged the racist status quo. Huggins claims that the brilliance and progressiveness of Bert Williams was the way in which he added “a distinctive dimension to ‘darky’ humor.”⁸⁸ In fact, Mills saw herself as the heir to Williams’ legacy who could move the race forward with her own celebrity. In a statement appearing in the Chicago Defender, a black newspaper, during her pre-Broadway engagement of Dixie, Mills explained why she did not accept an offer from Ziegfeld and follow in the tradition of Bert Williams, the first black performer in a Follies:

I felt [...] that since Williams established the Colored performer in association with a well-known revue, that I could best serve the Colored actor by accepting Mr. Leslie’s offer, since he had promised to make this revue as sumptuous and gorgeous in production and costume as Ziegfeld’s Follies, White’s Scandals or the Greenwich Village Follies, at the same time using an all-Colored cast. I felt that if this revue turned out successfully a permanent institution would have been created for the Colored artists and an opportunity created for the glorification of the American High-Brown. My wish and Mr. Leslie’s promise have been fulfilled in Dixie to Broadway.⁸⁹

Like Williams, who performed in blackface because of his light skin, the strides Mills made in racial advancement may seem slight today. Indeed, she glorified “the American High-Brown” (which is a play on Ziegfeld’s slogan “Glorifying the American Girl”) by reinscribing black stereotypes. Yet by parodying and exaggerating these images, Mills rose above them, and she seemed to be in control of them rather than allowed them to control her. And even more importantly, as with Bert Williams, she was able to find ways to

express her own voice within the limits of the white commercial theatre.

Williams’ most famous songs, “Nobody” and “Jonah Man” articulate the melancholy side of black life. Although his songs were in dialect and often overweighted with pathos, they did not come across as “gross,” demeaning, nor pitiful. Similarly, Mills imbued her songs with dignity and self-assurance. Reactions to her performance indicate that she injected a degree of irony into her most famous song, “I’m a Little Blackbird Looking for a Bluebird,” with which she stopped the show nightly in Dixie to Broadway. Taking center-stage, Mills sang the show’s penultimate “eleven o’clock” number:

Never had no happiness
 Never felt no one’s caress
 Just a lonesome bit of humanity
 Born on a Friday, I guess
 Blue as anyone can be
 Clouds are all I ever see
 If the sun forgets no one,
 Why don’t it shine for me?
 I’m a little blackbird looking for a little bluebird, too.
 You know little blackbirds get a little lonesome, too, and blue.
 I’ve been all over from east to west.
 In search of someone to feather my nest.
 Why don’t I find one the same as you do?
 The answer must be that I am a hoo-doo
 I’m a little jazz-bo
 Looking for a rainbow too.⁹⁰

Mills was so successful in endearing herself to the audience with this song that it became instantly associated with her. Hence, the blackbirds released from a plane at her funeral.

Although a recording of Mills performing the song does not exist (indeed the great

misfortune is that none of her songs were recorded), one can understand to some extent how she could, with this ditty, manage to "so quickly[,] so certainly and so electrically get an audience into her grip and keep it [t]here."⁹¹ She conveyed a fragile vulnerability, which emerged even more strongly through the sentimental lyrics of the song. But the pathos of the first stanza gives way to obsequiousness in the chorus and final stanza, establishing a sexual tension. On this level, the song signifies on the trope of the Lulu Belle-like, sex-mad single black woman (consider the euphemistic "hoo doo" and "jazzbo"), but here Mills reverses the image. Instead of a savage, uncontrolled home-wrecker, Mills is the epitome of domesticity, looking for "someone to feather [her] nest." She is coy, demure, and tamed. In short, she is civilized.

The words of "I'm a Little Blackbird Looking for a Bluebird" may have been written by a white person, but Florence Mills gave them voice. In fact, Mills believed that this, her signature song, had a deeper social significance than simply the lament of a lonely woman looking for the love of a man, and she tried to convey this in her performance. Writing for London's Sun Chronicle, she claimed that "Blackbird/Bluebird" profoundly articulated the "Negro's attitude towards life." In a short essay called "The Soul of the Negro," Mills compares the plight of black people in the United States to "a small boy flattening his nose against a pastry-cook's window and longing for all the good things on the other side of the pane." Moreover, she articulates the sense of exile that black people feel in their own country. Just as the lyrics describe an attitude of rootlessness, Mills asserts that African Americans wish "so badly to 'belong'—and as yet there is no place for [them]."⁹² This sense of homelessness, as discussed in Chapter 1, is a significant image in African-American literature and songs. As Cheryl Wall points out, "the idea of home has a particular resonance in African-American expressive tradition, a resonance that reflects the experience of dispossession that initiates it."⁹³ In both the article and the song, Mills expresses the plaintive hope of putting an end to a lifetime, as well as a heritage, of loneliness and isolation.

In the essay, Mills incorporates the language of minstrel songs and sentimental black narratives to critique a culture that oppresses blacks. She exaggerates and parodies white rhetoric that viewed blacks as helpless, puerile beings. For example, Mills defends black people by denoting their “childish trust,” “white to the core” feelings, and attesting that although they “may not be so sophisticated, so developed as the white man,” they do not deserve to be treated as social outcasts. The article may not be written in dialect, but it retains the tone of “Plantation Songs” and scenes of Dixie nostalgia. Pathos and mawkishness nearly overburden her plea for acceptance; the strains of a Dixie melody seem to underscore the writing. She writes, for example, “When I was born I was just a poor pickaninny, with no prospects but a whole legacy of sorrow.” Cannily, Mills seemed to recognize that in order to make people listen to a young black woman’s appeal for racial equality, she had to do it from behind a familiar, non-threatening guise. She writes: “In America, despite the very real prejudice that exists, the Negro race is rearing its head in all branches of social life. In England where the color line is practically non-existent, Negroes have achieved a virtual equality.” Even though she assumed the “pickanniny” mask, she was one of the wealthiest female entertainers in the world and hailed by royalty.⁷⁴ The Prince of Wales was taken by her and reportedly saw her perform twenty times. Ironically, the falsifying mask of minstrelsy allowed her to more truthfully address the black condition.

In a similar interview with the Manchester Evening Citizen, she couched her criticism of American prejudices within the rhetoric of harmless, good-willed blackface showmanship. Again, she evoked the nonconfrontational discourse tied to the representations of childlike, singing and dancing “darkies.” Downplaying the disastrous effects of racial tension gone unchecked, she reinscribed a non-malicious, ever-cheerful, and trustworthy Uncle Tom characterization. After all, potent memories of race riots in the summer of 1919 that erupted in Chicago, Washington, and Charleston undoubtedly left many white Americans wary of black solidarity. Mills valiantly attempted to calm these

fears. While touring with Blackbirds, her last show before she died, she told a British reporter:

[A]lthough the colored people have always been dominated by the white, there is no bitterness in the Negro's heart, no resentment. I am, of course, speaking of Negroes as a whole. There is a something in us, I cannot tell you what it is, but it is a happiness that always seems to triumph over depression and sadness. Take this company, for example. I have known some of my fellow players in the depths of misery, yet by calling up this reserve force, and by singing and dancing, they sink it.⁹⁵

Rather than expounding upon the achievements of black people and demanding social equality as other black luminaries were doing at this time, Florence Mills seems to have asked politely for racial tolerance. Her public persona promised that she was always ready with a song and a smile in exchange for it.⁹⁶

The technique in which Florence Mills strove for racial tolerance was based on her ability to ingratiate herself with her public. She once remarked, “The stage is the quickest way to get to the people. My own success makes people think better of other colored folks.”⁹⁷ Rather than reversing popular stage stereotypes, Florence Mills embraced and played these images brilliantly. She softened the hard edges so they looked less like grotesque caricatures, and in the process, she made them more endearing. Her genius was evident in the way in which she presented these familiar representations of blackness within moments of indescribable beauty and injected the culturally solidified forms with a transcendent humanity. By “mastering” popular tropes of black performance, Mills was able to gently impose her own voice on top of them and comment on the pervasive racial prejudice of her day. Rather than radically subverting notions of black authenticity—and risk alienating her mainstream audience—Florence Mills used these as a tool to give her access to a public platform so that her voice would be heard.

Mills’s contemporary, and a celebrated Broadway performer in her own right, Ethel Waters, also used her star status to critique black representations. Waters’s stage persona, however, was characterized less by her innocence, and more by her mischievousness. For instance, she nudged the boundaries of decorum with her “blue” songs, or those with risqué or double entendre lyrics. And parody was also a major aspect of Waters’ work in her black revues on Broadway. Like Florence Mills, Waters at times adopted stereotypical representations, but in her demeanor and vocal style, she distanced herself from the images. That is, rather than summoning a voice from the “mastery” of familiar racial images as Florence Mills had, Ethel Waters called attention to the ludicrousness behind them by deconstructing and satirizing them. Her “deformation of form,” to use Houston Baker’s terminology, was the most potent method in which she resisted the expectations of black womanhood while garnering accolades from her mostly white male critics.

“Shake That Thing”

Although today she is primarily known for her film work in the late 1940s and early 1950s, including Pinky (1949) and The Member of the Wedding (1952), and while she is best remembered as a corpulent, spirituals-singing black woman, Ethel Waters was not always the embodiment of the familiar image of the matriarchal African American. In the 1920s and early 1930s, Waters was regarded as a sometimes glamorous, sometimes sexy, sometimes comical, and sometimes bawdy singer with enormous talent. For instance, when she opened on Broadway in the mostly white 1935 musical revue At Home Abroad, the last revue in which she appeared, Brooks Atkinson of the New York Times described her as a “gleaming tower of dusky regality, who knows how to make a song stand on tip-toe.”⁹⁸ The hit show, which famed MGM director Vincente Minnelli both directed and designed, also starred British comedienne Beatrice Lillie, tap dancer Eleanor Powell, and vaudeville song and dance man Eddie Foy, Jr. Structured as a musical “travelogue,” At Home Abroad included sketches and numbers set in locales such as Paris.

Vienna, Russia, Jamaica, and Africa. Not surprisingly, the last two provided the backdrops for two of Waters' numbers. The New York critics lauded the show for its cleverness and arch sophistication, and hailed Arthur Schwartz and Howard Dietz's score, which included the hilarious "Paree" sung by Lillie and the now-standard "What a Wonderful World," as "amusing," "swell," and "luxurious."⁹⁹ But as the sole black star of the revue, Waters was expected to provide the evening's exotica, which she did dazzlingly with the help of Minnelli's costumes and set design. As Atkinson wrote, "[Minnelli] has set her in a jungle scene that is laden with magic, dressing her in gold bands and a star-struck gown of blue, and put her in a Jamaican set that looks like a modern painting. Miss Waters is decorative as well as magnetic."¹⁰⁰ Indeed, few could make the jungle seem as alluring, enchanting, and as amusing as Ethel Waters could while at the same time pointing to the artifice and the artistry surrounding her.

Born in Philadelphia in 1896 out of wedlock (her mother, then twelve, was raped at knifepoint by her father John Waters, a man she never knew), Waters seemed an unlikely candidate for international stardom. In her autobiography, His Eye is on the Sparrow (1951), Waters recounts the tumultuous early years of her life with unflinching candor. In fact, upon reading a segment printed in a staid magazine prior to the book's release, Carl Van Vechten wrote to painter and lithographer Prentiss Taylor (October 23, 1950): "The part of Miss Waters's Memoirs in the October issue of the Ladies Home Journal is sensational in all respects. How that cumbersome conservative magazine happened to publish all this rape and bastardy and adultery is beyond anybody, but they did."¹⁰¹ Added to these shocking descriptions is her unembarrassed narration of a life filled with crime and hard luck. As a child, Waters stole and associated primarily with whores, thieves, and hardened criminals. And at thirteen, she was married for the first time to a man who brutally beat her. The marriage lasted barely a year.

Her lucky break came when she was seventeen. While supporting herself as a chambermaid, Waters performed at a Halloween party on a whim. Known as "Chippie"

Waters to her friends at the time. she claims in her autobiography that she had become "a really agile shimmy shaker," and notes: "It was these completely mobile hips, not my voice, that won me friends and inspired admiration."¹⁰² A pair of professional vaudevillians were in the audience that night and offered her the opportunity to perform with them in a small unit out of Baltimore. She reluctantly accepted and began a highly successful vaudeville career under the name "Sweet Mama Stringbean" in reference to her height and lanky frame. While touring--chiefly in the South--she quickly developed a following for her blues songs and "shake dancing." But as William Gardner Smith points out, when Waters danced, it did not seem lewd or base, impressions other women dancers often gave while performing in a similar manner. One would expect her isolated hip and torso movements to invite catcalls and wolf whistles from the audience, but she evoked a different kind of response. Smith explained in a profile written years after Waters had given up shimmying:

She did the hottest shake dance of her, or any other day. She used to hold her arms far out from her body, to give the freest movement to all parts of her anatomy: she wore tassles on her hips sometimes, and a large buckle on her belt, to accentuate the movements of her body. She could squirm, twist, shake and vibrate in a way which was absolutely uncanny. And yet--who ever felt the slightest sense of vulgarity? One had the impression that she could bathe in mud and still remain clean. ¹⁰³

Although during these years Waters rehearsed the familiar stage-representation of a black woman's pure corporeality, she effectively separated herself from this on stage. Rather than conforming to or even "mastering" this image, she placed herself above it. Waters defied the stereotype of black woman as tainted, impure, and dirty by overlaying her act with a regality. For as description after description of her early performances reveal, Waters seemed to step outside of the "exotic primitive" representation she delineated, and defused the eroticism while on stage. Her puckish grin and playful demeanor called

attention to the sexualized motions as an act, and undermined the notion that she was an undulating object of desire. As her star rose, she continued to manipulate the standard representation of a performing black woman.

By the early 1920s, Waters was also recognized as an accomplished singer, and she became a major recording star for Black Swan, a label that specialized in “race records.” Subsequently, although she had performed regularly at the Harlem speakeasy Edmond’s Cellar, which was regarded as something of a “dive,” her notoriety eventually allowed her access to more reputable clubs, including the world-famous Cotton Club. But as Waters began to make a name for herself playing these Harlem venues, and toned down her “shimmy” somewhat for a more “respectable” clientele, many of the critics compared her to Florence Mills. They compared the performers’ comic abilities and warm personalities, as well as their voices, which were well-suited to both heartfelt ballads and jazzy up-tempo songs. Unlike the black blues women of the 1920s, Waters and Mills’s voices had softer, more refined tones (which made them more appealing for white audiences), and their voices were well-suited to Broadway and Tin Pan Alley songs. At one point Waters was actually concerned that she would be regarded as a pale imitation of the black superstar Mills. In His Eye is on the Sparrow, she describes her hesitance in becoming a replacement for Mills at the Plantation Club: “I felt that Broadway and all downtown belonged to Florence Mills. I also thought our singing styles were too similar for me to follow her at the Plantation.”¹⁰⁴

Yet following a comparable career path to Mills, Ethel Waters burst onto Broadway in 1927 with the musical revue Africana. Africana, unlike most of the black musical revues of the 1920s, was produced by an African American, Earl Dancer, and it had songs by Donald Heywood, who was also black. When the show opened at Daly’s, the theatre that previously housed Shuffle Along, The Amsterdam News noted its “barbaric and primitive splendor,”¹⁰⁵ and other critics praised the show’s “liveliness” and “swift pace.” The Times raved, “a simple corking Senegambian show that takes its place at once in the same

category with ‘Shuffle Along’ and ‘Runnin’ Wild.’”¹⁰⁶ Not surprisingly, the show contained the standard features of the revue, including the “old stuff” described by Van Vechten. Ethel Waters sang the obligatory “Wish I Were in Dixie” song, here called “I’m Coming Virginia” (which includes the lyric, “Beneath your bright southern moon./ Once more I’ll croon/ A dear old mammy tune”), and the “cotton bale” scene in which Waters sang “Here Comes My Show Boat.”¹⁰⁷ Some of the critics complained about the unevenness of the show’s numbers, particularly in a dance number that concluded the first act. “Pickaninny” Hill, advertised in the program as “the champion cakewalker of the world” led the company in “Old-Fashioned Cakewalk” that received particularly negative reactions. Hence, within the week, several of the numbers were dropped and new ones substituted.¹⁰⁸ Other Broadway appearances followed, and prior to her triumph in At Home Abroad, Waters also scored terrific notices in Lew Leslie’s Blackbirds of 1930 (1930), Rhapsody in Black (1931), and Irving Berlin’s revue As Thousands Cheer (1933). But in her later career, Waters gradually replaced her sexy, vamping, and often risqué image (Waters was known for dramatic image changes) with the one which she is best known for today. Beginning in the late thirties as she got older and heavier, and parts for middle-aged black women were fewer and farther-between, she accepted roles which required her to be matriarchal and pious. This was first evident in her dramatic debut as Hagar in Dorothy and DuBose Heywards’ Mamba’s Daughters (1939). Roles in Cabin in the Sky (1940), Pinky, for which she earned an Academy Award nomination (she was only the second black actress to receive this prestigious honor--Hattie McDaniel had been nominated and won for Gone With the Wind in 1939), Member of the Wedding, and a brief stint as a maid in the television series “Beulah” followed. She continued to sing, notably with the Billy Graham Crusades, up until her death in 1977.

By all accounts, Waters had a remarkable career, which spanned seven decades. She was one of the few black Broadway stars of the 1920s, along with Josephine Baker and Bill Robinson, who continued to find work after--to paraphrase Langston Hughes--the

Negro was no longer in vogue. The all-black, Broadway musical revue trend had all but run its course by 1935, and Waters' appearance in the otherwise white At Home Abroad, her last musical revue, offered a nostalgic throwback to the glitzy jungle scenes from the revues of the 1920s. In the 1930s, the black musical revue had run out of ways to surprise white audiences, who looked for newer, more "authentic" portrayals of black life. As Allen Woll explains, by the mid- to late-1930s, the black musical theatre had entered a "period of exile." With the Depression and an emphasis on integrated book musicals and black plays depicting social realism, "A once thriving cultural tradition faded to a mere whimper on Broadway. Black-performed musical shows did not disappear during the next twenty years, but they existed on the fringes of Broadway as oddities, exotica, or nostalgic reveries."¹⁰⁹ In At Home Abroad, the black segments contrasted sharply with the droll songs and sketches predominantly set in Europe, though these moments reintroduced images of a glittering black savagery back to an increasingly whiter Broadway. This is particularly evident in the review by Percy Hammond of the New York Tribune, who wrote, "Miss Ethel Waters, the Negro prima donna, again brings the jungle to Times Square efficiently."¹¹⁰

Backed by a chorus of black men and women dancers in her big African and Jamaican numbers, including "Hottentot Potentate" and "Steamboat Whistle," Waters represented the merging of familiar black stereotypes with tin-pan alley music and lyrics along with polished Broadway showmanship. Of course, the inhabitants of Minelli's "jungle" in At Home Abroad were Broadway's version of "savage": Scantily-dressed in sequins, satin, and chintz, the black chorus danced suggestively not to tom-toms and bongoes, but to the jazzy strains of a piano and muted trumpet.¹¹¹ The effect was not completely unlike the grotesquerie evoked by Florence Mills and her "Chocolate Drops" in "Jungle Nights in Dixieland" from Dixie to Broadway. Yet as was characteristic of Waters' performance style in the 1920s and early 1930s, she rendered these images with a knowing wink and a sly smile. Writing for Women's Wear Daily, for example, Kelcey Allen notes

Waters' remarkable ability to "sell" her songs in this show, and Brooks Atkinson described the "enormous lurking vitality" she applied to her numbers.¹¹² Unlike Florence Mills, who, according to some critics, artfully mastered these images and reflected an entire history of her race while executing certain songs, Waters pointed to the act of performing and "putting over" these numbers. She did not immerse herself in the jungle maiden depiction, as Florence Mills seemed to, for instance, but she wryly pointed to the ludicrousness of the image. In effect, she exaggerated the images she portrayed, and she laughed at herself with a knowing wink to the audience to let them in on the identity game she was playing. Rather than simply reinscribing and accommodating the popular constructions of black women, in the Broadway musical revues in which she appeared, Ethel Waters often reversed, exaggerated, and parodied stereotypical notions and called attention to the inauthenticity behind them.

By "reversing" the representations, or poking fun at familiar associations with blackness, Waters subtly resisted the racist ideology of the day. Donald Bogle explains that on stage and film, Waters "detached" herself from stereotypical characterizations and "puncture[d] holes in old-style" portrayals.¹¹³ She accomplished this by infusing her performance with a playful mischievousness, which explains why Carl Van Vechten referred to her as "our TOPSY," after the trickster character from Harriet Beecher Stowe's Uncle Tom's Cabin.¹¹⁴ Waters' special gift was not just her ability to transcend and ridicule the demeaning images afforded black women (including the Topsy character), but her ability to endear herself to conservative, white audiences who tended to publicly denounce non-normative and ribald performances by black women. Her exceptional charm not only masked the vulgarity in her movement, but also any hint of lewdness and subversiveness inherent in the lyrics she sang. She was able to push the limits of propriety by injecting her performance with feigned innocence, which earned her the title, the "Queen of Double-Entendre." As James Weldon Johnson wrote about her, "Miss Waters also has a disarming quality which enables her to sing some songs that many singers would not be able to get

away with on the stage. Those who have heard her sing 'Shake That Thing' will understand."¹¹⁵ And William Gardner Smith remarked similarly on the way "she raised her full, clear voice in songs with triple-meanings without making the most sensitive souls among her audience withdraw."¹¹⁶

The clearest example of why Waters was regarded as the Queen of Double-Entendre was her performance of black composer Eubie Blake and lyricist Andy Razaf's "My Handy Man Ain't Handy No More" which she introduced in Lew Leslie's Blackbirds of 1930. The show also starred Bill "Bojangles" Robinson and had lavish costumes by Vincente Minnelli. Nevertheless, it was a critical and financial disappointment. As Waters quipped: "Blackbirds opened at a Forty-second Street theater right next to the flea circus. Our show was a flop, and the fleas outdrew us at every performance. The Depression came in and made our business worse. But it didn't dent the take of the flea circus at all."¹¹⁷ In typical Lew Leslie fashion, the revue rehashed familiar settings, such as its opening number situated on a Levee in Mississippi, an African jungle number in Mozambique, and of course, Harlem. The sketches consisted of parodies of Green Pastures, a black biblical retelling by white playwright Marc Connelly; All Quiet on the Western Front, here called "All Quiet on the Darkest Front"; and Shakespeare's Othello, in which Waters played Desdemona.¹¹⁸ Naturally, the women in the large choral dance numbers were characteristically underdressed and suitably energetic. In his review, Percy Hammond acknowledged, "The dusky young women of the ensemble sing well and undress successfully; and the dancing is rhythmic and acrobatic."¹¹⁹ All of the ingredients in the Leslie recipe were in place, but by 1930, the confection had lost all of its airiness and distinctive flavor.

A particularly low point in the show (and arguably in all of musical theatre history, for that matter), was a sketch called "Aunt Jemima's Divorce Case," which single-handedly combined all of the most degrading black stereotypes into one skit. According to several critics, the jokes were tired, and the humor forced as it retread old minstrel show gags. The

characters included Aunt Jemima; Cream of Wheat, her husband: The Ham What Am, the judge; and Sambo, the lawyer. To critics who had once applauded, or at least tolerated, the debased caricatures, the gags had worn out their welcome on Broadway. It seems the images had been rehearsed and replayed so often on stage in the musical revue, that the authentic and comic elements of the minstrel mask had all but dropped out. White critic Richard Lockridge of the New York Sun railed against Lew Leslie's perpetuation of exaggerated blackface humor as reflected in this sketch, which he said concealed a truly uncorrupted, and presumably untapped, African-American talent. In a fascinating tirade about white culpability and black gullibility for the original construction of the "stage darkie" caricature, he wrote:

It would be interesting to discover, and quietly murder, the man who first convinced Negro comedians that the way to be a comic lies in blacking brown faces. You take a Negro, who is apt to have naturally certain qualities which the white race cannot acquire, and black him up. You lay on his dialect with a trowel--and with no closer relationship with the actual dialect of the Negro than may be found in the phonetic idiosyncrasies of the average white writer about him. You tell him it is funny to twist words, using for example, "evict" in place of "convict," which ninety-nine times out of one hundred, it isn't. You make him, in short, a bad imitation of what was not a very good imitation in the first place, and you tell him to make the people laugh. He--and I shall never know why--believes you.¹²⁰

Lockridge's argument is telling in that in an age when black performers had gained considerable artistic and commercial ground, the white assumption that African Americans were merely unwitting imitators and unoriginal pawns was still thriving. It also recalls the 1927 publicity of a paternal David Belasco teaching his childlike Lulu Belle supernumeraries how to "act" black as described in Chapter 3. The attitude evokes Henry Louis Gates's discussion of the nineteenth century notion that black writers were actually "mockingbird

poets” because they were “generally thought to lack originality.” African Americans supposedly “excelled,” according to Gates and his charting of the widely held belief, “at mimicry, at what was called mindless imitation, repetition without sufficient revision.”¹²¹ Regarding the black musical revue, the recycled jokes, sketches, and musical numbers had become so commonplace on Broadway that the exotic appeal no longer impressed the mostly white audiences. New images of the “authentic” would need to be found.

Blackbirds of 1930 and its indefatigable fidelity to the old formula and its lack of originality anticipated the demise of the black musical revue on Broadway. Lew Leslie, the master of the form, would try to resuscitate the genre with two more editions, in 1933 and 1939, but with dismal results. (Leslie’s immediate follow-up to Blackbirds of 1930, Rhapsody in Black in 1931, was moderately successful, but that show, which also starred Waters, had eliminated the typical format of the black musical revue and was structured more or less as a concert.) Black critic Theophilus Lewis once criticized Leslie for shamelessly recycling material from show to another, stating that, “Mr. Leslie seems to think that all you have to do to make a dance appear new is to change the costumes of the dancers. He has the same idea regarding a song.”¹²² The only salvation in the 1930 show was Ethel Waters, who provided respite from the tediousness of the over three-hour-long opening night show, and of whom Lockridge himself referred to with highest praise possible as “endlessly original.” To Lockridge, Waters was not a mere copy of endlessly reproduced images of blackness, but offered an animated spark lost among the lackluster proceedings.

Charles Darnton of the Evening World said that Waters was one of the few bright spots in the show, and added, “In fact, I don’t know what we would have done without her.”¹²³ Fortunately, she had some terrific Eubie Blake and Andy Razaf songs to sing, including “Lucky to Me” and “Memories of You.” But the highlight was her rendition of the fiercely funny “My Handy Man Ain’t Handy No More.” To several critics, though, the song bordered on the pornographic and the subversive. Darnton called it “one of the

frankest ballads of this free age." Richard Lockridge referred to it as "so disturbing a mess of double meaning," and the New Yorker said that only Waters' "innocence and cleansing quality" made the song "almost permissible."¹²⁴ "My Handy Man Ain't Handy No More" was actually a follow-up to a number Razaf had written and composed for Waters in 1928 titled "My Handy Man."¹²⁵ That earlier song offers a glowing tribute to a man who satisfies the singer's every domestic need. For instance, she relishes the way "He shakes my ashes/ Greases my griddle/ Churns my butter/ Strokes my fiddle"; and how "He threads my needle/ Creams my wheat/ Heats my heater/ Chops my meat." The sexual double-entendre also includes allusions to "Feed[ing] the horses in my stable" and "Trimming the rough edges off my lawn." But the last verse justifies why Barry Singer deems "My Handy Man" "a bawdy blues of such transcendent craft and consummate comic timing that it nearly overwhelmed all memory of its innumerable predecessors, becoming, on the instant, the genre's quintessential representative and remaining so till today."¹²⁶ Even on recording, Waters's playful naughtiness is irresistible as she sings that her Handy Man.

Never has a single thing to say
 While he's working hard.
 I wish that you could see the way
 He handles my front yard--
 My ice don't get a chance to melt away.
 He sees that I get a nice, fresh piece every day.
 My man is such a handy man.

The musical sequel to this song, composed two years later, revisits the same Handy Man, who it turns out, does not gratify in the same way he used to.

"My Handy Man Ain't Handy No More" is, if anything, even funnier than the first, and it benefits from Blake's music, which some believe is "as funny as Razaf's words."¹²⁷ The singer sets the mood by explaining that "Somethin' strange has happened to my Handy Man/ He's not the man he was before," and "He never hauls his ashes 'less I tell him

to.”¹²⁸ The lyric also visits a familiar domestic territory, once again subtly comparing parts of the woman singer’s anatomy to a “stove,” a “stable,” and a “front lawn.” In this version, the Handy Man’s admirable abilities have all but disappeared, and he is absolutely useless to her:

Time after time, if I’m not right there at his heels.
 He lets that poor horse in my stable miss his meals.
 There’s got to be some changes ‘cause each day reveals
 My Handy Man ain’t handy no more.
 He used to turn in early and get up at dawn,
 All full of new ambitions, he would trim the lawn:
 Now when he isn’t sleeping all he does is yawn,
 My Handy Man ain’t handy no more.

Once he used to have so much endurance,
 Now it looks like he needs life insurance:
 I used to brag about my Handy Man’s technique,
 Around the house he was a perfect indoor sheik
 But now ‘The spirit’s willing but the flesh is weak’:
 My Handy Man ain’t handy no more.

According to Allen Woll, the song’s torrid, controversial lyric was enough to induce an “audible buzz” among the opening night audience and cause one critic to warily dub the show “Hot Stuff” in the title of his review.¹²⁹

Although “My Handy Man Ain’t Handy No More” was written by two black men, it does, however, have a great deal in common with the songs of the 1920s “blues women,” including Bessie Smith, Gertrude “Ma” Rainey, and Alberta Hunter. On one level Blake and Razaff’s song may be regarded as somewhat exploitive, for male audiences would most likely have found the double entendre lyrics titillating. But on another, the

song, like many blues songs, offered a space for resistance. As I will explore further in the next chapter, the blues was a productive site for protesting oppressive social and political ideologies concerning black women. First, by exaggerating and undermining the singer's references to various household duties, “My Handy Man Ain't Handy No More” reverses and subverts cultural presumptions surrounding black gender and sexual roles. In Razaf's lyric, the (presumably) black man is responsible for carrying out domestic duties, and the woman is entrusted with the power to make sure these are completed. As the decision-maker, she is the one who calls the shots in the relationship. And in a switch from the common criticism that might have been directed at a black woman housekeeper whose abilities to keep an orderly home had begun to slip, the Handy Man “has lost his domestic science/ And he's lost his self-reliance.” The song also debunks the traditional middle-class notion of home in which a woman accedes her independence to marriage, domesticity, and the will of her husband. And even more radically, it inverts the image of the stereotypically macho and hypersexualized black man. Here the Handy Man is sexually enervated and rendered impotent (the cliché “the spirit's willing but the flesh is weak” takes on a whole new provocative meaning in Waters's delivery), while the woman is represented as the aggressive partner.

Thus, the setting of “My Handy Man Ain't Handy No More” may represent a familiar place for a black woman, but the singer has transformed it into an arena in which she is both empowered and has sexual autonomy. In this domestic, although eroticized, scene, the Handy Man is only useful to her when he can provide services that fulfill the singer's needs. Yet flying in the face of current discourse surrounding black women's morality, she unapologetically rejects middle-class sentiments about chastity and fidelity. As I emphasized in the preceding chapter, this was an age when black women needed to constantly protect themselves from attacks against their supposed depravity. But as Angela Davis explains, “In the process of defending black women's moral integrity and sexual purity, they [were] almost entirely denied sexual agency.”¹³⁰ The blues, however, were a

site of resistance where black women could proclaim their assertiveness and independence. For as Hazel Carby convincingly argues in her analysis of women blues singers, the blues opened a space of resistance for black women to unashamedly present themselves as “sexual beings,” thus affirming their freedom and individuality.¹³¹ Drawing upon the blues tradition of sexual liberation while performing this song, Ethel Waters effectively “redefined women’s ‘place,’” and constructed “a space in which the coercions of bourgeois notions of sexual purity and ‘true womanhood’ were absent.”¹³²

Sexual allusions of the blues were standard in the 1920s rent parties, honkytonks, or after-hours Harlem clubs, but with the enforced decency laws on Broadway, a song like “My Handy Man Ain’t Handy No More” could potentially close a show. The fact that the song did not meet with a wrathful censor was most likely due in large part to its uncanny delivery by Ethel Waters. Vocally, she offered a more refined presentation than her “blues-mama” contemporaries such as Bessie Smith and Gertrude “Ma” Rainey. As Barry Singer explains, “Blessed with bell-like vocal timbre that was complemented by a vaudeville-derived conscientiousness about enunciation, Waters, unlike the rawer, more rural beltors, delivered the blues with urbane elegance and a lilting melodicism.”¹³³ But even more importantly, Waters had by now perfected a complex style in which she could appear to accommodate the image of the stereotypical black plantation gal or jungle maiden for those who wished to see it, yet at the same time, she also undermined this image in her delivery of double-entendre songs. She personified what Freud called “misleading naïveté,” or appearing “as naive, so as to enjoy a liberty that . . . would not otherwise be granted.”¹³⁴

By the 1920s, double-entendre songs had become part of a popular black cultural tradition. Mel Watkins traces the development of this brand of African-American humor back to slave songs. Comical irony, subterfuge, and contradiction, Watkins posits, were “the central means of coping with slavery.”¹³⁵ And if Giles Oakley is correct, the blues and their sometimes oblique denunciation of whites evolved from black work songs. As Oakley depicts, while singing under the watchful eye of white overseers, the seditious implications

in the songs would go unheeded.¹³⁶ Subsequently, black comics had become adept at "masking" their true feelings and intentions in the face of white oppression by employing elusive or culturally acceptable terms that white audiences did not always "get." In a method similar to the literary metaphor defined by Henry Louis Gates as "double voicedness," black humor often contained dual connotations. Therefore, as a form of double-voicedness, double-entendre may be regarded as a strategy of black resistance. In these songs, performers and lyricists call attention to the slipperiness and "mutability" of the language of the oppressor, and intentionally displace the "white term" with a "new semantic orientation," or a distinctively black connotation.¹³⁷ Encoded, layered with new or reversed meanings, and manipulated, words in black double-entendre lose their power to debase and demean. In other words, on the surface, a song could appear to be a middle-class household elegy about a man who no longer works efficiently around the house, but underneath it could describe the sexual dissatisfaction of a working-class black woman who craves frequent and stimulating sexual intercourse. White audiences enjoyed black double entendre because the literal level of the humor catered to their demand for theatrical respectability. But like the skimpy outfits that black chorus girls wore, the literal meanings just barely concealed the eroticized and titillating images underneath.

In the case of Ethel Waters, many critics seemed unsure whether she was actually aware of the song's cloaked meaning. Darnton wrote that she sang "My Handy Man Ain't Handy No More" with "all the innocence of a domestic lament," and that her soulful rendering made him feel as if he were in an authentic Harlem club. "Putting her heart in it," he explained, "she brought us closer to Harlem with each succeeding verse." But perceptive reviewers saw beyond her applied "innocence" (a common term used when critics described her in performance), and detected an element of subversiveness. Waters may have adopted the stereotypical image, but she was not consumed by it. She called attention to its ludicrousness and artificiality. The second-string Times critic summed it up perfectly when he wrote, "Every gesture, every grimace counts. In the rolling of her eyes,

the exaggerated showing of her teeth, the comic shrugging of her shoulders, there is a multitude of meanings."¹³⁸ She put on the minstrel mask, but rather than mastering, transcending, and transforming it into a new artistic creation as Florence Mills had in the black musical revue, Waters continuously peaked out from behind the mask and undermined its suffocating authority over black performers.

These qualities were particularly evident in her performance of "Hottentot Potentate" from At Home Abroad, in which Waters not only challenged popular conceptions about black womanhood, but also created a space that recognized and accepted the gay community.¹³⁹ In this, her "African" number in the show, Waters sings about becoming the ruler of Harlem and bending the will of the people to serve her. A la Julius Caesar, the Hottentot Potentate "came," "saw," and "conquered" this "Congo" kingdom, and the residents easily submitted to her "trickery." Much of the song's humor, though, derives from the unabashed joy she receives from the worship the denizens bestow upon her:

My witchcraft made them make a crown for me;
The natives do a lot of bowing down for me,
And any one of them would go to town for me,
The Hottentot Potentate.

On one level, the song is a parody of Emperor Jones (here she refers to herself as "the Empress Jones"), Eugene O'Neill's 1920 play about a Pullman porter who becomes the revered (then reviled) ruler of a barbaric, unnamed West Indies tribe. In that play, Brutus Jones, with O'Neill's own allusion to Caesar, exploits his black subjects who later bring about his descent into madness and suicide. Hazel Carby convincingly reads the play as an enactment of the Caucasian fear of black insurrection and "retribution" for slavery. An escaped convict and murderer, Jones "tricks" the natives into believing he is godlike by playing upon their fears and superstitions, and he uses his brute strength to intimidate them further. According to Carby, Jones symbolizes the white "historical nightmare" of

enslavement by “those they had enslaved.” The play provides an outlet for those ingrained apprehensions. Carby writes: “Within the dominant cultural imagination, The Emperor Jones plays an important ideological role in the displacement of social and political anxieties of black rebellion, revolution, and revenge.”¹⁴⁰ In “Hottentot Potentate,” Waters pushes the image inside out. Sex and sophistication, rather than fear and force, are the tools of oppression for the “hot and potent, potent and hot, Hottentot Potentate.”

In addition to the popular cultural allusion to The Emperor Jones, the spectre of Lulu Belle haunts the song at every turn. Nearly ten years after Lulu Belle opened on Broadway, the sordid tale of Harlem’s most famous hussy had not faded from cultural consciousness. As with Lulu Belle, the tantalizing charms of the black temptress in Schwartz and Dietz’s song are irresistible and inescapable. In fact, the song makes direct reference to Sheldon and McArthur’s play: “I brought my bottle of Chanel with me / I took along a script of Lulu Belle with me.” And signifying on the title character of that play, not only does the Hottentot Potentate set a snare for the unwitting natives, but she revels in her conquests, which bring her tremendous wealth and prestige. More importantly, the Hottentot Potentate reflects the ease in which she is able to bewitch the credulous natives and capitalize on their particular fears of enslavement. But her powerful seductiveness is not part of an intrinsic identity; it is one that she has embraced and cultivated. On the recording of the song, for instance, Waters purrs with just the right amount of slyness and seduction:

I fool ‘em, fool ‘em, playing a part.
 And I rule ‘em, rule ‘em, I’ve got an art.
 And I ghoul ‘em, ghoul ‘em, right from the start.
 I gave ‘em that hotcha, je ne sais qu’oicha.

Like Lulu Belle, who beguiles an unsuspecting French count, it is fairly obvious that the Hottentot Potentate’s selective command of French comes in pretty handy as well. In this comic parody, though, the Lulu Belle figure is not a harbinger of destruction, but of

unyielding, joyful subjugation. At the same time, the bit satirized and exaggerated the stereotypical notion of the black savage and the alluring, menacing African-American woman.

This element in At Home Abroad inspired the indignation of at least one critic reviewing the show. A New York Times critic, who attended the show's out-of-town-tryout in Boston, found the show "approach[ing] vulgarity" at certain intervals, and he dismissed Waters' rendition of "Hottentot Potentate" as "not worth her trouble."¹⁴¹ To those accustomed to seeing black women performers embodying images of, to use Sterling Brown's phrase, the "exotic primitive," her performance must have been unsettling. Instead of reinscribing the familiar representation of black womanhood, she exaggerated it, inverted it, and made it laughable. In this particular number, Waters blatantly turns the culturally accepted proposition that assumes a black woman on stage must be represented as a primitive, eroticized African maiden, a sex-mad Lulu Belle, or a desexed mammy figure on its head. Here not only is the Hottentot Potentate known for her "trickery" and "hotcha," both familiar images associated with the stereotypical black woman, but more importantly, she is ultra chic with her "drawing room technique," "modern improvement," and as she proudly proclaims: "The heathens live upon a bed of roses now / And Cartier rings they're wearing in their noses now." Savagery and oppression of O'Neill's original vision in The Emperor Jones have been replaced by glamour and modernity.

As Mel Watkins explains, historically this form of reversal was a common method for black performers in confronting an especially degrading image. He explains, "There was no other way of dealing with it except to make fun of it and reverse the joke."¹⁴² And as he writes in his comprehensive treatise on African-American humor, On the Real Side, "for every authentic African-American joke or humorous tale reflecting an acceptance of the downtrodden condition of the black community there are numerous others that cleverly suggest transcending that condition. Black humor most often satirizes the demeaning views of non-blacks, celebrates the unique attributes of black community life, or focuses on

outwitting the oppressor—as it were, ‘getting over.’”¹⁴³ With her inimitable, comedic style, expensive dress, and sinewy voice, not to mention the assistance of Dietz’s witty lyrics, Waters separated herself from the stereotypical image. Rather than reinscribing the image or being trapped by it, or indeed performing it with exquisite grace and artistry as Florence Mills had in her own career, Waters distanced herself from it. And by doing so, she pointed to the artifice of the representations. The lyric’s numerous implications about theatre, art, and “playing a part.” assisted in further draining the stereotypes of their authenticity.

Another aspect of the song is the way in which it reflects a space that can accommodate non-heterosexual identities as well. Like the Harlem neighborhood itself, the environment articulated in the lyrics of “Hottentot Potentate” is not only comprised of contested black representations, but it also offers a space for gay inclusion. While the song’s references to Lulu Belle point to customary stereotypes about black women, they also signal not-so-veiled nods to the gay community that adopted the title character of Sheldon and MacArthur’s play as its icon. At one point, the Hottentot Potentate comically warns that certain kinds of behavior will not be tolerated in her utopian society. She sings: “The new name for the Congo’s stamping ground/ Is Empress Jones’s Africana vamping ground:/ I don’t allow no camping on my camping ground!” But just a few verses later she seems to recant, and she takes pride in the fact that she has made of this land a much less barbaric and virile atmosphere:

This wild and savage, open airy land
With lions and with tigers was a scary land
Until I made of it a *savoir* *fairyland*.

On the recording, Waters feigns shock at her verbal slip with an inflected “Dear!”, and by doing so, she not so subtly winks at the coterie of “male queers,” who often saw her perform. As she notes in her autobiography, when she performed at Edmond’s it was not

uncommon for gay men to "beg me to let them wear my best gowns for the evening so they could compete for the grand prizes" in various Harlem drag balls.¹⁴⁴

For gay men in the Broadway theatre, the comical allusions to "Lulu Belle," "vamping," "camping," and "savoir *fair*ylnd" meant that Waters affirmed and publicly recognized their existence in a site that by law prohibited lesbian and gay subject matter. The raids of The Captive and The Drag in the same year that Lulu Belle opened, were authoritative admonitions of this fact. Thus, in a mode of resistance similar to the racial double-entendre of the blues, Waters acknowledged a clandestine gay community with coded language. While heterosexual members of an audience might not necessarily have grasped the significance of certain terms, the gay community traditionally delighted in sly references to their lifestyle. As George Chauncey documents, singers in the 1920s and 30s who presented lyrics with gay-inflected subtexts generally attracted a huge following of homosexual men. In particular, Chauncey notes Beatrice Lillie, who was of course the featured star of At Home Abroad, and a fixture of Harlem's gay and lesbian nightlife, as a popular attraction among the gay community. Her comic song "There are Fairies at the Bottom of the Garden" was a "camp classic" for gay men, and as one of her fans later recalled, "The Palace was just packed with queers, for weeks at a time, when Lillie performed."¹⁴⁵ Moreover, Chauncey insightfully describes the communal effect such an occasion offers gay men in a non-gay identified space: "Whether or not the other members in the audience noticed them, *they* were aware of their numbers in the audience and often shared in the collective excitement of transforming such a public gathering into a 'gay space,' no matter how covertly."¹⁴⁶ It is not unreasonable to imagine, then, that when Ethel Waters sang "Hottentot Potentate," she created a space for surreptitious community-building among gay men. During the brief span of the song, Waters regally and unabashedly evoked an environment that was not ruled by a predominantly racist, sexist, and homophobic ideology, but was inclusive and emancipatory (ironically under the Hottentot Potentate's dictatorial command!). That is, in this number, the sexually liberated, "hot and potent,

potent and hot" Hottentot Potentate presided over an "Africana vamping ground" in which cultural representations of race, gender, and sexuality were completely subverted and reimagined.

Such moments of exhilarating musical anarchy in the revues of the 1920s and 1930s were rare indeed. Typically, songs, sketches, and numbers centering around black performers reprised and reinscribed white stereotypes of exotic and non-threatening African Americans. White critics, producers, and audiences determined what were suitable views of black life in these shows and these images were continually repeated and ingrained in white imaginations. But the performances of Florence Mills and Ethel Waters offer a privileged glimpse at ways in which black women resisted and exposed the stereotypes surrounding their race, gender, and sexual desire. Through "mastery" or "deformation" of the standard representations of black women in the conservative and commercial "white" theatre, Mills and Waters found room for social critique. In the process, they forged new possibilities for images of black women. They were unapologetically resilient, outspoken, and above all, sexy in an era when none of these qualities were popularly acceptable.

ENDNOTES

¹ Sung by Ethel Waters in the Arthur Schwartz and Howard Dietz musical revue At Home Abroad (1935). "Hottentot Potentate" was recorded in 1935, and is available on Ethel Waters: On Stage and Screen, 1925-1940 (New York: Sony Music Entertainment Inc., 1989). My appreciation to Charles Kloth for introducing me to this song.

² Waters, His Eye is on the Sparrow (New York: Da Capo Press, 1992; orig. 1951), 187.

³ *Ibid.*, 186. Waters parodied Baker in another musical revue as well. In the hit 1933 Irving Berlin show As Thousands Cheer, she sang "Harlem on My Mind." In his 1967 liner notes for Ethel Waters: On Stage and Screen, 1925-1940, Miles Kreuger described the impression she made in this show: "On the satiric side, she portrayed the ultra-chic darling of Parisian society, Josephine Baker, who drips with diamonds, attends all the best parties, but rather wistfully longs for the lost lusts of the old days, with Harlem on her mind" (Rprt. New York: Sony Music Entertainment Inc., 1989).

⁴ In "Lulu Belles—All?" Ruth Dennis asks: "Was 'Lulu Belle' actually based on the life of Florence Mills? is a query which has been asked continuously since the play of that name startled theatregoers. Denials have been forthcoming from Miss Mills and others repeatedly. But so true to life is this play that 'Lulu Belle' seems typical of the average Negro girl" (Amsterdam News, March 24, 1926: 5).

⁵ Reviews and program of the show contained in the Africana Clippings File in the Billy Rose Theatre Collection (New York Public Library).

⁶ Because a great deal has already been written about Josephine Baker, and because she achieved stardom in Paris rather than New York, she is not a focus of this study.

⁷ Reprinted in James Hatch and Leo Hamalian, eds., Lost Plays of the Harlem Renaissance, 1920-1940 (Detroit: Wayne State University, 1996; 427-432), 430. In When Harlem was in Vogue (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979). David Levering Lewis writes about Van Vechten: "Obviously, it never occurred to Van Vechten that what was exotically worthy to him might not strike an Afro-American writer as unusual, or--if so--that it might embarrass or offend the Afro-American deeply. Van Vechten knew he had much to learn about these people, joshing with [Henry Louis] Mencken, 'Ain't it hell to be a Nordic when you're struggling with Ethiopian psychology?'" (184).

⁸ Van Vechten, 431. Although Van Vechten and other "Negrotarians" forwarded the "New Negro" cause, their conceptions of black art were often based on stereotypical "authentic" images. As Jon Michael Spencer writes in The New Negroes and their Music: The Success of the Harlem Renaissance (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1997): "Since the early phase of the Renaissance was heavily reliant on the philanthropy of such whites as Carl Van Vechten and Charlotte Mason, who felt nostalgically that the Old Negro was the 'real' Negro, it was necessary for the Renaissance artists to be (or appear to be) accommodative and sometimes even to give their benefactors the stereotypical sounds and images they expected while working clandestinely for the 'vindication of the Negro'" (12).

⁹ "When the Black Gals Dance," review of Blackbirds of 1930 in New York Times, October 23, 1930. Clipping in Alexander Gumby Scrapbook Collection, Columbia University Library.

¹⁰ Harlem Renaissance (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), 248.

¹¹ Houston A. Baker, Jr., Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1987). Like Huggins, Baker recognizes the stronghold of minstrelsy throughout the twentieth century: "The mask, for generations on end, has been so persuasively captivating, so effectively engaging in its seeming authenticity, that an astute intellectual like Constance Rourke can actually take it as an adequate and accurate sign of a 'tradition' of 'Negro literature' predating the 'cult' of Afro-American expressivity she found so wearying in the 1940s" (17).

¹² *Ibid.*, 33.

¹³ Resistance, Parody, and Double Consciousness in African American Theatre, 1895-1910 (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997), 29. George Walker wrote that he and Williams "finally decided that as white men with black faces were billing themselves 'coons,' Williams and Walker would do well to bill themselves as the 'Two Real Coons,' which we did" (qtd. in Krasner, 28).

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 25.

¹⁵ Referring to literature, Gates (The Signifying Monkey, New York: Oxford University Press, 1988) argues: "Writers Signify upon each other's texts by rewriting the received textual tradition. This can be accomplished by the revision of tropes. This sort of

Signifyin(g) revision serves, if successful, to create a space for the revising text. It so alters fundamentally the way we read the tradition, by defining the relation of the text at hand to the tradition. The revising text is written in the language of the tradition, employing its tropes, its rhetorical strategies, and its ostensible subject matter, the so-called Black Experience. This mode of revision, of Signifyin(g), is the most striking aspect of Afro-American literary history” (124).

¹⁶ Krasner, 30.

¹⁷ Leslie writes, “Whenever a Negro musical extravaganza is brought to town and it doesn’t show the Ethiopian in the settings and song background that is supposed to be his by birthright, the critics assert the Negro is invading Caucasian territory and is therefore on alien ground” (“Blackbirds’ Shows Change in Negro Life in America.” The New York Amsterdam News, February 29, 1929, 8).

¹⁸ Baker, 33.

¹⁹ Cecil Smith and Glenn Litton, Musical Comedy in America (New York: Theatre Arts Books, 1981), 125.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ For a detailed description of the history of the black musical revue, see Allen Woll’s Black Musical Theatre: From Coontown to Dreamgirls (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989).

²² Qtd. in Marshall and Jean Stearns, Jazz Dance: The Story of American Vernacular Dance (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1968), 130.

²³ Ibid., 131.

²⁴ Qtd. in Paul Gilroy, The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1993), 91.

²⁵ Ibid., 92.

²⁶ Qtd. in Woll, 60.

²⁷ Ibid., 91-3. Warren B. Burdine, Jr. also writes: “As it had been true for minstrelsy, the characteristics of the black musicals of the era accurately mirrored the black man’s place in white America. In these shows the Negro was portrayed as a singing, dancing puppet of little or no substance, all flash and no form, all glass and no content. [...] This was reflective of White America’s conviction of the Negro’s innate mental inferiority; the mindless entertainments went along with the old adage that ‘the Negro’s brains are all in his feet’” (“The Evolution of the Images of African-American characters in the American Commercial Musical.” vols. 1 & 2 [Dissertation: City University of New York, 1991], 216).

²⁸ As Allen Woll explains, “From the first, they found it necessary to ‘black up.’ They discovered that jobs were easier to get if the theatre managers and the audiences assumed they were white men wearing burnt cork makeup. This early adaptation to the demands of the audience became their trademark (as it did with Bert Williams), and they retained their comic masks throughout the 1920s” (60).

²⁹ Dale Cockrell, Demons of Disorder: Early Blackface Minstrels and Their World (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 51.

³⁰ Robert Littell, "'Blackbirds of 1928' in Town," New York Evening Post (May 10, 1928). Clipping in Alexander Gumby Scrapbook Collection, Columbia University Library.

³¹ Eric Lott, Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 146. See also Abiola Sinclair, "The Image of Black Women in Minstrelsy," Black History Magazine (Fall 1998): 53-55. Sinclair writes, "In white minstrel shows there were no wom[e]n. Female parts were played by male impersonators [sic]. White women were depicted rather delicately, but Black women were given the broadest treatment possible. They were referred to as 'gal,' 'wench,' 'likely wench,' or 'mammy' (a slave was *not* permitted to be called 'mother' by anyone, including her own children. She could be called 'nanny' if she were a wet nurse)" (53).

³² *Ibid.*, 145.

³³ Annemarie Bean, "Transgressing the Gender Divide: The Female Impersonator in Nineteenth-Century Blackface Minstrelsy," in Inside the Minstrel Mask: Readings in Nineteenth-Century Blackface Minstrelsy (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1996: 245-56.), 247.

³⁴ Sandra L. Richards, "Writing the Absent Potential: Drama, Performance, and the Canon of African-American Literature," in Performativity and Performance, Andrew Parker and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, eds. (New York: Routledge, 1995: 64-88), 75.

³⁵ "'Liza,' A New Colored Show Comes to Town," Evening Mail (November 18, 1922) and "The Colored Folks in Another Child-Like Imitation of Dull, White Extravaganza," New York Herald Tribune (July 13, 1927). Clippings in Alexander Gumby Scrapbook Collection, Columbia University Library.

³⁶ Linda Mizejewski, Ziegfeld Girl: Image and Icon in Culture and Cinema (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999). Mizejewski writes: "The many attempts to create an American Girl in popular media during this era symptomized the need to impose a singular model (of Americanism, the American) against these confusing ethnic multiplicities and emerging concepts of what American modernity might mean" (115).

³⁷ Robert Littell, "'Blackbirds of 1928' in Town."

³⁸ "Adelaide Hall Is Big Asset to 'Blackbirds'" (January 24, 1929). Clipping in Alexander Gumby Scrapbook Collection, Columbia University Library.

³⁹ "Race Riot Barely Averted When Men Insult Actresses," New York Amsterdam News (September 19, 1928). Clipping in Alexander Gumby Scrapbook Collection, Columbia University Library.

⁴⁰ Lawrence Levine discusses the process in which by the twentieth century and the rise of the middle-class, popular theatre had become increasingly "highbrow." At the turn of the century, this led to the creation of an audience which had previously been quite vocal during a performance to one which was "passive." He explains, "Throughout these years the audience was being transformed, in Richard Sennett's phrase, into 'a spectator rather than a witness' and in the process 'lost a sense of itself as an active force, as a "public.""

[...] Art was becoming a one-way process: the artist communicating and the audience receiving" (Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America. Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1988: 195).

⁴¹ Kristina Straub. Sexual Suspects: Eighteenth-Century Players and Sexual Ideology (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 90.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 107.

⁴³ "White Woman Says She is Glad Ill-Mannered Sothemers Caused Rumpus and Tells Why." New York Amsterdam News. Clipping in Alexander Gumby Scrapbook Collection. Columbia University Library.

⁴⁴ Bernard L. Peterson Jr., A Century of Musicals in Black and White: An Encyclopedia of Musical Stage Works By, About, or Involving African-Americans (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1993), 108.

⁴⁵ Lester Walton. "Negroes' Dream Realized As Race Plays Broadway." the New York World (November 23, 1924). Clipping in Alexander Gumby Scrapbook Collection. Columbia University Library.

⁴⁶ Woll, 111.

⁴⁷ Peterson, 272.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ The Dixie to Broadway Clippings File in the Billy Rose Theatre Collection (New York Public Library) contains programs from Nixon's Apollo Theatre in New York, the Shubert Garrick Theatre in Chicago, the Shubert Majestic Theatre in Boston, the Broadhurst Theatre on Broadway, and the Shubert Lyric Theatre in Philadelphia (a post-Broadway touring stop).

⁵⁰ Qtd. in James Weldon Johnson's Black Manhattan (New York: Da Capo Press, 1991: 1930 orig.), 197-198.

⁵¹ Bricktop, Bricktop, with James Haskins (New York: Atheneum Press, 1983), 54-6.

⁵² Theophilus Lewis. "Florence Mills--An Appreciation." Inter-State Tattler (November 11, 1927). Article in Florence Mills clipping file, Schomburg Center.

⁵³ Qtd. in Martin Bauml Duberman's Paul Robeson (New York: Alfred K. Knopf, 1988), 584 n11. Duberman notes that Robeson once referred to Mills, along with Bessie Mills, as "the greatest Negro artist he has ever heard" (*Ibid.*).

⁵⁴ "'Flo' Mills First of Race to Headline at the Palace." Chicago Defender (June 27, 1925).

⁵⁵ Johnson, 200.

⁵⁶ Irene Kuhn of the New York Daily Mirror, for example, wrote: "Never before in the history of Harlem has there been such a funeral. Never have the emotional colored people been so moved. Never have they sung their spirituals, and their heart-swelling hymns of sorrowful mourners, with such evident heart-break." She goes on to describe the emotional

outbursts of people in the church, and adds: "But Juanita Stinnett, a pal of Flo Mills, provided the high drama. She sang 'Florence,' a song dedicated to Flo Mills, and written especially for her funeral. The girl sang the song through bravely. She began to break at the last few lines and she, too, fainted and was carried out crying hysterically: 'Florence, Oh Florence'" (November 7, 1927). Clipping in Alexander Gumby Scrapbook Collection, Columbia University Library.

⁵⁷ "Scores Collapse at Mills Funeral" (November 7, 1927). Unidentified clipping in Alexander Gumby Scrapbook Collection, Columbia University Library.

⁵⁸ The poem is reprinted in Henry T. Sampson, Blacks in Blackface: A Source Book on Early Black Musical Shows (Metuchen, New Jersey: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1980), 104. Barry Singer reports that Razaf recorded the song himself on November 4, 1927, for Columbia Records, accompanied by J.C. Johnson on piano and Eddie King on organ (Black and Blue: The Life and Lyrics of Andy Razaf, New York: Schirmer Books, 1992: 185-6).

⁵⁹ Johnson, 197.

⁶⁰ Carole Marks and Diana Edkins, The Power of Pride: Stylemakers and Rulebreakers of the Harlem Renaissance (New York: Crown Publishers, 1999), 10.

⁶¹ See chapter "Dixie to Broadway: Lew Leslie and the Black Revues" in Woll, 94-113.

⁶² Tony Langston, "Florence Mills Heads Great Review [sic]." The Chicago Defender (August 23, 1924).

⁶³ Alexander Woolcott, "Rhapsody in Brown Presented." New York Sun (October 30, 1924).

⁶⁴ October 30, 1924, clipping in Alexander Gumby Scrapbook Collection, Columbia University Library.

⁶⁵ Heywood Broun, New York World (October 30, 1924).

⁶⁶ Percy Hammond, Herald Tribune (October 30, 1924); Alan Dale, American (October 30, 1924); Gabriel; and Alexander Woolcott, New York Sun (October 30, 1924).

⁶⁷ Randolph Edmonds, "Not Many of Your People Come Here: A Discussion of Segregation in the Theatre." The Messenger (March 1928), 70.

⁶⁸ David Levering Lewis writes, "But Harlem would never have been on white New York's extra-curricular itinerary had it not been for the Broadway musical. . . . Whatever their shortcomings, the musicals sent more and more whites from the theatre Uptown to Lenox and Seventh avenues" (When Harlem Was in Vogue, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981).

⁶⁹ "Dixie Dreams." lyric by Grant Clarke and Roy Turke, music by George W. Meyer and Arthur Johnston. Published by Irving Berlin, Inc., 1924. Sheet music in Music Collection, New York Public Library of the Performing Arts.

⁷⁰ Lott, 187.

⁷¹ The remark is in response to Mills’s performance of this number in the Plantation Revue, which played at the Lafayette Theatre in Harlem. The show played there for two weeks prior to its London and Paris engagements. “About Things Theatrical.” Amsterdam News (February 20, 1924). Clipping in Alexander Gumby Scrapbook Collection, Columbia University Library.

⁷² Qtd in Woll, 103.

⁷³ Other critics in the early twentieth century addressed the issue as well. Arnold L. Haskell writes: “Imagine a performance of Les Sylphides danced by loose-limbed ‘coal-black mummies’! Such a thing seems utterly ridiculous, and yet we are perfectly used to seeing our own pink and white girls charlestoning and blackbottoming--(I am not discussing the ballroom versions). To me both sights seem very much the same. I am a great admirer of negro dancing, but only when danced by negroes.” (Arnold L. Haskell. “Further Studies in Ballet: Negro Dancing.” The Dancing Times, January, 1930.)

⁷⁴ George Jean Nathan. “Colored Actress Given the Palm By George Jean Nathan. Yah!”, New York Telegram (Incorrectly dated April 16, 1931. From Florence Mills Clippings File in the Schomburg Collection, New York Public Library).

⁷⁵ Woll points out in a footnote that the striking resemblance to Ziegfeld is rather deliberate: “Acute observers should have noticed that this song was at best an homage to, but more likely a retread of, a classic Irving Berlin number called ‘Mandy.’ The song first appeared in a World War I all-soldier show Yip, Yip, Yaphank in 1918 and later in the 1919 edition of the Ziegfeld Follies. In a similar sex-switch strategy, Marilyn Miller played minstrel George Primrose” (104).

⁷⁶ “Mandy Make Up Your Mind.” lyric by Grant Clarke and Roy Turke, music by George W. Meyer and Arthur Johnston. Published by Irving Berlin, Inc., 1924. Sheet music in Music Collection, New York Public Library of the Performing Arts.

⁷⁷ Wendy Martin. “‘Remembering the Jungle’: Josephine Baker and Modernist Parody.” in Prehistories of the Future: The Primitivist Project and the Culture of Modernism, Elazar Barkan and Ronald Bush, eds. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), 322.

⁷⁸ Broun. World.

⁷⁹ Martin 316-17.

⁸⁰ Kevin J. Mumford. Interzones: Black/White Sex Districts in Chicago and New York in the Early Twentieth Century (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 162.

⁸¹ Unidentified author. American.

⁸² Qtd. in Woll, 110.

⁸³ “‘Dixie to Broadway’ Drawing fine: ‘Runnin’ Wild’ on Final Week.” The Chicago Defender (August 30, 1924), 6.

⁸⁴ Qtd. in Woll, 110.

⁸⁵ Qtd in Samuel A. Hay. African American Theatre: An Historical and Critical Analysis (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 18.

⁸⁶ Hay, 18.

⁸⁷ Baker, 33.

⁸⁸ Huggins, 284.

⁸⁹ Qtd. in "Florence Mills Turned Down Offer to Appear in Ziegfeld Follies." The Chicago Defender (August 23, 1924), 8.

⁹⁰ Qtd. in Woll, 107-8.

⁹¹ Nathan, "Colored Actress."

⁹² Florence Mills. "The Soul of the Negro" The Sun-Chronicle, London, England. Reprinted in the Amsterdam News (November 24, 1926), 10.

⁹³ Women of the Harlem Renaissance (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1995), 31.

⁹⁴ Marks and Edkins, 165.

⁹⁵ "Florence Mills Again Gives Interview to a Leading European Publication: Sends Clippings to Amsterdam News to Prove that She is Taking Advantage of Every Opportunity to Place Negroes in Favorable Light." Amsterdam News (August 3, 1927), 12.

⁹⁶ In an article appearing the following week in the Amsterdam News (August 10, 1927), however, Mills was more direct in her criticism of the color barrier in the United States, stating that, "there are many colored boys in America who, after being trained as lawyers and doctors, have to become train attendants because they are black and there is no place for them." And addressing the incongruity of racism in the United States, she told her interviewer that "if a white person in a theatre is put next to a Negro, the white person objects. Yet the same white person will eat food cooked by a colored person and be waited on by another Negro." In this interview, she reiterates the sense that African Americans are a "very happy family" (10).

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Brooks Atkinson, "Beatrice Lillie and Ethel Waters in a Musical Travelogue Entitled 'At Home Abroad'" New York Times (September 20, 1935).

⁹⁹ Whitney Bolton, "Put 'At Home Abroad' on 'See' List: Lillie, Powell and Waters are Tops!" New York Telegraph (September 21, 1935); Brooks Atkinson re-review, New York Times (October 27, 1935). Clippings in At Home Abroad Scrapbook, the Billy Rose Theatre Collection (New York Public Library).

¹⁰⁰ Atkinson, "At Home Abroad."

¹⁰¹ Qtd. in Bruce Kellner, ed., Letters of Carl Van Vechten (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), 244. Carl Van Vechten remained a tremendous admirer of Waters for most of his life. In a letter dated December 14, 1932, to Blanche Knopf, the wife of publisher Alfred, he wrote: "I have long believed that Ethel Waters and Langston [Hughes] had more

genius than any others of their race in this country and I think Langston will in the end have as wide a success as Ethel" (129).

¹⁰² Waters, 71-2.

¹⁰³ William Gardner Smith. "Phylon Profile. XXI: Ethel Waters." Phylon (circa 1950). Article in Alexander Gumby Scrapbook Collection, Columbia University), 115-16.

¹⁰⁴ Waters. 183.

¹⁰⁵ "Ethel Waters Opens With 'Africana' at Daly's Amid Riot of Barbaric Splendor." Amsterdam News (July 13, 1927), 11.

¹⁰⁶ Africana Clippings File.

¹⁰⁷ Henry T. Sampson reprints the numbers from the program in his Blacks in Blackface: A Source Book on Early Black Musical Shows (Metuchen, NJ: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1980), and several of Waters' numbers from this were recorded, which are available on The Chronological Ethel Waters, 1926-1929 (France: Classics Records, 1993). These include: "I'm Coming Virginia," "My Special Friend is Back in Town," "Weary Feet," "Smile!," and "Take Your Black Bottom Outside." She also sang her signature song, "Dinah," at the loud vocal request of Carl Van Vechten on opening night, and this song is available on The Chronological Ethel Waters, 1931-1934 (France: Classics Records, 1993).

¹⁰⁸ The Amsterdam News reported a week after its opening: "True, there were some things which some of us though 'passe' in the show, but it is good to see that those very things were withdrawn the very next night and at this writing there have been many additions which cannot help but enhance the production" ("Many Changes in 'Africana.' July 20, 1927, 7).

¹⁰⁹ Woll. 193.

¹¹⁰ Percy Hammond. "At Home Abroad" review, New York Tribune (September 20, 1935). Clipping in At Home Abroad Scrapbook, the Billy Rose Theatre Collection (New York Public Library).

¹¹¹ In a 1966 essay, Harlem Renaissance writer Sterling Brown castigated the images of "exotic primitives whose dances--the Charleston, the 'black bottom,' the 'snake hips,' the 'walking the dog'--were tribal rituals; whose music with wa-wa trumpets and trombones and drum batteries doubled for tom-toms; whose chorus girls with bunches of bananas girding their shapely middles nurtured tourists' delusions of the 'Congo creeping through the black'" ("A Century of Negro Portraiture in American Literature," reprinted in Black Voices, Abraham Chapman, ed. [New York: New American Library, 1968]: 564-89).

¹¹² Kelcey Allen. "At Home Abroad" review, Women's Wear Daily (September 20, 1935). Clipping in At Home Abroad Scrapbook, the Billy Rose Theatre Collection (New York Public Library). Atkinson, "Beatrice Lillie and Ethel Waters in a Musical Travelogue."

¹¹³ Donald Bogle's preface to His Eye is on the Sparrow (1991 edition), xiv.

¹¹⁴ Van Vechten in a letter to his wife Fania Marinoff (July 4, 1937). Qtd. in Kellner. 154.

¹¹⁵ Black Manhattan. 210.

¹¹⁶ Smith, 116.

¹¹⁷ Waters, 215.

¹¹⁸ Low Leslie's Blackbirds of 1930 program in the Billy Rose Theatre Collection (New York Public Library).

¹¹⁹ Percy Hammond, "Glorifying the American Negro." New York Tribune (October 23, 1930). Clipping in the Billy Rose Theatre Collection (New York Public Library).

¹²⁰ Richard Lockridge, "Black and Brown," New York Sun (October 23, 1930). Clipping in the Billy Rose Theatre Collection (New York Public Library).

¹²¹ Gates, 113.

¹²² Theophilus Lewis, The Messenger (May 1926).

¹²³ Charles Darnton, "The New Play," Evening World (October 23, 1930). Clipping in the Billy Rose Theatre Collection (New York Public Library).

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*; Lockridge; New Yorker (November 1, 1930). 26. Clippings in the Billy Rose Theatre Collection (New York Public Library).

¹²⁵ The lyric is reprinted in Barry Singer's Black and Blue: The Life and Lyrics of Andy Razaf (New York: Schirmer Books, 1992), 194-5. Ethel Waters recorded the song on August 21, 1928 for Columbia, and is available on Ethel Waters, 1926-1929 (Classics Records, 1993).

¹²⁶ Singer, 194.

¹²⁷ David A. Jasen and Gene Jones, Spreadin' Rhythm Around: Black Popular Songwriters, 1880-1930 (New York: Schirmer Books, 1998), 355.

¹²⁸ Lyric reprinted in Singer, 249.

¹²⁹ Woll, 145.

¹³⁰ Angela Y. Davis, Blues Legacies and Black Feminism (New York: Pantheon Books, 1998), 44.

¹³¹ Hazel Carby, "It Just Be's Dat Way Sometime: The Sexual Politics of Women's Blues." Radical America, vol. 20, no. 4 (June-July 1986). See also Paula Giddings, When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America (New York: Morrow, 1984); Cheryl Wall, "Whose Sweet Angel Child? Blues Women, Langston Hughes, and Writing During the Harlem Renaissance," in Arnold Rampersad, Langston Hughes: The Man, His Art, and His Continuing Influence, ed. by C. James Trotman (New York: Garland, 1995); and Michele Wallace, Invisibility Blues: From Pop to Theory (New York: Verso, 1990).

¹³² Davis, 44, 46.

¹³³ Singer, 179-80.

¹³⁴ Qtd. in Mel Watkins, On the Real Side: Laughing, Lying, and Signifying--The Underground Tradition of African-American Humor that Transformed American Culture, from Slavery to Richard Pryor (New York: Simon & Scuster, 1994), 33.

¹³⁵ Watkins, 52.

¹³⁶ Giles Oakley, The Devil's Music: A History of the Blues (New York: Harcourt Brace and Jovanovich, 1976), 36-40.

¹³⁷ Gates, 121.

¹³⁸ E. F. M., "Testing the Wings of the 'Blackbirds.'" New York Times. Undated clipping in the Billy Rose Theatre Collection (New York Public Library).

¹³⁹ See note 1.

¹⁴⁰ Hazel V. Carby, Race Men (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 77-8.

¹⁴¹ "'At Home Abroad' Offered in Boston," New York Times (September 4, 1935), 22:3.

¹⁴² Qtd. in Felicia R. Lee, "An Encore for Black Vaudeville," New York Times (February 10, 1999), E1, 6.

¹⁴³ Mel Watkins, 29.

¹⁴⁴ Waters, 149.

¹⁴⁵ Qtd. in George Chauncey, Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay World 1890-1940 (New York: BasicBooks, 1994), 288.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

CHAPTER 5

"Gladys Isn't Gratis Anymore"

Gladys Bentley's Bulldykin' Blues

What make you men folk treat us women like you do?
What make you men folk treat us women like you do?
I don't want no man that I got to give my money to.

Call me a leper giving nothin', but I know.
Call me a leper giving nothin', but I know.
'Cause right back I told him, man, I ain't no billy goat.

Give my man everything from a diamond ring or dough.
Give my man everything from a diamond ring or dough.
The next thing I'm gonna give him six feet in the cold, cold ground.

--Gladys Bentley, "Worried Blues"¹

"I'm a Big Fat Mama With Meat Shaking on My Bones"

With the enforcement of the Wales Padlock Law and stricter censorship of Broadway plays, musicals, and revues, lesbians and gay men in mainstream theatre audiences had to content themselves with sly allusions and coded innuendo. In the late 1920s and early 1930s, Broadway performers like Ethel Waters teased the limits of decency with double meanings that the censor politely ignored, but the city made it very clear that it would no longer tolerate blatant sexuality nor "perversity" on its public stages. Standing behind the rationale that New York City was the entertainment capital of the world, state and city elected officials were intent on promoting a respectable, wholesome image of Broadway. Thus, police billy clubs and political crackdowns on obscenity charges kept the New York theatre's closet door rather securely closed, and only coy references to homosexuality, such as indirect suggestions and questionable character traits, escaped the vigilant public censor.

Up in Harlem, however, where drag balls continued to attract thousands of spectators, and cross-dressed men and women could be spotted daily on the streets, many

of the nightclub floorshows and theatre revues—although officially held accountable under the same state censorship laws—were as coarse and rowdy as ever. Female impersonators, "bull dykin' women," and "freakish men" appeared on stage with great regularity during this era, and although there were sporadic efforts to clean up Harlem's reputation, white tourists demanded that the neighborhood live up to its image for racial and sexual exotica. Because one of the functions of the ghetto is to provide a controlled site for a certain amount of lawlessness, city authorities had a far more relaxed legal attitude in Harlem than they did in Mid-town. It should come as no surprise then, that some of the best known Harlem acts were those that flaunted the qualities deemed impermissible on Broadway. As reported in a 1934 column in one of Harlem's leading newspapers, the New York Age, some of Harlem's most popular entertainers were lesbians, bawdy comics, and female impersonators.²

High up on this list was Gladys Bentley, an avowed "bulldagger" and headliner at Harlem's Ubangi Club, who was famous for her "suggestive" songs and masculine appearance. Throughout the late 1920s and through the mid-1930s, Bentley remained a major attraction at Harlem's voguish nightclubs as well as its largest theatres, including the Lafayette Theatre, the Harlem Opera House, and the Apollo. At these houses, theatre managers booked variety programs that changed weekly and presented shows that featured not only Harlem's most famous names, but also its up-and-coming talents. For ten to forty cents (depending on the time of day one attended), audiences were also treated to a movie and a serial short, which followed the hour-long stage show. It would not have seemed incongruous in the early 1930s, for example, if a Shirley Temple film like Bright Eyes followed a risqué variety show that featured a racy, cross-dressed entertainer like Gladys Bentley.

Bentley was not the only performer to push the limits of prevailing decency. The 1934 Age column also listed several other acts that would have been barred from the stages of the downtown theatres, including comedienne Jackie "Moms" Mabley, who adopted

the stage persona of everyone's favorite tart-tongued mother of Harlem, and who, according to Bruce Nugent, "habitually wore men's street attire" and did not conceal her lesbian affections. Also listed were two raunchy female impersonators, the Sepia Mae West and the Sepia Gloria Swanson, who were adored by audiences but were reviled by many critics for their "perverse" performances.³ The regular appearances of entertainers like Bentley, Mabley, the Sepia Gloria Swanson, and Mae West at Harlem's popular theatres do not necessarily signal universal acceptance or appreciation for "vulgarity" even in Harlem. Critics, especially in the conservative black newspapers, leveled accusations of obscenity against these acts and often rallied for theatre closings if owners did not clean up the variety programs. Even after the rash of theatre manager and performer arrests in 1927 resulting from the controversy surrounding The Drag, The Captive, and Sex, traditionalists were still not appeased. The chief entertainment critic of the Age, Vere E. Johns, once complained about the preponderance of "fairiosities" on the stages of Harlem in the 1930s. Although not a diehard fan of jazz music, which he referred to as "noisy tunes," Johns wrote that if he had "to choose between jazz, 'fairiyism' and filth, bring on the jazz."⁴ The wrath that female impersonators might incur was particularly evident in 1934 when the Sepia Swanson and West were at the top of their popularity.

In September of that year, for example, Swanson performed at the Harlem Opera House on a variety bill that also featured the legendary jazz musician Fletcher Henderson and his band. Augustus Austin reviewing for the Age qualified his response to the standing room only show by stating that "although Sepia Gloria Swanson was there with 'her' repulsive 'she-male' glorifying act," the rest of the show was quite successful. He enjoyed the band, singers, comedians, ventriloquist, movie (a talkie called Murder on the Blackboard starring Edna May Oliver), and the serial (The Red Rider) on the program, but he was sickened by Swanson's rendition of "I'm a Big Fat Mama With Meat Shaking on My Bones." Swanson added a new twist to this classic blues song, which includes the refrain, "I'm a big fat mama, got the meat shakin' on my bones/ I'm a big fat mama, got the

meat shakin' on my bones/ And every time I shake, some skinny gal loses her home."⁵

Perhaps because the man-stealing, home-wrecking "mama" of the song was portrayed by a man in drag added to the critic's discomfort, but Austin claimed to be physiologically effected by Swanson's performance. He wrote:

When "Gloria Swanson" made "her" appearance my spirits drooped; when "she" sang "I'm a Big Fat Mama With Meat Shaking on My Bones." I became disgusted; but when "she" showed "her laundry" I had a sinking sensation in the pit of my stomach akin to the feeling one has on his first ocean trip."

Austin's response is indicative of the conservative backlash from black critics and prominent citizens. Female impersonators, raunchy comics, and "sexual perverts" threatened the "respectable" image that Harlem dignitaries strove hard to emblazon in the cultural imagination.

A few months after Swanson's engagement, the Sepia Mae West did not fare critically any better. In September, 1934, she also appeared on a bill with Fletcher Henderson at the Opera House. Another critic of the New York Age, identified as "Bourne," raved about "Fletch" and his band, but was appalled by the self-proclaimed "Darling of Female Impersonators" in the show. The reviewer wrote: "There is only one spot on the program which might really be classed as 'putrid,' and that is the demonstration of just how freakish humans can become as offered by something which is styled as the 'Sepia Mae West.' The less said about it, the better."⁷ The critic said nothing else about the act.

If the Sepia Gloria Swanson and Mae West were Harlem's queens of risqué performance, then a young black performer named Gladys Bentley was Harlem's king. Bentley, a 250 pound, black lesbian, was, if possible, even more scandalous than Swanson and West. Like those performers, Bentley also aroused the ire of several critics with her ribald performance, and she pushed the boundaries of stage decency to their limits

with her nightclub act. In the late 1920s, she began her career as a pianist, playing the rent party circuit and then in Harlem’s swankiest nightclubs. Performing in her trademark white tuxedo, she was even better known for taking popular, mainstream songs and substituting the lyrics with her own off-color treatment. Wilbur Young wrote that “so adept was she at this art that she could take the most tender ballad and convert it into a new low with her filthy lyrics.” He added, “In fact, some of these lyrics would be so rank that the house lady would look on in despair while Gladys, not content with merely singing them herself but would encourage the paying guests to join in on the chorus which they did willingly. At this stage, it was just a matter of time before the house got raided.”⁹ Off-stage, Bentley’s persona was similarly ignominious. She only wore men’s clothing in public, and she married a white woman in a highly publicized New Jersey civil ceremony. As Lillian Faderman explains, this kind of wedding among black butch/femme couples was not unheard of in Harlem of the 1920s and early 1930s. A lesbian wedding was often a grand affair, which included bridesmaids and attendants. Faderman says that “real marriage licenses were obtained by masculinizing a first name or having a gay male surrogate apply for a license for the lesbian couple.”¹⁰

In the 1930s, Bentley became even more famous as a performer, and her nightclub act regularly transferred to Harlem’s large theatres. Backed by a chorus of “pansies,” she performed suggestive songs and bantered with her so-called “fellows.” Writing about the show Bentley headlined at the Opera House in 1934, for example, one critic described it as “one of the rankest revues this commentator has witnessed in many a moon.” Claiming that a group of novelty musicians called the Washboard Serenaders¹⁰ was the only redeeming performance on the program, the critic vehemently urged audiences to stop paying to see entertainments that featured repugnant acts like the one Gladys Bentley presented. He wrote:

If patrons would refrain from attending shows of the nature of the current Opera House revue, probably the management wouldn’t embarrass us by

parading sexual perverts and double entendre jokes crackers. I have no fault to find of "men" earning their living as "chorus girls," but why glorify them on the stage of a theatre patronized supposedly by respectable people?"¹¹

But people did not stay away. Throughout much of the 1930s, Gladys Bentley continued to pack people, both black and white, into Harlem's largest theatres and most fashionable night clubs with her outrageous and frank performances.

But Gladys Bentley was more than just a shocking personality. She was also an accomplished pianist and blues singer, and she preserved several of her own compositions on Okeh Race Records, the leading black recording label of the 1920s. Mostly forgotten today, Bentley epitomizes the spirit of the Harlem Renaissance. Like Florence Mills and Ethel Waters, Bentley resisted and subverted cultural expectations of black women. And comparable to many of the blues women of the 1920s and 30s, including Bessie Smith, Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Alberta Hunter, Victoria Spivey, and Ida Cox, Bentley not only symbolized a defiant stand against social and sexual convention, she also represented a new image of African-American womanhood.

In Black Pearls, Daphne Duval Harrison writes that the blues women were "pivotal figures in the assertion of black women's ideas and ideals from the standpoint of the working class and the poor."¹² Similarly, Angela Davis explains that the blues women "found ways to express themselves that were at variance with the prevailing standards of femininity." The music performed by these women, Davis argues, offers a rich site for investigation, because it contains early traces of African-American feminism. The songs and performances presented images of out-spoken, strong, and autonomous black women, who were not afraid to take on the sexual taboos of the era. Davis writes:

Even as they may have shed tears, they found the courage to lift their heads and fight back, asserting their right to be respected not as appendages or victims of men but as truly independent human beings with vividly

articulated sexual desires. Blues women provided emphatic examples of black female independence.¹³

But even more so than the blues women, Bentley did not just challenge fixed notions of race, class, gender, and sexuality; she turned them on their head.

In the ghettoized, liminal spaces of Harlem, laws that were applied with great force Downtown were less stringently enforced, or they were ignored entirely (against the wishes of conservative critics), and performers teased the limits of the taboo. While singing her off-color songs, and while smartly turned-out in her trademark tuxedo, Gladys Bentley's cross-dressed, cross-classed performance, parodied and blatantly mocked bourgeois notions of white male dominance. She was, to use Carroll Smith-Rosenberg's description of literary "mannish lesbians" of the 1920s, the quintessential trickster. The trickster, according to Rosenberg, is a "disorderly figure, libidinous, scatological, of indeterminate sex and changeable gender."¹⁴ In race theory, the trickster figure is similarly reproduced. Henry Louis Gates, for example, traces the trickster figure in African-American culture through the Signifying Monkey and the Esu-Elegebara of Yoruba mythology. Like Smith-Rosenberg's definition of the trickster, Esu-Elegebara is a protean, multi-faceted figure whose "sexuality is indeterminate, if insatiable."¹⁵ As a scholar of Yoruba mythology writes, "Although [Esu's] masculinity is depicted as visually and graphically overwhelming, his equally expressive femininity renders his enormous sexuality ambiguous, contrary, and genderless."¹⁶ The power of the trickster in cultural studies lies in her/his ability to expose the brittleness of social convention and customs and temporarily invert the political distribution of power.

In the 1920s and 1930s, Gladys Bentley flirted with the limits of decency, and as an unabashed butch lesbian, she publicly flaunted an independent stance that not only violated codes of femininity, but also exposed the artificiality of gender and racial constructs. Though now a victim of relative obscurity, Bentley's power as a revolutionist was apparently short-lived. The trickster's effect is, as Smith-Rosenberg reminds,

invariably transitory. As a figure of disorder, the trickster connotes the security of the alternative. Social order is, after all, always preferable to chaos. But for the decade that Gladys Bentley reigned as Harlem's King, she struck a formidable blow against coercive cultural stereotypes that governed acceptable images of black women, and she represented a defiant rejoinder to legal and political efforts to silence and subdue homosexuals in public.

"How Much Can I Stand"

Gladys Bentley was born in Philadelphia in 1907 to George L. Bentley and Mary C. Mote. According to an autobiographical (and quite sensational) essay she wrote for Ebony in 1952, she had an exceedingly difficult childhood. She was the oldest of four children (the rest of whom were boys), and before Bentley was born, her mother had prayed ardently for a son. "Girls," her mother believed, "were fated for trouble."¹⁷ When the infant turned out to be a girl, her mother was bitterly disappointed. She would not even touch the child at first, and she refused to nurse the baby for the first six months. Bentley attributed the effects of her mother's obsessive desire for a son to her own feelings of being "different" and contributing to her childhood aversion to men. She explained, "From the time I can remember anything, even when I was a toddling, I never wanted a man to touch me. I would run away from my own father."¹⁸ She also said that very early in her adolescence, she developed a penchant for wearing boys' clothes, not only as a way to compete with her brothers for their mother's attention, but also because men's shirts and pants felt more comfortable on her large frame than dresses. Her peers taunted her for this, but Bentley did not compromise until her parents relentlessly insisted that she wear girls' clothing. She eventually caved and agreed to wear "middy blouses and skirts."

As a young girl, Bentley was also confronted with her budding lesbian sexuality, which aroused in her feelings she did not comprehend at first. In the Ebony essay, she movingly recalled the first time she felt attracted to another woman:

I remember one person who did appeal to me in those love-starved, lonely elementary school days. She was one of my teachers. During recess, I stayed in the class and helped her, dusting and arranging things on her desk, cleaning blackboards. Sometimes she would let me comb her long, beautiful hair. In class I sat for hours watching her and wondering why I was so attracted to her. At night I dreamed of her. I didn't understand those dreams until later.¹⁹

When her mother realized the extent of Bentley's "difference," she took young Gladys "from doctor to doctor" to cure her of her proclivities. Nothing seemed to work, but Bentley pointed out that, nevertheless, her mother and father "meant well." "They just didn't know," she claimed, "how to cope with a situation which to them was at once startling and disgraceful."²⁰ But when she was sixteen, Bentley left home and went where so many other disenfranchised young black people went in the 1920s: Harlem.

Eric Garber writes that "it was within [Harlem's] nocturnal milieu of illicit sexuality, gambling, and drugs that Gladys Bentley found a place where she could be herself."²¹ In her autobiographical essay, Bentley does not mention her development as a pianist and singer, but by the time she arrived in Harlem, she was already an adroit musician. Playing the Harlem rent party circuit, she quickly established herself as a highly proficient pianist and secured a modest living. Although this circuit was dominated by black male musicians, Bentley earned a formidable reputation as a pianist and singer, and she was soon playing, first as a substitute then as a featured performer, in small nightclubs in Jungle Alley. Her first break came when a friend told her that a club on 133rd Street, called the Mad House, was looking for a pianist right away. "But," he informed her, "they want a boy." Without missing a beat, Bentley replied, "There's no better time for them to start using a girl."²² She rushed over, persuaded the reluctant owner to give her a chance, and she immediately wowed the audience. Starting at \$35 a week, she was soon making \$125 plus tips, which was an impressive salary for a black woman entertainer in the 1920s.

Bentley’s central attraction as a performer in the 1920s, first at the Mad House and then at Harry Hansberry’s Clam House, was her unconventionality and seemingly boundless energy. Charles G. Shaw, a Vanity Fair columnist, described the Clam House in his 1931 guidebook to Harlem as,

A narrow room in Jungle Alley, catering to a large white patronage and featuring Gladys Bentley, pianist and torrid warbler. A popular house for revelers but not for the innocent young. Best after 1 A.M. and open until all hours.²³

With her deep, rumbling voice, closely cropped, greased down hair, and masculine clothes (she was not wearing full tuxedos yet, but a variation on her school girl outfit including skirts, dress shirts, and bow ties), she was an intriguing sight. Her unique appearance and expert musicianship attracted celebrities and artists alike, who were drawn to her raucous blend of blues and scandalous banter. For example, gossip columnist Louis Sobel remembered seeing novelist Theodore Dreiser “in the old Clam House dive in Harlem when Gladys Bentley was still wearing skirts.”²⁴ And Eslanda Robeson, the wife of actor Paul Robeson, gushed, “Gladys Bentley is grand. I heard her three nights, and will never be the same.”²⁵ Indeed, Langston Hughes recalled that when Bentley first started out as a performer in these small clubs, “she was something worth discovering.” “For two or three amazing years,” Hughes recollected,

Miss Bentley sat, and played a piano all night long, literally all night, without stopping--singing songs like “The St. James Infirmary,” from ten in the evening until dawn, with scarcely a break between the notes, sliding from one song to another, with a powerful and continuous underbeat of jungle rhythm. Miss Bentley was an amazing exhibition of musical energy--a large, dark, masculine lady, whose feet pounded the floor while her fingers pounded the keyboard--a perfect piece of African sculpture, animated by her own rhythm.²⁶

Yet at other times, Bentley's raucousness transformed into a performance that could be exceedingly moving, as indicated by Harlem schoolteacher Harold Jackman in a letter to poet Countee Cullen. Jackman remarked, "When Gladys sings 'Saint James Infirmary,' it makes you weep your heart out."²⁷

The contradictory descriptions of Bentley are typical of those who saw her perform. She seemed to exude a throbbing, primal Africanness that Hughes pinpoints, as well as a soul-stirring vocal delivery derived from spirituals and gospel music, and while costumed in the height of masculine deportment, she evoked images of Broadway elegance. And while writers like Hughes denoted her primitive, "jungle"-like qualities as the basis of her wide appeal, others described her sophistication, which she accentuated by her "immaculate white full dress shirts with stiff collars, small bow ties and skirts, oxfords, short Elton jackets and hair cut straight back."²⁸ In an interesting convergence of differing performance styles, she seemed to represent a clash of low and highbrow cultures in one body. Simultaneously, she signified both workingclass blues and genteel musical showmanship creating a fascinating display of mutable forms. This collision of high and lowbrow is evident in a blurb by columnist Marcus Wright, who wrote that "Gladys Bentley and her sophisticated group were seen in Jones's Bar and Grill on last Wednesday night. They solidly beat it up, and carried on."²⁹ Whether bringing an element of refinement to a bar and grill or a degree of lewdness to a "respectable" theatre, Bentley teased the limits of propriety with her volatile showmanship. For this reason, New York's cosmopolitan set was intrigued by this unpredictable young performer and curious spectacle, who one moment appeared to be the model of elegance and restraint, but then the next erupted into a fantastic display of blues and raunch.

According to Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, this continual metamorphosis is a defining feature of the trickster figure. "Creating her/himself out of fancy, farce, and finery," Smith-Rosenberg explains, "she tricks us into abandoning all that we know."³⁰ Bentley reiterated Harlem's promise that one really can transgress rigid racial, gender, and sexual norms.

And for audiences craving temporary escape from constraining middle-class morality, Bentley's merged styles and unpredictability epitomized the "porous membranes," to use Sally Munt's phrase, of conventional identity categories.³¹ Her masculinity was her salient characteristic and her chief mode of transgression. But Bentley's brand of masculinity was imbued with cross-cultural references, and they demonstrated the slipperiness of "authentic" forms. Gayle Rubin explains that "forms of masculinity are molded by the experiences and expectations of class, race, ethnicity, religion, occupation, age, subculture, and individual personality. National, racial and ethnic groups differ widely in what constitutes masculinity, and each has its own system for communicating and conferring 'manhood.'"³² Bentley's images of "manhood" signified on and conflated contradicting cultural paragons of masculinity. On one extreme, her raunchy, blues-inflected swagger pointed to black, working-class machismo. On the other, she cloaked this "mucho-macho" image in a costume and comportment that designated an "effeminate-masculinity," represented by the image of privileged upper-class sophistication (like the iconographic character Fred Astaire played in films, for example). As I will show later in this chapter, Bentley's performance demonstrated the complex cultural constructions associated with masculinity, and her performances occasioned new ways of defining gender and sexuality.

One of the first people to discover Bentley at this time was author and socialite Carl Van Vechten, who was intrigued by her unique, powerful performance. He religiously went to see her act at the Clam House between 1929 and 1930, and in his 1930 novel, Parties, he even included a reference to her, not by name, but clearly in the persona of a peculiar night club pianist. In the novel, one of the characters persuades another to go with him to Harlem, urging, "There's a girl up there now you oughta hear. She does her hair up so her head looks like a wet seal and when she pounds the piano the dawn comes up like thunder."³³ In truth, Van Vechten was enthralled by Bentley, and as evident in separate diary entries of 1929 through 1930, he saw her perform on nearly twenty different occasions at the Clam House and at private parties. In November 1929, for example, he

gave a cocktail party and supper for twelve, which included Cecil Beaton and Langston Hughes, and Bentley played piano, sang, and danced.³⁴ A few weeks later he saw her at a party thrown by blues singer Clara Smith, and then again at another party hosted by wealthy sophisticate Eddie Wasserman, and at which Van Vechten met Cole Porter.³⁵ According to gossip columnist Sobol, Van Vechten's appreciation for the singer even extended to his bestowing upon her a gift that would become her trademark, a white tuxedo.³⁶

Although Bentley mingled with the likes of Carl Van Vechten, Cole Porter, and Cecil Beaton, she was not simply the darling of the white upper crust. She also attracted a sizeable black following, first from her work as a blues recording artist and then as a headliner at Harlem's popular theatres. Because her performance of blues with a Broadway-style elegance confounded class categorization, she was at home both in society affairs and in Harlem rent parties, where she developed her act. As a result of her wide appeal, a recording contract seemed imminent. Her reputation as a singer had been cultivated via the rent party circuit and nightclub scene, and in 1928, record producers were willing to take a chance on banking on her distinctive voice. Soon after, she signed with an agent, and in 1928 and 1929, Bentley recorded for Okeh Race Records a total of eight sides (or what today would be called "singles." In this era of 78 RPM records, a singer would release two songs at a time, one on each side of the record). Bentley's records appear to have sold reasonably well (she claimed they had a "gratifying success" in her Ebony article³⁷), but unfortunately, Bentley's timing as Okeh's newest blues star was less than ideal. By the end of the 1920s, interest in black women blues artists was on the wane, and black men commanded the blues market in the 1930s.

Nevertheless, upon the release of her first four sides, including "Ground Hog Blues" and "Worried Blues," which were recorded on August 8, 1928, and "How Long--How Long Blues" and "Moanful Wailin' Blues," recorded August 31, 1928, Bentley established a place for herself among the pantheon of blues women, who dominated the

burgeoning black recording industry in the 1920s. As Angela Davis documents, hundreds of black women made records during this decade, and at the peak of this blues era, nearly all of the blues recording stars were women. "Between 1923 and 1926," she explains, "few men, aside from Papa Charlie Jackson, were signed up by Paramount and Columbia, the two major companies of that period."³⁸ From the outset, recorded blues was one of the few entertainment markets that was dominated by women performers. It was also one of the places where black women could publicly speak out against the social injustices they encountered on a daily basis. Because it was regarded as the most "authentically black" of musical forms, the blues remained the most marginalized music genre, and it was one of the few arenas that tolerated outspoken black women. Bentley's adaptability as a performer is particularly evident in the blues songs that she recorded for Okeh Records. While on stage and performing at parties she flaunted an image of a raunchy bulldagger, on record she immersed herself in the persona of a tough-talking heterosexual, black blues woman. And although her blues compositions and recordings articulated Bentley's "feminine" side, she remained a model of resistance against societal pressures to squelch social autonomy and sexual liberation based on prevalent attitudes around gender and race.

Bentley's success as a blues singer dovetails with the tradition established before she arrived on the entertainment scene. Music and cultural historians generally cite Mamie Smith (no relation to Bessie) as the matriarch of the blues woman legacy, when she became the first black singer to cut a blues record for a financially troubled, white run, recording studio named Okeh Phonograph Company, the same label under which Gladys Bentley later recorded. Smith recorded "That Thing Called Love" and "You Can't Keep a Good Man Down" in February 1920, and although the company marketed the releases with very little publicity, sales among black consumers were brisk. Okeh knew it had tapped into a potentially lucrative market, but it did not know the extent of its new find. Other record companies followed Okeh's lead and dipped into this surprisingly profitable "race market."

Columbia, RCA Victor, and Paramount wasted no time in signing and promoting black singers for their labels.

The new blues stars tended to be women, not, as Angela Davis points out, because women necessarily had more appeal for black audiences than male singers, but because of an unwillingness on the part of the record companies to gamble with the success they achieved at the beginning of the trend, which was ushered in by Mamie Smith. “Because the initial successes were with women’s blues,” Davis explains, companies believed that “only women could be successful recording artists.”³⁹ With the proliferation of blues records, the musical form quickly became shorthand for an authentic black performance style dating back to slavery. For as several ethnomusicologists and anthropologists have convincingly shown, the blues most likely emerged from slave work songs, shouts, and black spirituals. Jon Michael Spencer argues that it was a musical articulation of the struggles and obstacles that African Americans continually encountered in the United States.⁴⁰ And many regard the blues as an essentially, inimitable black form. W.C. Handy, who is regarded as the “Father of the Blues,” referred to the blues as the “Negro’s mother tongue.” And Amiri Baraka describes the form as one of the first indications of a truly “native American music,” and “the product of the black man [sic] in this country.”⁴¹ “Blues,” Baraka contends, “could not exist if the African captives had not become American captives.”⁴²

But according to Ann Douglas, one must be cautious in attempting to locate an “authentic” blackness in the blues. The form was influenced both by the effects of black oppression and white commodification. Douglas writes, “If their rhythms and vocal techniques, their call-and-answer patterns, were Negro and African in origin, their marketing and the needs from which they came were American and mongrel. Only blacks could have written the blues, but they could not have written them in an all-black world.”⁴³ Blacks were the primary consumers of blues records, and for the first time they were viewed as a viable marketing niche by white companies. But white record producers were

not alone in capitalizing on the popularity of blues women, or what Ann DuCille describes as "the feminization of the blues" and what she says soon became "the metonym for authentic blackness."⁴⁴ The creation and dissemination of the blues records in the 1920s reflects the complexity of propagating an ostensibly authentic black product.

In 1921, Black Swan Records, a black-owned and black-run company, countered the white commodification of the blues by entering the market with a recording by Ethel Waters. Because Waters had a much smoother sound (read: white) than the rough vocals of Bessie Smith and "Ma" Rainey (read: black), the Black Swan executives believed she would have more cross-over appeal for white and black middle-class audiences. Ironically, though, the fledgling company promoted the authentic "blackness" of their company, advertising heavily in national black papers with the motto: "The Only Genuine Colored Record--Others Are Only Passing."⁴⁵ Hence, the new recording technologies and a recognition of African Americans as consumers created an extensive demand for an "authentic" black musical tradition, and the era of "classic blues" was off to a rousing start. Although associated with putative blackness, the field, which was dominated by black women, was an important site for contesting oppression based on an individual's race, gender, and sexual orientation. Like the blues women who came before her, Gladys Bentley used the musical form to enunciate the anger, sorrows, and conflicting desires of black women, and her songs countered the common perception that black women were merely objects to be controlled, degraded, or looked down upon.

Classic blues, the name given to the blues of the 1920s, maintained the raw, improvisational characteristics of the forms of blues that evolved from its earliest incarnations, but it appropriated the smoothness of popular music and the professionalism of vaudeville entertainment. Furthermore, musicians, composers, and singers placed a greater emphasis on showmanship and theatricality than they had when they originally performed in small, private venues or homes. Baraka explains that blues-singing was no longer something one did merely as a hobby or as a release for pent-up rage, but in the

1920s it was something one could do for a "living." He writes, "An external and sophisticated idea of performance had come to the blues, moving it past the casualness of the 'folk' to the conditioned emotional gesture of the 'public.'"⁴⁶ In addition, even though the blues was generally regarded as an "authentic" black form, musically, it was already a hybrid form. As musicologists have shown, the blues evolved out of both African and Western music traditions.

Classic blues generally contain a twelve-bar, three-line, AAB construction, a structure somewhat different from the first blues songs. Very early blues seemed to have adapted elements of Western music traditions, most noticeably the English ballad form, which is comprised of eight, ten, or sixteen bars. But as Kathy Ogren points out, early blues songs "were also characterized by three-line stanzas that were probably an African-derived 'inner form.'"⁴⁷ The three-line stanza construction is an essential feature of most classic blues songs, contributing to the improvisational effect the blues retained in performance. This improvisational effect was an important aspect in the sense of community that the blues engendered. As Baraka explains, this aspect was a remnant from work songs, spirituals, shouts, and African "call-and-response" songs:

The shout as much as the African call-and-response singing dictated the form blues took. Blues issued directly out of the shout and, of course, the spiritual. The three-line structure of the blues was a feature of the shout. The first two lines of the song were repeated, it would seem, while the singer was waiting for the next line to come. Or, as was characteristic of the hollers and shouts, the single line could be repeated again and again, either because the singer especially liked it, or because he could not think of another line.⁴⁸

The features of the call-and-response contribute to the communal feature of the blues, and the feeling that the songs, even on a recording, are a shared composition by the singer and audience. That is, the repetition and call-and-response elements in the song are similar to

testifying during a preacher's sermon. Between the repeated lines, the performers seem to invite vocal replies from listeners and the affirmation of the "truths" contained in the lyrics. Even as recording technology forever changed the function and accessibility of the blues, the form did not lose its elemental ability to move its listeners.

The blues reflect the junctures of different performance traditions meeting and melding, and demonstrates the impossibility of locating a "fixed essence" of a black identity. For as Michel de Certeau explains in The Practice of Everyday Life (1988), this process of hybridization is how culture is formed. He writes, "[Culture] develops in an atmosphere of tensions, and often violence, for which it provides symbolic balances, contracts of compatibility and compromises, all more or less temporary."⁴⁹ But as Paul Gilroy also reminds, this does not preclude, nor summarily discount the strength or "realness" of that culture or identity. As Judith Butler also explains, identity is not something one can put on and take off at whim.⁵⁰ "Black identity," Gilroy explains, "is not simply a social and political category to be used or abandoned according to the extent to which the rhetoric that supports and legitimises it is persuasive or institutionally powerful."⁵¹ The blues offered a site where black identities could be tested and constructed. As Gilroy argues, the blues "can be interpreted both as a process of of identity construction and as an affirmation of racialised being at it is most intensely felt."⁵² The blues articulated common concerns among black people, who had been dispersed as a result of the Great Migration in the first few decades of the century. The images and themes were immediately recognizable to communities scattered across the United States.

The immediacy and frankness of the songs were popularly linked with an idyllic American folk. In Black Manhattan (1930), for instance, James Weldon Johnson referred to the blues songs of the 1920s as "folk-poetry," and he said that within the verses "very often there is the flash of lines that have great primitive beauty and power."⁵³ The simplicity of the images, use of the vernacular, and the emphasis on every day realities heightened the lyrical impact of the songs. Structurally, the form is somewhat more complex than is

immediately apparent. The repetition of the first line that is followed by, in Barry Singer’s words, “a third line that reflect[s] the first two in a release of the tension built by their repetition,”⁵⁴ contributes to the powerful effect the songs achieved. The blues writers and singers applied these poetic devices to clear, identifiable images. Lived experience, rather than flights of fancy and imaginative possibilities tended to be the source of the blues.

These qualities pervade Gladys Bentley’s blues songs. In “Wild Geese Blues,” for example, she establishes an underlying sense of foreboding by the use of repetition, which she couples with familiar, domestic images. The third line in each stanza, recapitulates the sense of loss and apprehension introduced in the first two.

Heard that lonesome music just about the break of day.

Heard that lonesome music just about the break of day.

Wash my feet in molasses tryin’ to keep bad luck away.

Threw my window open just to air these loves of mine.

Threw my window open just to air these loves of mine.

Groundhog saw his shadow, six more weeks of winter time.

Hard coal in my cellar, only got to shovel more.

Hard coal in my cellar, only got to shovel more.

Can’t get no more credit from butcher or the grocery store.⁵⁵

In each stanza, the singer presents an image of loneliness as a result of the presumed abandonment of a lover. But the lyric, unlike popular white songs of the day, is not grounded in the romantic pining of a lovelorn heroine or “*Lover Come Back To Me*” sentiments. Instead, Bentley’s images elicit a stark reality for an African-American woman suddenly confronted with independence. Feelings of love are fleeting and unimportant compared with the more serious questions of heating a home and buying food when one’s left with no more credit. As Daphne Duval Harrison explains, the desired effect of the blues

is to articulate the "agony and pain of life as experienced by blacks in America." She maintains, "Neither the intent nor the result is escape but, instead, the artistic expression of reality."⁵⁶ Yet this act of expression empowers and liberates the singer as well as the listener from the "blue" feelings voiced in the song.

"Wild Geese Blues" articulates several prominent themes often revisited in the blues. Particularly among the blues women, abandonment, loneliness, financial destitution, and uncertainty about the future are commonly evoked in the songs. But paradoxically, the blues do not reproduce a feeling of utter despair. As black novelist Richard Wright explains, "Though replete with a sense of defeat and down-heartedness, they are not intrinsically pessimistic; their burden of woe and melancholy is dialectically redeemed through sheer force of sensuality, into an almost exultant affirmation of life, of love, of sex, of movement, of hope."⁵⁷ That is, the act of articulating one's problem and expressing one's suffering through the blues, gives the individual power over life's torments. In other words, naming and identifying one's miseries releases the hold they have on the individual. In the case above, the singer of "Wild Geese Blues" declares her resilience by facing her bleak future squarely with what James Baldwin terms a characteristic black "toughness." "I want to suggest," Baldwin explains, "that the acceptance of this anguish one finds in the blues, and the expression of it, creates also, however odd this may sound, a kind of joy."⁵⁸ For this reason, the blues are transformative in purpose and intention. Although some critics have dismissed the blues as profane and irreverent, the songs provide the same function as gospel music: They potentially uplift and revive the spirit by overcoming the sorrowful conditions they address.

Unlike gospel music, though, which often looks toward the future and the promised rewards of one's suffering, the blues are generally rooted in the here and now. Blues songs are, as described by theologian James Cone, "secular spirituals." Cone explains:

They are secular in the same sense that they confine their attention solely to the immediate and affirm the bodily expression of black soul, including its sexual manifestations. They are spirituals because they are impelled by the same search for the truth of black experience.⁵⁹

Simultaneously, they are both profane and sacred. In Blues and Evil, Jon Michael Spencer traces the mythology and theology evident in the blues, and he compares blues singers to preachers. Both attempt to bring meaning to existential questions, provide guidance on how to live one's life, and expose hypocrisy and evil in one's midst. The difference lies in the subjects about which they sing. Spencer says that "while gospel singers and preachers extolled the glories of heaven, blues singers--as marginal Christians--explored present reality rarely with reference to Jesus Christ."⁶⁰ The reality of the blues consists of social, economic, and political issues that directly affect black people. For the blues women of the 1920s, as Cone implies, these were often articulated through their lived experiences based on their gender and sexuality.

Angela Davis convincingly argues that many of the songs of the blues women were forms of social and political protest. The blues provided one of the few arenas in which working-class black women could speak out against wide-spread injustice, such as prejudice, financial hardship, and domestic violence. Yet the songs were not mere grumblings or pitiable laments of perceived mistreatment, but they were powerful statements that gestured toward an emerging feminist sensibility and awareness. Writing about the music of "Ma" Rainey and Bessie Smith, for example, Davis writes that many of their songs "are certainly far more than complaint, for they begin to articulate a consciousness that takes into account social conditions of class exploitation, racism, and male dominance as seen through the lenses of the complex emotional responses of black female subjects."⁶¹ According to Davis, whether or not the songs provoked action from their female listeners would be purely speculative, but these songs were thoughtful treatises on previously undiscussed topics affecting black women. In the words of Elizabeth

Lopovsky Kennedy and Madeline Davis, the circumstances reflect a "realignment of the public and private" realms of these women.⁶² As women moved out of the confines of domestic spaces and into social spaces, their relationships were founded on "a dynamic interconnection between public socializing and personal intimacy."⁶³

Through their songs, the blues women sang about their own experiences and shoved these personal and private issues into the public discourse, and they demanded that people pay attention to them. As Lawrence Levine explains, "The blues was an inward-looking music which insisted upon the meaningfulness of black lives."⁶⁴ In fact, several of Gladys Bentley's songs squarely confronted domestic violence and exploitive relationships, two issues not generally discussed in public, while affirming a black woman's right to be sexually independent and responsible for her own choices.

In "How Much Can I Stand?" Bentley describes a woman whose male lover used to be attentive and caring, but who now treats her "like a darn stepchild." Although it is tempting to surmise that Bentley's songs arose from her aversion toward men (i.e. her "coldness and inability to respond" to passionate male advances), they contain many of the same characteristics of other blues songs by women of the era. Admittedly, many of these other women were also lesbians or maintained sexual and emotional attachments to other women, such as Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Alberta Hunter, but the unveiling of noxious heterosexual relationships was an integral part of the blues canon. When blues men sang about their relationships, for example, they often described cheating, lying, and sometimes physically harmful lovers as well. But what makes the songs of the blues women notable is their assertion of themselves as rational, complicated individuals, which went against the grain of popular images presented in musical shows and revues. As demonstrated in Chapter 4, black women were generally presented as exotic, sexualized objects, who were all body with no intellect. In many of the blues songs, black women are represented as complex, conflicted human beings.

In "How Much Can I Stand?" Bentley charts the emotional growth of the singer as she moves from complete dependence on a man, to contemplation of suicide as a result of his physical and psychological abuse, to sexual and emotional autonomy of the woman as she declares that she will not fall into the same pattern again.

I've got a man I've loved all the while,
 But now he treats me like a darn stepchild,
 How much of that stuff can I stand?
 One time he said my sugar was oh, so sweet,
 But now for his dessert he goes across the street
 How much of that stuff can I stand?
 Said I was an angel, he was born to treat me right,
 Who the devil heard of an angel that gets beat up every night?
 How much of that stuff can I stand?
 Went down to the drugstore, asked the clerk for a dose,
 But when I received the poison, I eyed it very close,
 How much of this stuff can I stand?
 The next man I get must be guaranteed,
 When I walk down the aisle, you're gonna hear me scream,
 How much of this stuff can I stand?"⁵

The lyric represents a process of self-realization as the singer first recognizes her predicament and then takes action against it. While she initially thinks that her best option is to take a dose of poison (or perhaps give it to her cheating, abusive lover), the singer decides against this and announces her determination to continue to love, but on her own terms. She will no longer be victimized by men, and she will make this clear at the beginning of her next relationship.

Only in the last few decades has domestic violence been a subject which people have talked about openly, but this was not an uncommon topic in the women's blues songs

of the 1920s. For example, Bentley sang about a "daddy," who "wouldn't treat me right" in her "Moanful Wailin' Blues."⁶⁶ In "Blood Hound Blues," Victoria Spivey sings about escaping from prison after poisoning her abusive lover, lamenting, "I know I've done wrong, but he beat me and blacked my eye./ But if the blood hounds don't get me, in the electric chair I'll die."⁶⁷ And Bessie Smith's "Outside of That" describes a man, who although she claims, "blackened my eye," and "knocked out both my teeth," she contends, "outside of that, he's all right with me." Similarly, Ma Rainey sang "Black Eye Blues" about a woman who resolutely says that she will "hang around" even as her man beats her and cheats on her, but she waits for the day when she gets revenge after catching him with his "britches down."⁶⁸

Often times, the women in the songs choose to remain in the abusive situations, but nevertheless, there is a sense of empowerment in giving voice to the mistreatment. Rather than cloaking the issue in silence, as violence against women was typically handled, the lyrics address and identify the violence in the relationship and show that the women have made deliberate choices surrounding it. Sometimes the choice is treated ironically, such as in Bentley's "Big Gorilla Man," in which the man is abusive, but nevertheless provides sexual satisfaction:

That big gorilla, a woman killa'.
 And I ought to know.
 He mistreats me, knocks and beats me.
 Still I love him so.
 'Cause he's got that something that I need so bad.⁶⁹

In any case, by articulating the violent domestic conditions and taking responsibility for their own decisions, the singers subverted the power of that cultural silence, giving them subjectivity and agency that was so often denied them in the public sphere. This communal enunciation of self-understanding is in itself, according to many black feminists, a form of social and political protest. As Sydné Mahon explains, "The very act of a black woman

telling her story, speaking her truth, can be perceived as an act of resistance to oppression."⁷⁰ Indeed, the blues was a potent site for countering what Michele Wallace describes as "the lethal global presupposition (which is unconscious) in the dominant discourse that women of color are incapable of describing, much less analyzing, reality, or their place in their world."⁷¹ Armed with their own lyrical and musical powers, Gladys Bentley and other blues women of the 1920s forcefully spoke to and for women of color about the necessity of sharing their stories with the larger communities.

"Telling their stories" wasn't the only way in which blues women reached out to their listeners. In addition to reflecting an individual's process of self-discovery and sharing that heightened consciousness with their listeners, these singers often spoke directly to their assembled (while at a live performance) or separated (while listening to records) audiences. Sometimes singers would "preach" the blues, offering guidance and warnings based on their own experiences. These "advice songs," as Angela Davis terms them, more importantly contributed to the sense of community that the blues evoked. While singing about familiar concerns and everyday struggles, writes Levine, the blues women simultaneously accentuated "individual expression and group coherence."⁷² When singing about male-female relations, for instance, the singers often challenged men for their actions and counseled women on how to recognize "warning signs" in a relationship and what to do if a male lover treats them poorly. Gladys Bentley employed this form to powerful effect in her 1928 song, "Worried Blues."

While "How Much Can I Stand?" presents a black woman's own emotional journey, Bentley's "Worried Blues" offers a defiant rejoinder to men who lure women with their charms and then take advantage of them. The song is unusual because of its shifting audience focus. Blues songs tend to be directed at a core group, whether this is an implied black male and female community, or just male listeners, or just female listeners. In "Worried Blues," the singer, as a preacher might in front of a mixed congregation, addresses both men and women while weaving personal narrative into the guidance. For

example. the singer begins by admonishing men for the shabby way in which they treat women. In her characteristic deep, resonant voice, Bentley sang:

What make you men folk treat us women like you do?

What make you men folk treat us women like you do?

I don't want no man that I got to give my money to.

Although most of the song is pointed toward men, the song shifts focus to a recounting of the singer's own experiences with a male lover and her exploitation by him. Yet similar to "How Much Can I Stand?" the song presents an attitude of defiance against the no-good man. She sings:

Give my man everything from a diamond ring or dough.

Give my man everything from a diamond ring or dough.

The next thing I'm gonna' give him six feet in the cold, cold ground.

Later, she speaks directly to women and advises them to resist the romantic pull that certain men have:

You can never tell what an old, old man can do.

You can never tell what an old, old man can do.

Keep your eyes open, girls, 'cause he'll put that thing on you.

The composite representation evoked from these stanzas is an extraordinary image that flies in the face of conventional representations of black women. Bentley's chastisement to men, her counsel for others based on personal experience, and her refusal to support a man prefigures a model of an emotionally, sexually, and financially independent African-American woman.

This effect is increased by Bentley's performance of the song on record. Her rumbling vocal delivery, pounding piano-playing, and understated threats of violence indicate that she offers an unyielding and stalwart challenge to male dominance.

Incidentally, the singer's stated plan for murdering her lover in this song would not have struck blues listeners as particularly grisly or out of place. Actually, as implicit in the songs

dealing with domestic violence, death threats, suicide attempts, and other acts of violence are frequently alluded to in the blues. Usually the acts are not carried out, but they further convey James Baldwin's definition of black "toughness" that Bentley and other blues women represented. Paul Oliver explains that the preponderance of violence in these songs "is probably indicative of one of the functions of blues--to bolster confidence by emphasizing assertiveness and unwillingness to submit to repression."⁷³ Coupled with the violent images, Bentley's own vocal "toughness" heightens this effect. In true blues fashion, she "shouts" most of the lyrics, vocally stressing the beats of the music rather than fluidly "singing" the notes as one typically would with a Broadway melody. Her obstinacy is further conveyed by her piercing and defiant trumpet-like vocal pyrotechnics in the song's musical breaks.

As indicated earlier, normally the breaks between the repeated lines in blues songs prompted replies from the audience, which probably evolved from the African call-and-response. The sense of community the blues engendered was a result of this interaction. As Patricia Hill Collins, a black feminist sociologist, explains, the call-and-response is a principal feature of "Afrocentric feminist epistemology." She writes, "Composed of spontaneous verbal and nonverbal interaction between speaker and listener in which all of the speaker's statements, or 'calls,' are punctuated by expressions, or 'responses,' from the listener, this black discourse mode pervades African American culture."⁷⁴ The form encourages everyone in the community to participate in the formation and experimentation of these ideas. As blues recordings became more prevalent, singers began to fill in these breaks with their own vocalized responses, such as affirmative utterances or improvised dialogue. The singer, substituting herself for the "live" listeners, attempted to recreate the theatrical experience on record. From a performance standpoint, the singer models and stands in for her "ideal" community. The recorded "audiences" of these songs, which were "performed" by the singer herself, represented communities that were unstintingly

supportive and appreciative of the views expressed by these black women. effects most likely rarely achieved in live performance.

But Gladys Bentley used these breaks differently in her own songs. In many of her recordings, most prominently displayed in "Worried Blues," she fills each break with a trumpet-like "scatting" that seems to preclude response and group participation. Because much of the song is directed toward men, they are her intended audience. Rather than allow them a chance to respond to her indictment, the high-pitched sounds seem in effect to drown out possible male detractors or defensive listeners. Therefore, in a rare cultural inversion, Bentley not only--to use Michele Wallace's metaphor--fills the assumed "black hole of feminist creativity"⁷⁵ with her voiced objections to male exploitation, but she effectively silences those who might silence her. Although the blues generally stressed community and shared responses to personal and universal concerns, "Worried Blues" is a potent protest against perceived notions of black women as submissive, uncomplicated, and repressed. In the 1920s, Bentley and the other "queens," "empresses," and "world's best singers" (as they were so often individually billed) stood in opposition to bourgeois notions of black femininity, and they dared to demand deference from those who were not used to seeing black women as self-reliant, out-spoken, and autonomous. In a further assault on male dominance, many of these singers also demonstrated that men were not always needed to fulfill a woman's sexual desires either.

"Lord, How I Adored It"

In addition to providing a space for articulating black women's struggle for societal parity and respect, many blues songs also candidly addressed lesbianism and bisexuality. The forthrightness around these issues further confirmed black women's claim for independence and their declaration of self-sufficiency. The songs detailing the exploits of "bulldyers," as they were referred to, boldly presented other sexual options contrary to an enforced, heterosexual life plan. Their performances forcefully confronted archetypal

images of women’s roles as mothers, wives, and “chippies,” and they contested the black community’s ingrained homophobia. In public and on-stage, Gladys Bentley and other “B.D. Women,” as Lucille Bogan succinctly described tough-talking, masculine-acting, and whiskey-drinking women, exposed the restraints of cultural expectations pertaining to middle-class morality, conventional femininity, and compulsory heterosexuality.

Because the depiction of openly homosexual behavior was punishable by law in New York State, Gladys Bentley was in many ways a true sexual outlaw. She was one of the only openly lesbian performers of the time, and although this fact probably contributed to her sizeable following, she ran the risk of arrest and prosecution. As Elizabeth Drorbaugh documents, the institution of Will Hays’s Hollywood Motion Picture Production Code in 1933, which prohibited allusions to “sexual perversion or any inference of it,” drastically reduced the number of cross-dressed performers in the popular theatre. As she explains, “The feared conflation of (homo)sexuality with gender impersonation caused male impersonation to seemingly evaporate.”⁷⁶ The fact that Gladys Bentley did not incur legal difficulties most likely had to do with the marginalization of her public and private performances. The containment and recognition of the ghetto assures a certain amount of security, providing the indecorous behavior remains within it.

Paul Oliver theorizes that homosexuality may have been more common in Harlem of the 1920s and early 1930s than in white communities because of the living conditions in which black people lived. He contends, “In the overcrowded northern ghettos its incidence tended to increase as did all others, through the lack of privacy, the ease of soliciting, the difficulties inherent in maintaining social order when young and old, male and female, criminal and virtuous were thrown into close and unavoidable contact.”⁷⁷ Oliver’s out-dated (and homophobic) implications that homosexuality resulted from solicitation, social disorder, and criminal corruption notwithstanding, his point that it was a civic reality in Harlem is important. Working class people in Harlem usually, as Sandra Lieb explains, handled the issue with reticence and quiet disapproval.⁷⁸ But as was typical

of the blues women, they countered this silence with candor, humor, and recalcitrance. In songs such as “BD’s Dream,” a rent party standard, Ma Rainey’s “Prove It On Me Blues,” and Lucille Bogan’s “B.D. Women’s Blues,” lesbianism was publicly and unapologetically proclaimed.

The most famous and the most familiar of these songs is Ma Rainey’s “Prove It On Me Blues.” Recorded in 1928, “Prove It On Me Blues” is sung from the point of view of a woman who dresses in “a collar and tie” and can “talk to the gals just like any old man.” Yet even as the singer flaunts her lesbian appearance and mannerisms (Rainey’s own attraction to women was well-known), she defies anyone to prove her sexual preference. Insolently undermining the visual codes that publicly, to paraphrase Alisa Solomon, announces her “desire through [her] appearance,” the singer reveals that one’s performance does not always reveal the essence of her being.⁸⁰ In “Prove It On Me Blues,” the singer’s comportment, costume, and accoutrements of a bulldyker are not necessarily proof that she is one. She sings:

They said I do it, ain’t nobody caught me
 Sure got to prove it on me
 Went out last night with a crowd of my friends
 They must’ve been women, ‘cause I don’t like no men.⁸¹

In this song the black lesbian is characterized as both a threatening and admirably rebellious figure. Simultaneously obvious and hidden, public and private, she is a sexual desperado tauntingly floating between genders. The singer is deliberately evasive, because to her, sexual desire is a matter of personal choice. Nevertheless, she rebukes a culture that is intolerant of this lifestyle. As Hazel Carby writes, this song “vacillates between the subversive hidden activity of women loving women [and] a public declaration of lesbianism.”⁸¹ Yet the singer’s bravado also summons veneration from her listeners due to her outright challenge to authoritarian principles. As Leib, Carby, Davis, and Lillian Faderman explain in connection with this song, this quality would have been particularly

meaningful to black listeners. Faderman writes that the singer's "outlaw" quality "makes her a bit of a culture hero in an oppressed community." That is, even though the B.D. woman is essentially antithetical to traditional morality, Faderman argues that "the black audience is forced to identify with her because she and they understand stigmatization."⁸² "Prove It On Me Blues" serves as a model of resistance against stereotypical representations that attempt to define individuals by appearance, mannerisms, and associations.

Angela Davis convincingly argues that "Prove It On Me Blues" reflects "how the iconoclastic blues women of the twenties were pioneers for later historical developments."⁸³ She sees the song and others like it as forerunners of the cultural movement of the 1970s in which lesbians publicly proclaimed their identities. In their history of a working-class lesbian bar culture in Buffalo of the 1940s and 1950s, Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy and Madeline Davis claimed, "It is our guess that [Harlem's] powerful [lesbian] culture was formative for working-class lesbian culture for the rest of the century."⁸⁴ Other songs of the Harlem Renaissance also seem to foreshadow the emergence of a radical feminism in which singers touted lesbianism as preferable to heterosexuality. In Lucille Bogan's "B.D. Women's Blues" (which she recorded as Bessie Jackson), men are represented as dispensable in their roles as both sexual partners and monetary supporters. In fact, Faderman reads a "subversive statement" in Bogan's "B.D. Women's Blues," and she detects a degree of "lesbian pride in its listing of lesbian competencies."⁸⁵ The song contains the following lyric:

Comin' a time, B.D. womens ain't gonna need no men.

Comin' a time, B.D. womens ain't gonna need no men.

The way they treat us is a lowdown and dirty sin.⁸⁶

Claiming that B.D. women "walk just like a natural man" and "they sure is rough," the song also indicates that although B.D. women "work and make their dough," "when they get ready to spend it, they have no place to go." On one level the song humorously reminds

men that they had better treat women more correctly because they are replaceable with other women. On another level, the lyric also points to black women's growing economic liberation from men. B.D. women offer a visibly potent reminder to men that male dominance is purely provisional.

Gladys Bentley's blues songs do not directly address desire for other women, nor do they explicitly refer to bulldykes. But like "Prove It On Me Blues" and "B.D. Women's Blues," Bentley's "Worried Blues," "How Much Can I Stand," and "Moanful Wailin' Blues" present images of self-sufficient, self-assured, and independent women, who are fed up with male abuse and lechery. Yet Bentley's bulldyking image comes across in other ways on her recordings. Her deep voice and heavy-handed piano-playing (Wilbur Young referred to her "hamlike mitts" pounding the keyboard⁸⁷) added to the masculine persona she evoked in performance. She combined with her rather standard blues lyrics a raw, boorish, but also somewhat mischievous, style that seemed to be at odds with the dignified, refined image she cultivated in Harlem's most popular clubs and theatres. These apparent contradictions and unpredictability of Bentley's musical, theatrical, and everyday conduct contributed to her status as one of Harlem's most prominent sexual outlaws.

While other lesbian and bisexual performers such as Ethel Waters, Ma Rainey, and Jackie Mabley did not publicly flaunt their sexuality, or at least dared others to "prove it on them," Bentley made it an essential part of her early career. Both on stage and off, she was the epitome of masculine swagger and braggadocio. Although she was sometimes referred to as a male impersonator, a term she used to describe herself in the Ebony article, in modern-day language, Bentley would more appropriately be called a "butch lesbian." The definition of this term is quite broad, and may in fact include, as Alisa Solomon points out, drag kings, transsexuals, and "soft butches."⁸⁸ But differing from the traditional male impersonator in the popular theatre, Gladys Bentley did not try to "pass" as a man, nor did she playfully try to deceive her audience into believing she was biologically male. Instead, she at all times called attention to a "black female masculinity," to use Judith Halberstam's

terminology, that she exuded in her theatrical and everyday performances. The titillating pleasure that Bentley seemed to provide (and derive) was her blurring of culturally concretized demarcations between gender, race, and class. The excessiveness of Bentley's persona, which included her weight, bawdiness, and manliness, flagrantly violated acceptable notions of femininity. Yet Bentley's exaggerated performance destabilized the conventional identity roles assigned within the binaries of black/white, woman/man, and homo-/heterosexual and reflected the possibility of, in Marjorie Garber's words, a "category crisis."⁸⁹

Many feminist theorists contend that the destabilization of the categories of identity requires an overturning of the way in which cultural binaries, such as masculinity and femininity, are imagined. Femininity is associated with subservience and weakness, while "masculinity in this society," Halberstam writes, "inevitably conjures up notions of power and legitimacy and privilege; it often symbolically refers to the power of the state and to uneven distributions of wealth."⁹⁰ Femininity, therefore, is associated with "lack," "deficient," and "negative." Some theorists contend that female sexuality can only disrupt this binary by mimicking traditional images of women in an effort to show the constructedness of the identity categories. Teresa de Lauretis, for instance, argues that this is possible by applying an "excessiveness" in presentation. Citing Elaine Marks, she says, "that to undomesticate the female body one must dare reinscribe it in excess--as excess--in provocative counterimages sufficiently outrageous, passionate, verbally violent and formally complex to both destroy the male discourse on love and redesign the universe."⁹¹ To de Lauretis and others, an "excessive" representation of masculinity is the hallmark of the male impersonator or the butch lesbian that mimic cultural codes of manhood. The often exaggerated appropriation of masculine codes, sometimes to the point of passing as a man, reflect the social construction, or in Butler's language, "performativity," of those classifications.

On one level, the argument is convincing. Parody and mimicry, as I have discussed in earlier chapters, are useful tools in dismantling claims to authenticity. The performance methods provide potential for disrupting identity categories by highlighting the gaps between them. But as Halberstam persuasively shows, these tools can also be counterproductive in examining the historical butch figure, or to use Esther Newton’s useful term, “the mythic mannish lesbian.”⁹² The central problem with looking at the butch lesbian as a parodic figure is that it reduces her to a mere copy of that which already occupies a space of power. Taking on de Lauretis’s Freudian analysis of the mannish lesbian Stephen Gordon in Radclyffe Hall’s The Well of Loneliness, Halberstam says that to read Gordon’s masculinity as a compensation for her lack of femininity is “counterintuitive.” Halberstam writes, “I want to resist such a reading vigorously because I believe it confirms the most conservative attempts to shore up the essential and historical relations between masculinity and men and condemns masculine women once more to the pathos of male mimicry.”⁹³ Halberstam argues that instead of looking at the butch lesbian as an inferior copy of men, one should examine them as having their own “specific histories.”⁹⁴ Rather than a parody of a culturally inscribed definition of maleness, the butch lesbian comprises “multiple” masculinities, and rather than perceiving her as “lacking” femininity and *real* masculinity, the butch shows the possibility of “gender variance,” or “female masculinity.”

Like the trickster figure, the butch lesbian points to the falsity behind cultural beliefs. As Joan Nestle explains, the butch expresses the insufficiency of two gender categories.⁹⁵ Similarly, Halberstam writes that the power of the butch on stage or screen is in her “courageous attempt to move butchness in particular from loss and lack into extravagance and presence.”⁹⁶ Bentley’s appearances in the 1920s through the mid-1930s enabled a similar re-reading of the way categories are solidified. Rather than calling attention to her “lack” of maleness, whiteness, or class, she posited an—and here I find de Lauretis’s term useful—“excess” at the junctures of her identity categories. The excesses did

not come across as merely camp parody, but revealed the proliferation of social signifiers on her body.

Bentley's assault on social conventions was particularly evident in her nightclub and theatrical appearances in Harlem in which she undermined essentialist notions of gender, race, and sexuality. The most obvious way in which she represented "excess" was in her overabundant corporeality. Her weight was one of her prominent features, and critics often distinguished her by it. For instance, Wilbur Young begins his biographical sketch, "Huge voluptuous chocolate colored Gladys Bentley," and later compares her to "an overstuffed beer barrel."⁹⁷ One critic quipped about one of her theatrical performances that she and her enormous bulk "threaten[ed] the floor by tap dancing--a little."⁹⁸ Various referred to as the "ample," "buxom," "portly," "large and ungainly" Gladys Bentley, she reversed the stereotype of the ideal woman as frail, or at the very most shapely (à la Mae West). Bentley was a hyperbolic response to the black woman representing the "world's body,"⁹⁹ and she resisted and subverted the Freudian notion of woman as lack. Her extreme physical presence was the opposite of deficient: it was a sign of surplus.

In addition, she effectively applied the excess of her racial identity to her songs. The mostly white audiences who frequented the Clam House, for example, expected to hear jazz, blues, and "hot" songs performed by black entertainers. In short, they wanted an "authentic" black experience in a faux African or southern environment. A 1925 guidebook explained that Harlem was a great place for New Yorkers "to observe the antics of members of its enormous [N]egro population, many of whom show great ability in song, dance and comedy performance." He added that black people's "unfailing sense of rhythm, their vocal quality, something primitive, animal-like and graceful movements, combine to make their performances interesting to all who can put racial prejudice out of their minds."¹⁰⁰ With delicious mockery, however, Bentley parodied the notion that music stems from an essentialized racial source by exaggerating and amplifying aspects of the sexually charged "black" blues and the demure, romantic "white" ballads. Her mixture of the

characteristically raw, working-class music with the melodic, middle-class exposed the two forms as cultural products rather than authentically racial.

None of these parodies were recorded, most likely because they far exceeded the bounds of decency, but also because to record them would violate copyright laws. One of the lyrics, a lampoon on "Sweet Georgia Brown" and "My Alice Blue Gown," familiar Broadway showtunes of the day, survives. Fusing and enhancing the original lyrics, Bentley's version became a tribute to anal sex:

And he said, "Dearie, please turn around"

And he shoved that big thing up my brown.

He tore it. I bored it. Lord, how I adored it.

My sweet little Alice Blue Gown.¹⁰¹

Although reactions to the version are not available, it seems fairly clear why such a song would be the catalyst for a raid of the club, an effect that according to Wilbur Young Bentley's performances often had.

The song has much in common with the blues women songs of the 1920s. Similar to the women who ironically sang about loving the men who blackened their eyes and knocked out their teeth, the singer's enjoyment of the violent sexual act is a means of taking responsibility for their sexual choices. Bentley's "Sweet Alice Blue Gown" is not defeated by the man's mutilation, but empowered. In this version of the popular standard, the woman is not a fetishized object of male attention, but the one receiving the erotic pleasure. Rather than articulating an incidence of rape or victimization, the performer seizes sexual agency by exclaiming the pleasure the act has given her. The song also calls attention to the cultural assumptions regarding race and class. The reference to her "brown," for example, takes on a several meanings. While referring to her anus, the term alternately signifies the reduction of black women to their skin color and sexual parts, and a symbol of what Michele Wallace explains as the historic representation of an African-American woman as a "black hole." Similarly, her description of the penis as "that big

thing" elicits familiar stereotypes and the association of African-American men with their genitalia. Furthermore, Bentley effectively parodies the notion of black primal sexuality by framing it in the context of a wholesome "white" song. In terms of class, the lyric, linked with middle-class gentility, attacks the white male tender love ballad form. Bentley turns the convention on its head with her grotesque and scatological (read "low-class") rendering. More significantly, however, the song works on another level to challenge compulsory heterosexuality.

In comparison to a recent performance that also called attention to a woman's anus, Lynda Hart's analysis of Karen Finley's defunding by the NEA, examines the furor aroused by Finley's "Yams Up My Granny's Ass." Hart explains, "Finley's discretion was thus not only a violation of the 'purity' of womanhood, but also a willful crossing over into a domain that has been preserved for gay men in homophobic discourse." As demonstrated by the public outcry over the performance, this unnatural act produced anxiety over a culturally "unnatural sexuality." Hart says, "By rendering public what is necessarily privatized in order to uphold the reign of the phallus, Finley's emphasis on anality created strong associations with (male) homosexuality and thereby also constituted an attack on heterosexual supremacy."¹⁰² In a similar way, Bentley made public the most private of all body parts, calling attention to the zone aligned with filth and excess (i.e., waste or excrement). By performing the song in men's clothing, she also registered a direct affinity to male homosexuality. Dressed in a tuxedo, she framed the activity as occurring between two men, and the pleasure the performer seemed to derive from the sexual act made the attack on heterosexual supremacy that much more direct. In fact, one of the most controversial features of Bentley's act were her allusions to homosexuality, which playfully wreaked havoc with assumptions around masculinity and femininity.

This aspect of Bentley's performance was especially evident in her nightclub floorshows in the early to mid-1930s. As a result of her shocking persona and often lewd material, she remained a marginalized theatre performer. Her act would have been

considered indecent for Broadway, which would have garnered her much more attention than she earned in the peripheries of Harlem. This marginalization most likely accounts for her relative obscurity today. In addition, nearly all of the reviews of her shows came from black newspapers, which limited her publicity. Nevertheless, her taboo material had toned down considerably when she was playing Harlem's larger theatres and clubs, but Bentley's power to shock was still strongly apparent. In 1934, for example, Bentley was a headline attraction at the Kings Terrace nightclub in Harlem, where she was the centerpiece of a musical revue. In April of that year, the show transferred to the Lafayette Theatre where it played for a limited engagement of a week. A publicity photo for the show depicts Bentley wearing her immaculately tailored white tuxedo standing suavely behind a group of kneeling black men in sailor suits, who are described as "the six 'Favorites of the King.'" ¹⁰³ The billing plays on the familiar drag king/queen nomenclature, but it also amusingly, and not so subtly, points to the blatant homosexual content of the act. The picture of the sailor chorus surely was a reference to the gay subculture, which transformed New York's waterfront into a legendary homosexual cruising spot. For gay men, the sailor on-leave was a symbol of masculine eroticism, pent-up sexuality, and rough trade. And as George Chauncey explains, the sailor "served for generations as the central masculine icon in gay figure pornography." ¹⁰⁴ But the slick, professional quality of the publicity photo and its presentation of respectable theatricality undermines and obscures the mischievous, yet surely intentional, gay coding of the picture.

Even still, the picture is an ingenious inversion of traditional images of power. The photo's exaggeration of familiar social divisions creates a possibility for what Jill Dolan calls a "limitless revisioning of a reality that has been hampered by strict gender and sexual roles" and shows these classifications as cultural constructs. ¹⁰⁵ The photo, with its posed black subjects all wearing white costumes, looks like a reversed negative of reality, and it depicts the figurative overturning of racial, sexual, and economic conventions for which Bentley was known. Class and racial hierarchies are switched as the role of the "King."

dressed in the finery usually associated with dapper, wealthy, and white men, is "performed" here by a black woman. She poses regally behind her six submissive, and desired (they are, after all, her "favorites") sailors, who usually occupy the position of power in the gay sexual fantasy. But the form of desire being addressed in this picture is perplexing. What and whom is being desired is not clear. The "King" is referred to in the caption as "Miss Bentley," so perhaps the photo recapitulates a heterosexual model of desire (although the conventional power binary is reversed). But the framing of the "King" with his (her?) six "favorite" sailors also suggests the possibility of a homosexual model. The conjectural quality is indicative of the subversive spirit Bentley's shows evoked.

The homosexual content may have been coded in advertisements for this, Bentley's first show in a Harlem proscenium house, but it was not at all subtle in performance. Vere Johns mockingly referred to the revue as a "'fairy' good show," but he was actually quite put-off by the production's speculative gender representations and the allusions to their "perverse" sexuality. He wrote:

A large and ungainly woman (if I may say so), who cuts her hair and dresses in tuxedos and calls herself Gladys Bentley, albeit that her troupe of six refer to her as a "gorgeous man" is supposed to be the headline attraction at the Lafayette this week. And she refers to her six boys as 'fellows' and then apologizes to them for so doing. As a matter of fact if these boys were put into dresses they would be indistinguishable from the chorines. I, personally, could not enjoy their part of the show as I had a burning desire to rush out and get an ambulance backed up against the stage door to take them all to Bellevue for the alienists to work on.¹⁶⁶

Perhaps what was most unsettling about Bentley's act for this critic, was the indeterminacy of the performers' genders. Unlike a drag show where the actors attempt to fully embody the characteristics of the opposite sex, in this act the performers themselves seem to exist in a perpetual in-between state. Rather than appropriating and hiding behind the recognizable

characteristics of masculinity and femininity (as drag kings and queens do). Bentley and her chorus boys--to use a metaphor by Alisa Solomon--"put quotation marks around" these social conventions. With their own confusion over identity and their frequent pronoun corrections, Bentley called attention to the hoariness of these conventions, and she highlighted the theatricality of gender construction.

As many feminist theorists have convincingly shown in the last several years, the potential subversiveness of drag performance is its ability to show that gender is in itself a limiting performance. By manipulating the conventional images of gender, and by "putting on" one gender over another, the performer calls attention to the symbols or style of the identity, rather than the "truth" behind it. The ability to manipulate these marks of masculinity or femininity undermines the authenticity or essence of the dual gender system. Queer and feminist theorists contend that this issue is at the root of the anxiety that drag performance may cause. Judith Butler explains in her foundational analysis that "the parodic repetition of gender" effectively "exposes the illusion of gender identity as an intractable depth and inner substance." She contends, "As the effects of a subtle and politically enforced performativity, gender is an 'act,' as it were, that is open to splittings, self-parody, self-criticism, and those hyperbolic exhibitions of the 'natural' that, in their very exaggeration, reveal its fundamentally phantasmatic status."¹⁰⁷

But as Esther Newton explains, drag can have an opposite effect as well. While it may interrogate the performance of gender, drag performance may also show the conformity to the system. She says that "by endowing a biological female with a masculine self," the mannish lesbian sometimes "both questions the inevitability of traditional gender categories *and* assents to it."¹⁰⁸ As Halberstam indicates, in the case of the butch lesbian, her masculinity should not be read as one that imitates or derives from men. "A popular misunderstanding of lesbian butchness," Halberstam says, "depicts it as either an appropriation of dominant male masculinity or an instance of false consciousness in which the butch lacks strong models of lesbian identity."¹⁰⁹ Bentley's own brand of masculinity

cannot be said to be a conscious imitation of a white male ideal. As clear from her blues records, Bentley did not disavow her "feminine" side in an attempt to pass as a man. Her "female masculinity" was a complicated, but wholly unique quality unto herself. I would argue that this aspect of her performance made her particularly compelling (and threatening to some). Shane Phelan also argues that the butch cannot be reduced to a parody of a masculine ideal. Phelan argues, "Butchness is imbricated in the same performative fabric within which late moderns of every stripe negotiate their lives: it is neither the expression of a true essence, nor a voluntary 'performance,' nor a compulsory production. It is a mode of being in Western societies that is consistently contentious."¹¹⁰ Rather than hide behind images of an ostensibly superior male gender, she forced her audiences to consider the possibility of at least another category.

Through the mid-1930s, Bentley remained a popular performer while teasing the limits of decorum in her act. She became a fixture at the Ubangi Club (which was formerly Connie's Inn and was located in the basement of the Lafayette Theatre), where she headlined for an impressive four years, often with Jackie Mabley and bandleader Willie Bryant. At the Ubangi Club, Bentley starred in revues built around her formidable reputation and talents, including "High, Wide and Handsome" (1936) and "Round the World in Swing Tempo" (1937).¹¹¹ In 1934, one columnist reported that she was a huge hit with the crowd and "solidly breaking them down" with her risqué entertainment, and in 1936, the New York Post reported that she was bringing the house down with her rendition of "The Devil Trucks His Rounds."¹¹² She continued to annoy some critics, who often found her act offensive, but her popularity with audiences could not be denied. About her Ubangi Club show that transferred to the Apollo Theatre in 1936, a critic from the Age wrote that Bentley was still plying her sexually-laden songs to the audience's acclaim:

You know what Gladys Bentley does, something suggestive as usual.

Somehow, I've never learned to appreciate her work but that doesn't stop

her from being a prime favorite with the mob. After all, how much do I know?"¹¹³

Later in the same year when she returned to the Apollo, the same critic wrote dismissively, "Ample Gladys Bentley, who is as much part of the Ubangi Club as the scenery, delivers a couple of those songs that have come to be identified with her, dual meaning lyrics that really have only one."¹¹⁴

Her double entendre and language play was a central feature of her act, which she extended to her billing. She sometimes poked fun at typically regal star designations by adopting appellations that went counter to her performance. For instance, when her Ubangi Club show played the Harlem Opera House, she appeared in her familiar white tux, and although she never played Broadway, she went under the billing, "Broadway's Queen of Song and Jazz." Around town she was also popularly known as "'La' Bentley," causing one critic to remark on the confusing gendered article, implying that it might more appropriately be "Le."¹¹⁵ Yet by consistently undermining gender identifications, Bentley derided the entire system. By applying feminine titles to herself, she made them look ridiculous and inappropriate. Her mockery of traditional billings that were assigned to popular performers highlighted her disassociation from those conventions. She called attention to the conventions themselves, and she reflected what Solomon describes as the transgressive power of the butch:

Thus the butch reveals the conventions of masculinity while at the same time her self-presentation allows the possibility of femininity, the role she is refusing, to be inferred. That's why she is so intolerable: at once the butch demonstrates the choice she's refusing and claims the ground she can't have.¹¹⁶

The intolerability of Bentley's performance for some critics is evident by the incendiary responses her act sometimes evoked. She brazenly taunted the limits of respectability even as she wore, in her white tuxedo, the affects of that respectability.

Off-stage. Bentley sustained her assault on propriety with as much aggressiveness. Wilbur Young, writing in 1939, explained:

As Gladys grew in popularity, rumors had it that she was queer and even sported a girl friend. To add to these whispers, she could be seen any day marching down Seventh Avenue attired in men’s clothes and she seemed to thrive on the fact that her odd habits was the subject of much tongue wagging.¹¹⁷

She was often seen with a host of young women, who were presumably smitten by her masculine charms. Gossip columnist Archie Seale, for example, reported seeing “the buxom Gladys Bentley entering the Alhambra [Theatre] late Saturday afternoon while three chicks stood amazed.”¹¹⁸ And unlike the singer in “Prove It On Me Blues,” Bentley did not hide her lesbian desire either, but openly acknowledged it. During the early 1930s, she repudiated heterosexuality, marrying a white woman in a New Jersey civil ceremony. As Eric Garber relates, Louis Sobol, a gossip columnist for the New York Evening Graphic, recalled Bentley approaching him and secretly telling him: “‘I’m getting married tomorrow and you’re invited.’ When Sobol asked who the lucky man was to be, she giggled and replied: ‘Man? Why boy you’re crazy. I’m marryin’--’ and she named another woman singer.”¹¹⁹

By 1937, Bentley’s act seemed to have lost much of its potency. Her shows seemed slick and stagey, and what had once seemed daring and impertinent was now self-conscious and deliberate. She dropped one of the most effective elements of her performance, her piano playing, and sang while someone else accompanied her. Although she still sang double entendre numbers, her shows emphasized the superficial glitz of “respectable” Broadway fare. As Langston Hughes claimed, when “she got famous,” Bentley “acquired an accompanist, specifically written material, and conscious vulgarity.”¹²⁰ Her final show in Harlem, Brevities in Bronze, a rousing, blues-inflected revue that originated at the Ubangi Club, was much like a polished Cotton Club show. The

revue was aimed at an audience that expected a nightclub confection to be one part naughtiness, one part rhythm and jazz, and one part downtown sophistication. In Brevities in Bronze, Bentley was backed not by a chorus of "pansies" but the Ubangettes, a chorus of black women, who were dubbed "The Gorgeous Fast Stepping Sepians." She sang her obligatory double entendre songs, and also on view was a woman strip tease artist who went by "Gypsy Rose Lee in Bronze." Yet the proceedings came across as shocking for the sake of being shocking, which is not to say that the critics did not praise the show. It teased the limits of propriety without subverting them: it was titillating rather than transgressive. The Amsterdam News called it a "diverting bit of entertainment," and said that it was "carefully gauged to suit the sensibilities of night club goers, who love their entertainment to center on the riqué."¹²¹ The general appeal the show had is evidenced by the fact that New York's mainstream papers reviewed it. The New York Sun cheerfully wrote that Brevities in Bronze "is a big revue that sets out to be shocking and succeeds nobly."¹²² The critic of the New York World Telegram called it "the kind of show one expects from the bronze belt: fast, robust, dancing across--and through--the thin ice of good taste with a laugh and a leer."¹²³

But in an appropriate coda to her provocative Harlem performances, Bentley's big number in Brevities in Bronze articulated her defiant stance against social expectations. Alone on the small stage at the Ubangi Club wearing her trademark white tuxedo, and daring to claim images of masculinity, whiteness, and wealth for herself, Bentley exuded confidence and a smoldering eroticism. By all accounts, it was a powerful repudiation of black female objectification. The New York World Telegram claimed, "Portly Gladys Bentley, in white tails, gives her number all she has (about 300 pounds)."¹²⁴ In this number, fittingly called "Gladys Isn't Gratis Any More," she triumphantly proclaimed her economic, social, and sexual independence. The music and lyrics were written by Donald Heywood, but the song perfectly articulated Bentley's unwillingness to fit into the assumed category of what an African-American black woman should be.

In a rather cruel irony, just as the thirty year old Bentley was being discovered by the mainstream, the public's fascination with Harlem was severely on the wane. As Eric Garber concisely states, "By 1937, Jungle Alley had gone to seed."¹²⁵ Many of Harlem's largest clubs and theatres persevered for a time with the onslaught of the Great Depression. It even managed to retain some of its appeal with the repeal of Prohibition, which removed much of the exuberant lawlessness that the neighborhood seemed to offer. But finally, the devil-may-care attitude of the 1920s was summarily subsumed by the devastating economic and political realities of the 1930s. As James Hatch explains, the Depression was the great leveler, transforming the spirited entertainment of the 1920s "into a movement concerned with social problems and leftist politics."¹²⁶ In addition, Harlem's riots of 1935, which Claude McKay described as "the gesture of despair of a bewildered, baffled, and disillusioned people," shattered Harlem's sense of optimism.¹²⁷ And as Nathan Irvin Huggins maintains, "From the perspective of the 1930s, the artists of the Renaissance looked strangely foolish and irrelevant, even to themselves. Poverty, which had always been obvious in Harlem, suddenly seemed more to characterize the area than did art and jazz."¹²⁸ In a time when a large percentage of the population was spending much of its time on relief lines and breadlines, Gladys Bentley's night club act seemed inappropriate and strangely naive.

By 1938, Bentley left New York for East Los Angeles, where she moved in with her mother in a small home on South Crawford Avenue. Over the next twenty years, Bentley tried several times to rejuvenate her singing career, but she had limited success. Los Angeles in the 1940s and 1950s was far less tolerant of a 250 pound butch lesbian than New York City in the 1920s, and Bentley had difficulty getting regular bookings. Worse still, her career was directly affected by the rising tide of conservatism that took hold in the 1940s and continued into the 1950s. For instance, during an engagement at Joaquin's El Rancho in February 1940, the nightclub had to file for a special police permit that would allow her to appear in pants rather than a skirt.¹²⁹ Yet Bentley persisted. She made a

handful of recordings on small labels, performed occasionally at Mona's, San Francisco's well-known lesbian bar, and she appeared twice on Groucho Marx's television show.¹³⁰ She even tried her hand at marriage--to a man--but they divorced a short time later. Sadly, Bentley never replicated the fame she had achieved headlining at such nightclubs as the Clam House, Ubangi Club, and Kings Terrace. And she never again attracted the audiences that packed the Lafayette, Apollo, and Harlem Opera House. Instead, in her late 40's, she invested most of her energy in evangelism. Before her death from flu in 1960 (she was 52), she was a prominent member at the Temple of Love in Christ Church, Inc. And Eric Garber reports that before she died, she was set to be ordained as a minister.¹³¹ On January 23, 1960, with her mother making all of the necessary arrangements, Gladys Bentley was buried at Lincoln Memorial Park in Carson, California.¹³²

Gladys Bentley's descent into obscurity is particularly unfortunate because beginning in the late 1950s, the United States witnessed a renewed interest in blues and folk songs. Corresponding with the Civil Rights movement and an attention to the plight of downtrodden people, whom these singers represented, many of the classic blues women were coaxed out of retirement, and they attracted a whole new audience. Performing in smoky Greenwich Village clubs, folk festivals, and blues concerts, these women introduced the form to a new generation of music fans. Alberta Hunter, Ida Cox, Ada "Bricktop" Smith, Sippie Wallace, Victoria Spivey, and Edith Wilson all benefitted from the revival and brought to their songs an added layer of toughness and a deeper affirmation of survival. Even more unfortunate for Gladys Bentley is that she did not live long enough to celebrate the revolutionary temperament of lesbian and gay pride that the Stonewall Riots initiated in 1969.

But Bentley's own relatively brief career can in no way be termed a failure. In the 1920s and 1930s she defiantly demanded respect as an African American, a woman, and a butch lesbian. Her blues songs named and called attention to issues affecting working class people, and her exaggerated, larger-than-life appearances on-stage and off poked fun at

cultural ideologies associated with race, class, gender, and sexual orientation. Bentley's refusal to capitulate would exact a terrific price, but in the 1920s and 1930s, she represented one possible model of black womanhood, who was at once robust, self-supporting, and sexually liberated.

Epilogue: "In the Twilight Zone of Sex"

Harlem of the 1920s and 1930s may have tolerated a butch lesbian like Gladys Bentley, but in the McCarthy era of the late 1940s and early 1950s, she would have been perceived as something of a national menace. The "excess" of Bentley's persona, as marked by her flagrant violation of acceptable female behavior, appearance, and desire, challenged the presupposed notion of femininity and necessarily had to be reclaimed by patriarchy. In her 1952 Ebony article, called "I Am a Woman Again," Bentley renounced her previous identity and "the sex underworld in which [she] once lived," presumably as an attempt to resuscitate her moribund career. Analyzing Bentley's literary performance, however, one may recognize elements from the quintessential lesbian narrative. Radclyffe Hall's The Well of Loneliness (1928).¹³³ But even in this article, Bentley once again appears to be the ultimate trickster. Unlike the sad, brooding mannish lesbian of Hall's novel, who goes by the name Stephen Gordon, Bentley recreates a "happy ending" for herself. Like a gifted, adaptable actor, Bentley sheds the costumes, dialogue, and props of one role and sets the scene for a new dramatic interpretation. Yet rather than completely concealing her former self within the new characterization, Bentley occasionally offers privileged, unmistakable glimpses of the performer within the role, presenting the impossibility of locating the "real" Gladys Bentley and affirming the impossible task of finding the truth behind the portrayal.

Bentley's denunciation in the 1950s of her former life was a reflection of the prevalent cultural attitude of the era. David Savran shows that the image of the American nuclear family offered a comforting refuge from "an increasingly anxiety-producing and dangerous world" torn apart by World War II and confronted by the Cold War. Within this

representative image "was the strict prescription of masculine and feminine roles defined by the interrelationship of both men and women in both home and marketplace."¹³⁴ Gay men and lesbians posed a direct threat to this picture of safety and tranquility, because they could corrupt and potentially destroy the sanctity of the American family with their perversity. Historian Lee Edelman explains that the nation's concerted efforts "to control homosexual behavior" after World War II, "responded to the widespread perception of gay sexuality as an alien infestation, and unnatural because un-American practice, resulting from the entanglement with foreign countries--and foreign nationals--during the war."¹³⁵ Post War United States was intent on reflecting an idyllic scene of harmony and impenetrability founded on the notion that men and women had particular roles to play. If Bentley wanted to be a part of this stolid new vision of the United States, which had no room for a sexually and economically independent black woman, she necessarily had to change her public and private act. In short, she had to be domesticated.

The change her act took is evident in the songs she sang and the parts she played. In the 1950s, one of the few songs she recorded was "Before Midnight," cut for Flame Records. The song does not have any lyrics, just a series of "Do-do-doo"s performed in Bentley's characteristically deep, resonant, and trumpet-like voice.¹³⁶ In a symbolic reflection of the times, her articulate protest so clearly evident in her blues songs has been silenced as was her outspoken and visual performance of lesbianism. For instance, in Brevities in Bronze, Bentley's final New York appearance in 1937, she sang a bittersweet number called "In My Well of Loneliness." The song, which appears to be no longer available, played on the novel's infamy and the main character's pitiable search for love and fulfillment. Yet the song's sentimentality was surely undercut when Bentley sang her ode to personal capitalism, "Gladys Isn't Gratis Any More" in the same show. But in 1952, Bentley refashioned herself for a new homophobic entertainment market while announcing in the Ebony article that she intends to write a book that would "help people who are trapped in a modern-day 'well of loneliness.'"¹³⁷

The irony of this statement is that Bentley’s own narrative mirrors many of the images presented in that novel. Fiction and truth are constantly blurred in this autobiographical essay. In the novel, for example, Stephen Gordon’s alienation from her mother is recycled in Bentley’s narrative. Whereas Bentley’s mother assiduously prayed for a son, in The Well of Loneliness, the main character’s mother also expected a boy child. As Halberstam explains the scene, “When her mother is pregnant with Stephen, she assumes (along with her husband) that the child will be a boy; thus she carries within her own body an image of inversion, of the boy in the woman.”¹³⁸ And at times, Bentley’s rhetoric seems to derive directly from the novel. Describing her condition, she writes:

For many years I lived in a personal hell. Like a great number of lost souls, I inhabited that half-shadow no man’s land which exists between the boundaries of the two sexes.¹³⁹

The novel includes a similar passage about the young Stephen Gordon’s feelings of solitude:

Like a very small child this large muscular creature would sit down beside [her father] because she felt lonely, and because youth most rightly resents isolation, and because she had not yet learnt her hard lesson--she had not yet learnt that the loneliest place in this world is the no-man’s-land of sex.¹⁴⁰

As Esther Newton documents, this language sprang from sexologist Havelock Ellis’s analysis of women “inverts.” “The true invert,” Newton explains, “was a being between categories, neither man nor woman, a ‘third sex’ or ‘trapped soul.’”¹⁴¹

Like Stephen Gordon, Bentley’s gender is defined by what she wears. As Halberstam explains, “Clothing, indeed, becomes the means by which Stephen covers her queerness and finds a comfortable gender expression. Clothing is her way of making masculinity both real and potent, convincing and natural: without her male clothes, she is either awkward (in women’s clothes) or inadequate next to the ‘real’ embodied masculinity of a man.”¹⁴² In Bentley’s essay, clothing plays a similar role and is used as tangible proof

for her gender transformation. The costumes also call attention to the role that Bentley is playing.

For example, she describes her previous life as “tragic,” a “living hell,” and a “strange, heart-twisting existence,” but she refers in loving detail to her former apparel, including “tailor-made clothes, top hat and tails, with a cane to match each costume, stiff-bosomed shirt, wing collar tie and matching shoes.”¹⁴³ She talks about her luxurious “\$300-a-month apartment,” the servants who attended to her, and her beautiful car. These images are a far cry from the drab, shapeless white housedress covering her huge body that she wears in the article’s pictures. Throughout the article are photographs of Bentley appearing domesticated: “turning back cover of bed to make homecoming husband comfortable,” “taste-testing dinner for her husband,” and “making selection from jewel case for an evening out.” Whereas she lived amid New York’s splendor, the photo captions state that she now lives in a “modest, tastefully appointed home directly in rear of similar home she purchased for her mother.”¹⁴⁴ One is forced to wonder which life indeed is the “personal hell” that she describes.

Whereas in the 1920s and 30s, Bentley proclaimed her sexual and economic independence from men, in this article, her melodramatic take on the theme, she describes her new found happiness upon finding the love of a “real man.” She rehearses the familiar image of the butch lesbian as a “failed woman,” to employ Sally Munt’s phrase.¹⁴⁵ According to her autobiographical essay, she had enjoyed the fame, money, and critical adoration of her professional life, but in her “secret heart, [she] was weeping and wounded because [she] was traveling the wrong road to real love and real happiness.”¹⁴⁶ Then, the “miracle” arrived. She explains:

The miracle came about when I discovered and accepted the one glorious thing which, for so many years, I had bitterly fought with all my heart, mind, and body: the love and tenderness, the true devotion of a man who

loved me unselfishly and whose love I could return: the awakening within me of the womanliness I had tried to suppress.¹⁴⁷

In an ironic understatement, Bentley says that she is no longer married to her savior (a sailor, which ironically calls to mind her "Favorites," a "pansy" chorus dressed as sailors), but she still treasures the precious gift he gave her. In fact, at the time of her writing she was soon to be married again, this time to a theatrical column-writer. She adds that she "hope[s] and pray[s] this marriage will last."¹⁴⁸ It did not, and her "husband" denied that they were ever married.

Bentley's surprising--albeit histrionic--reversal, is a reflection of how conservative viewpoints had almost completely swept the Post-War United States by the 1950s. Even as lesbian subcultures were evolving in such places as San Francisco and Buffalo, the lesbian (i.e. the visible butch lesbian) was culturally regarded as a tragic and desolate figure. She was, according to the pulp novels of the era, guaranteed a life of solitude and misery unless she renounced her sinful way of life. Martha Vicinus writes, "The doomed lesbian was a remarkably durable image. By the 1950s everyone knew what a lesbian was: she had been assigned a clearly defined role. Defiance and loneliness marked her life, according to the pulp romances."¹⁴⁹ On one level, the novels offered evidence that lesbians existed and provided a sense of solidarity to lesbians reading the books. But on another level, the novels' emphasis on an ill-fated existence helped to reinscribe heterosexual values.

Indeed, the proliferation of pulp romances featuring lesbian characters in the 1950s offered a solution for the "problem" of the lesbian in society. For the dominant culture, the lesbian's plight was a comforting image for those who feared her undermining of heterosexual male power. Lillian Faderman states, "Perhaps the image of love between women aroused subconscious anxiety that was then cathartically soothed in these fictional works, since they almost invariably ended by confirming conventional sexuality: the girl seldom got the girl--most often a male came in and stole the booty. The old, reassuring sexual order was restored after experimentation with the new."¹⁵⁰ Structurally and

stylistically. Bentley's own apologia and literary "rescue" resembles the pulp fiction, and symbolically serves as a sad coda for the experimentation and excitement of the Harlem Renaissance.

In February 1954, Jet, a popular black magazine, included an article that focused on "the problems of hundreds of women who are trapped in the half-shadow, no-man's-land of the man-woman."¹⁵¹ The article outlines the deception which lesbians employ to ensnare unwitting women, and it warns that "the lesbian, like the male homosexual, who stalks a married home is to be considered a dangerous person."¹⁵² Particularly vulnerable to the lesbian's advances, the article claims, are widows, spinsters, lonely women, and "those who have suffered from nervous breakdowns and other mental ills."¹⁵³ The essay is not without its hopefulness, though. It contends: "Despite the lesbian's power of persuasion or slyness of approach, she stands a slim chance of debauching a normally sexed woman who is happily married or deeply in love with a man. Studies show that most women feel it is still much nicer to have a man around the house."¹⁵⁴ The author also points to Gladys Bentley's narrative as an example of a "happy ending" for "the lives of strange women." Referring to Bentley's Ebony article a year and a half earlier, the author offers the entertainer's "return to womanhood" as proof that "manlike women" can be rescued from their sexual deviate condition.

Although Bentley's conversion is heartbreaking when one considers her insouciance in the 1920s and 30s, one can see in her Ebony article the signs of a woman hyperbolizing and poking fun at the conventions she has co-opted in order to survive. At times, she seems to be deliberately parodying the lesbian pulp fiction form and the cultural attitudes toward the archetypal "man-woman." The article reads like an entertaining, trashy supermarket novel combined with the titillating appeal of a tell-all, star autobiography. But reading between the lines, one can also see occasions in which she comes very close to castigating a society that forces conformity from people "who are fascinated by a way of

life different from that approved by society.” In another context, her description of the way such people are treated might be a plea for acceptance when she writes:

All about us we hear the condemnation of our kind. We hear the scornful word labels used in referring to us. We wince at the many harsh suggestions of what should be done to rid the world of the abnormalcy to which we cling. The censure which rages all about us has the effect of creating within us a brooding self-condemnation, a sense of not being as good as the next person, a feeling of inadequacy and impotence. To the great majority of us, at some time or other, has come the feeling that the world would be better off without us: that our families and friends would profit by our disappearance from the human race.¹⁵⁵

Similarly, Bentley has adopted the roles of “woman” and housewife thanks to her recent “miracles,” but they do not seem nearly as interesting as the ones she used to play. She may, to use a theatrical phrase, chew the scenery in her newest drama, but there are indications that she longs to play the old role.

Bentley’s reclaiming of her womanhood could be the contents of one of Freud’s case analyses, and her article is filled with allusions to Freudian rhetoric. The cause of her “strange” situation, according to the physician she visited, appears to be her failure to pass through the oedipal complex. He told her clinically after she decided to seek help and willingly become a woman: “That’s just what I wanted to hear. Now I can tell you what I’ve known for a very long time. Your sex organs are infantile. They haven’t progressed past the stage of those of a fourteen-year-old child.”¹⁵⁶ The way out of this “sex underworld in which [she] once lived” for Bentley was not only by way of the “unselfish” love of a “real” man, but also through the “miracle” of science, which consisted of regular female hormone injections that might counteract the excess of male hormones her body produced. The combination of these two elements allowed her to reciprocate the man’s love, as well as enjoy “the awakening of the womanliness [she] tried to suppress.”

Ultimately, Bentley claims her message is for those seen and unseen (i.e. passing) deviants, those who "wear the symbols and badges of [their] non-conformity" and those who "hide behind respectable fronts." Part of her penance for her sins against society seems to be her avowal to help others come to the same conclusions she has. She appeals to youths and people struggling with the issues she faced that there is salvation:

I want the world to know that those of us who have taken the unusual paths to love are not hopeless: that we can find someone in the opposite sex who can teach us love as love really ought to exist. Maybe I can do some good, help someone know how I became a woman again.¹⁵⁷

The mannered language, which evokes images of rooting out those "hiding behind respectable fronts" in the McCarthy witch hunts and evangelical sermons promising greater rewards, comes across as affected. The apology comes across as enforced rather than spontaneous and sincere. Still, the psychological and physiological treatments Bentley received give a 1950s slant to the 1920s version of the New Woman.

In the article, she never mentions the taboo term "lesbianism," which was at the base of her former unhappiness. One may assume, that she (or her editor) intended to diminish the power of the term by refusing to name it. By naming it, she would accord it status and make it "real." Instead, she describes her life as an uncategorizable, phantasmatic living hell, that "sociologists and psychiatrists would term extreme social maladjustment."¹⁵⁸ Lynda Hart contends that the "reality" of the lesbian is what makes her particularly dangerous. As a reminder of the construction of masculine behavior, the butch lesbian calls attention to the "counterfeiting of gender." Acknowledging the lesbian "produces a recognition of the instability of gender" because it points to the performance of gender that we all play.¹⁵⁹ Identity roles that had been challenged and explored in 1920s had to be reclaimed, restored, and reconstructed in the 1950s.

Gladys Bentley's transition (back) to a woman, figuratively sets out to show the stability of the gender categories. According to the rhetoric she adopts, they are necessary

and truthful if one is to find fulfillment and personal completeness. But in an interesting way, her article subverts her intention as we follow the continually shifting images of her persona. In an effect similar to a funnyhouse of mirrors, Bentley’s article juxtaposes pictures of the performer in drag from the 1920s and 30s with pictures of her in 1952 wearing floral-printed dresses. The reader becomes aware of the instability of the roles Bentley is performing in each shot. Although she claims the “truth” of one role and the happiness it has brought her, her previous role does not seem to foretell of misery and shame. On the contrary, posing regally in the early pictures, Bentley appears dignified and independent: while the pictures of Bentley at the time of the writing show her as domestic and dependent. The fluidity of her identity is most cogently revealed in the largest picture, which frames the article. Displaying a scrapbook with photos of herself in top hat and tails, Bentley beams. Looking at the picture of pictures and charting her various personae, the reader is faced with the impossibility of discerning the “real” Gladys Bentley. The endless shifting between what appear to be the boundaries of masculine and feminine, black and white, homosexual and heterosexual produces an unsettling and exciting promise of a category crisis. And this is precisely what the Harlem Renaissance celebrated.

ENDNOTES

¹ Recorded August 8, 1928 for Okeh Race Records. Song available on Maggie Jones, volume 2, and Gladys Bentley: Complete Recorded Works in Chronological Order (Vienna, Austria: Document Records, 1995).

² Marcus Wright, “The Talk of the Town,” New York Age (December 22, 1934), 4.

³ Bruce Nugent, “On ‘Gloria Swanson’ (Real Name. Mr. Winston),” in Richard Bruce Nugent: Gay Rebel of the Harlem Renaissance, edited by Thomas H. Wirth (Unpublished Manuscript). 6/11. Mabel Hampton explains that she was close friends of Jackie Mabley and “her girlfriend.” while Mabley was performing at the Lafayette in those years (Interview with Joan Nestle, May 21, 1981. Transcript of interview in the Mabel Hampton Collection, Lesbian Herstory Archives; 3).

⁴ “Willie Bryant’s Band Featured at Apollo,” New York Age (July 21, 1934), 4.

⁵ Qtd. in Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones), Blues People: The Negro Experience in White America and the Music that Developed from It (New York: Morrow Quill Paperbacks, 1963), 92.

⁶ Augustus Austin, "Fletcher Henderson's Band Pleases At Opera House," New York Age (September 1, 1934), 4.

⁷ Bourne, "Harlem Opera Show Is Pretty Good This Week," New York Age (December 1, 1934), 4.

⁸ Wilbur Young, "Gladys Bentley," from Biographical Sketches: Negroes of New York (Schomburg Collection, New York Public Library: WPA Writers Program, 1939), 1.

⁹ Lillian Faderman, Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers: A History of Lesbianism in Twentieth-Century America (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 73.

¹⁰ The Washboard Serenaders was a well-known jazz group that recorded on the Victor label. In 1930, Bentley recorded with them.

¹¹ "Washboard Serenaders Feature at Opera House," New York Age (September 15, 1934), 4.

¹² Daphne Duval Harrison, Black Pearls: Blues Queens of the 1920s (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1993), 10.

¹³ Angela Y. Davis, Blues Legacies and Black Feminism (New York: Pantheon Books, 1998), 20.

¹⁴ Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, "Discourses of Sexuality and Subjectivity: The New Woman, 1870-1936," in Hidden From History: Reclaiming the Gay and Lesbian Past, edited by Martin Duberman, et al (New York: Meridian Books, 1989), 277.

¹⁵ Henry Louis Gates, Jr., The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 29.

¹⁶ Qtd. in Gates, 29.

¹⁷ Gladys Bentley, "I Am a Woman Again," Ebony (August 1952), 95.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 96.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Eric Garber, "Gladys Bentley: The Bulldagger Who Sang the Blues," Out/Look (Spring 1988), 55.

²² "I Am a Woman Again," 94.

²³ Charles G. Shaw, Nightlife: Vanity Fair's Intimate Guide to New York After Dark (New York: The John Day Company, 1931), 76.

²⁴ Louis Sobol, "The Voice of Broadway," New York Journal (August 16, 1933). Clipping in Carl Van Vechten Scrapbooks, New York Public Library.

²⁵ Qtd. in Garber, "The Bulldagger Who Sang the Blues," 56.

²⁶ Langston Hughes, The Big Sea: An Autobiography (1940) (New York: Thunder’s Mouth Press, 1986), 225-6.

²⁷ Qtd. in Garber, “The Bulldagger Who Sang the Blues,” 56.

²⁸ “I Am a Woman Again,” 94.

²⁹ Marcus Wright, “The Talk of the Town,” New York Age (May 12, 1934), 5.

³⁰ Smith-Rosenberg, 278.

³¹ Sally R. Munt, Butch/Femme: Inside Lesbian Gender (London: Cassell, 1998), 8.

³² Gayle Rubin, “Of Catamites and Kings: Reflections on Butch, Gender, and Boundaries,” in The Persistent Desire: A Femme-Butch Reader, Joan Nestle, ed. (Boston: Alyson Publications, Inc., 1992), 470.

³³ Carl Van Vechten, Parties: Scenes from Contemporary New York Life (Los Angeles: Sun and Moon Press, 1993; orig. 1930), 33. As Garber points out, Bentley also appears as a character in Clement Wood’s novel Deep River (1931), and Blair Niles’ Strange Brother (1931). In the latter work she is represented as Sybil, a large, black cabaret pianist with a “deep man’s voice,” who performs at a club called the Lobster Pot (a take-off on the Clam House, where Bentley performed). The narrator describes Sybil as a grotesque, “clumsy figure,” “whose hands passed with such incredible speed up and down the piano.” Regardless of Sybil’s grotesquerie, one of the characters claims her performance is “sheer genius...nothing but sheer genius!” (Blair Niles, Strange Brother, London: Gay Men’s Press, 1991: 41-2).

³⁴ November 10, 1929 diary entry. Carl Van Vechten Diaries, New York Public Library.

³⁵ December 5, 1929 and December 29, 1929 diary entries. Van Vechten mentions seeing Bentley at parties or at the Clam House in the following diary entries of 1929 and 1930: April 25, 1929; May 4, 1929; November 17, 1929; November 27, 1929; December 28, 1929; January 4, 1930; January 12, 1930; January 19, 1930; January 25, 1930; February 2, 1930; February 9, 1930; April 19, 1930; April 20, 1930; April 22, 1930; May 2, 1930; May 24, 1930.

³⁶ Louis Sobol, the New York Graphic. Undated clipping in Carl Van Vechten Scrapbook, New York Public Library.

³⁷ “I Am a Woman Again,” 94.

³⁸ Davis, xii.

³⁹ Davis, xii.

⁴⁰ Jon Michael Spencer, Blues and Evil (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1993), xxv.

⁴¹ Baraka, 17.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ann Douglas, Terrible Honesty: Mongrel Manhattan in the 1920s (New York: The Noonday Press, 1995), 391.

⁴⁴ Ann DuCille, “Blues Notes on Black Sexuality: Sex and the Texts of Jessie Fauset and Nella Larsen.” Journal of the History of Sexuality 3 (January 1993), 426.

⁴⁵ Qtd. in Davis, 152.

⁴⁶ Baraka, 82.

⁴⁷ Kathy J. Ogren, The Jazz Revolution: Twenties America and the Meaning of Jazz (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 17.

⁴⁸ Baraka, 62.

⁴⁹ Qtd. in Paul Gilroy, The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 103.

⁵⁰ Judith Butler, Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex” (New York: Routledge, 1993), 231.

⁵¹ Gilroy, 102.

⁵² Ibid., 202.

⁵³ James Weldon Johnson, Black Manhattan (New York: Da Capo Press, 1991; originally published 1930), 228.

⁵⁴ Barry Singer, Black and Blue: The Life and Lyrics of Andy Razaf (New York: Schirmer Books, 1992), 64.

⁵⁵ Recorded in New York for Okeh Records, November 2, 1928. Available on Gladys Bentley: Complete Recorded Works in Chronological Order.

⁵⁶ Harrison, 66.

⁵⁷ Richard Wright, Foreword to Paul Oliver’s Blues Fell This Morning: Meaning in the Blues, Second Edition (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990; First Edition published 1960), xv.

⁵⁸ Qtd. in Harrison, 65.

⁵⁹ James H. Cone, The Spirituals and the Blues: An Interpretation (New York: Seabury, 1972), 112.

⁶⁰ Spencer, 43.

⁶¹ Davis, 119.

⁶² Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy and Madeline Davis, Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold: The History of a Lesbian Community (New York: Penguin Books, 1993), 4.

⁶³ Ibid., 5.

⁶⁴ Lawrence Levine, Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Thought from Slavery to Freedom (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975), 270.

⁶⁵ Recorded November 2, 1928 for Okeh Records. Available on Gladys Bentley: Complete Recorded Works in Chronological Order.

⁶⁶ Recorded August 31, 1928 for Okeh Records. Available on Gladys Bentley: Complete Recorded Works in Chronological Order.

⁶⁷ Qtd. in Harrison, 81.

⁶⁸ Examples discussed in Davis, 27-29.

⁶⁹ Recorded March 26, 1929 for Okeh Records. Available on Gladys Bentley: Complete Recorded Works in Chronological Order.

⁷⁰ Sydné Mahone. Introduction to Moon Marked and Touched By Sun: Plays by African-American Women, edited by Mahone (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1994), xviii.

⁷¹ Michele Wallace, Invisibility Blues: From Pop to Theory (New York and London: Verso, 1990), 251.

⁷² Levine, 270.

⁷³ Oliver, 185.

⁷⁴ Qtd. in Davis, 57.

⁷⁵ Michele Wallace, “Variations on Negation and the Heresy of Black Feminist Creativity,” in Reading Black, Reading Feminist, Henry Louis Gates, ed. (New York: Meridian Books, 1990), 55.

⁷⁶ Elizabeth Drorbaugh, “Stormé Delarverie and the Jewel Box Revue,” in Crossing the Stage: Controversies on Cross-Dressing, ed. Lesley Ferris (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), 124.

⁷⁷ Oliver, 100.

⁷⁸ Sandra Lieb, Mother of the Blues: A Study of Ma Rainey (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1981), 124-5.

⁷⁹ Alisa Solomon, Re-Dressing the Canon: Essays on Theater and Gender (New York: Routledge, 1997), 167.

⁸⁰ Qtd. in Davis, 39. Recording on Sissy Man Blues: 25 Authentic Straight and Gay Blues and Jazz Vocals (Mojo Records, 1996).

⁸¹ Qtd. in Davis, 40.

⁸² Faderman, 77.

⁸³ Davis, 40.

⁸⁴ Kennedy and Davis, 10.

⁸⁵ Faderman, 78.

⁸⁶ Recording on Sissy Man Blues.

⁸⁷ Young, 1.

⁸⁸ Solomon, 167.

⁸⁹ Marjorie Garber, Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing & Cultural Anxiety (New York and London: Routledge, 1992). Garber writes, "By 'category crisis' I mean a failure of definitional distinction, a borderline that becomes permeable, that permits of border crossings from one (apparently distinct) category to another: black/white, Jew/Christian, noble/bourgeois, master/servant, master/slave. The binarism male/female, one apparent ground of distinction (in contemporary eyes, at least) between 'this' and 'that,' 'him' and 'me,' is itself put in question or under erasure in transvestism, and a transvestite figure, or a transvestite mode, will always function as a sign of overdetermination--a mechanism of displacement from one blurred boundary to another" (16).

⁹⁰ Judith Halberstam, Female Masculinity (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), 2.

⁹¹ Qtd. in Teresa de Lauretis, "Sexual Indifference and Lesbian Representation," in Performing Feminisms, Sue-Ellen Case, ed. (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), 27.

⁹² See Esther Newton, "The Mythic Mannish Lesbian: Radclyffe Hall and the New Woman," in Hidden from History: Reclaiming the Lesbian and Gay Past, Martin Duberman et al eds. (New York: Meridan Books, 1990), 281-293.

⁹³ Halberstam, Female Masculinity, 102.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 59.

⁹⁵ Joan Nestle, "Flamboyance and Fortitude: An Introduction," in The Persistent Desire, Joan Nestle ed. (Boston: Alyson Publications, Inc., 1992), 16.

⁹⁶ Judith Halberstam, "Between Butches," in Butch/ Femme: In side Lesbian Gender, Sally Munt, ed. (London: Cassell Books, 1998), 65.

⁹⁷ Young, 1-2.

⁹⁸ "Bentley at Opera House," New York Age (April 27, 1935), 4.

⁹⁹ Eric Lott, Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 146.

¹⁰⁰ Chauncey, 247.

¹⁰¹ Qtd. in Garber, 55.

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- ¹⁰² Lynda Hart, Fatal Women: Lesbian Sexuality and the Mark of Aggression (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1994), 95.
- ¹⁰³ “Gladys Bentley and Her Entertainers,” New York Amsterdam News (April 7, 1934), 6.
- ¹⁰⁴ Chauncey, 78. Chauncey writes, “The sailor, seen as young and manly, unattached, and unconstrained by conventional morality, epitomized the bachelor subculture in the gay cultural imagination” (78).
- ¹⁰⁵ Jill Dolan, The Feminist Spectator as Critic (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1991), 81.
- ¹⁰⁶ Vere E. Johns, “Lafayette Theatre,” New York Age (April 14, 1934), 5.
- ¹⁰⁷ Judith Butler, Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity (New York, London: Routledge, 1990), 146-7.
- ¹⁰⁸ Newton, 291. Emphasis in original.
- ¹⁰⁹ Halberstam, Female Masculinity, 241.
- ¹¹⁰ Shane Phelan, “Public Discourse and the Closeting of Butch Lesbians,” in Butch/Femme, 191.
- ¹¹¹ “Hollywood to Harlem,” Brooklyn Daily Eagle (June 12, 1936); New York Evening Journal (January 23, 1937). Clippings in Gladys Bentley File, Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York Public Library.
- ¹¹² Marcus Wright, “The Talk of the Town,” New York Age (June 30, 1934), 4. “5 A.M.,” New York Post (March 16, 1936). Clipping in Gladys Bentley File, Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York Public Library.
- ¹¹³ Joe Bostic, “Seeing the Show,” New York Age (April 25, 1936), 8.
- ¹¹⁴ Joe Bostic, “Seeing the Show,” New York Age (August 15, 1936), 8.
- ¹¹⁵ “Bentley at Opera House,” New York Age (April 27, 1935).
- ¹¹⁶ Solomon, 171.
- ¹¹⁷ Wilbur, 2.
- ¹¹⁸ Archie Seale, “Man About Harlem,” New York Age (August 1, 1936), 8.
- ¹¹⁹ E. Garber, 58.
- ¹²⁰ Hughes, 225.
- ¹²¹ Ken Jassamy, “Club Revue is Entertaining and Brilliant,” New York Amsterdam News (April 3, 1937), 16.

¹²² April 3, 1937. Untitled article in Ubangi Club clippings file, Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York Public Library.

¹²³ April 17, 1937. Untitled article in Ubangi Club clippings file, Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York Public Library.

¹²⁴ April 17, 1937.

¹²⁵ Garber, 59.

¹²⁶ James V. Hatch, “Introduction,” Lost Plays of the Harlem Renaissance, 1920-1940, eds. James V. Hatch and Leo Hamalian (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1996), 17.

¹²⁷ “Harlem Runs Wild,” Nation, vol. 140 (April 3, 1935), 382-383.

¹²⁸ Nathan Irvin Huggins, ed., Voices from the Harlem Renaissance (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), 369.

¹²⁹ Garber, 59.

¹³⁰ With Professor Daniel Gerould’s help, I have tried to locate the Groucho Marx appearances, but with no luck thus far.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 60.

¹³² Bentley’s burial record on file at Lincoln Memorial Park, 16701 Central Avenue, Carson, CA 90746.

¹³³ Radclyffe Hall, The Well of Loneliness (New York: Anchor Books, 1990; orig. pub. 1928).

¹³⁴ David Savran, Cowboys, Communists, and Queers: The Politics of Containment in the Work of Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), 7.

¹³⁵ Lee Edelman, “Tearrooms and Sympathy, or, The Epistemology of the Water Closet,” in Nationalisms and Sexualities, ed. Andrew Parker et al (New York: Routledge, 1992), 269.

¹³⁶ On Boogie Blues: Women Sing and Play Boogie Woogie. Rosetta Records, 1983 (Available in the Schomburg Collection: New York Public Library).

¹³⁷ Gladys Bentley, “I Am a Woman Again,” Ebony (August 1952), 97.

¹³⁸ Halberstam, Female Masculinity, 99.

¹³⁹ Bentley, 93.

¹⁴⁰ Hall, 79.

¹⁴¹ Newton, 288-9.

¹⁴² Halberstam, Female Masculinity, 100.

¹⁴³ Bentley, 94.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 94.

¹⁴⁵ Munt, 3.

¹⁴⁶ Bentley, 93.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 94.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 98.

¹⁴⁹ Martha Vicinus, “‘They Wonder to Which Sex I Belong’: The Historical Roots of the Modern Lesbian Identity” in *Homosexuality, Which Homosexuality?* eds. Anja van Kooten Niekark and Theo van der Meer (Amsterdam: An Dekker/Schorer, 1989), 189.

¹⁵⁰ Faderman, 66.

¹⁵¹ “Women Who Pass for Men.” *Jet Magazine* (February 1954). Reprinted in *The Persistent Desire*, 98-101.

¹⁵² Ibid., 100.

¹⁵³ Ibid.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., 101.

¹⁵⁵ Bentley, 93.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid. Halberstam states that historically lesbianism is equated with a woman’s failed attempt to pass through puberty. She writes in *Female Masculinity*: “We could say that tomboyism is tolerated as long as the child remains prepubescent; as soon as puberty begins, however, the full force of gender conformity descends upon the girl. Gender conformity is pressed onto all girls, not just tomboys, and this is where it becomes hard to uphold the notion that male femininity presents a greater threat to social and familial stability than female masculinity” (6).

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., 98.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., 96.

¹⁵⁹ Lynda Hart, *Acting Out: Feminist Performances*, eds. Lynda Hart and Peggy Phelan (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1993), 125.

AFTERWORD

“You’ve Seen Harlem At Its Best”

There’s more to Harlem than people suspect,
They spend an evening or two.
You get impressions I’d like to correct:
You don’t know nothing. I’m telling you
‘Til you’ve seen gigolos wash their clothes
In a self-respecting nest,
Humming lullabies instead of hi-de hi’s
You’ve seen Harlem at its best.

When you’ve seen girls who wail,
“Hello, Baby, love for sale.”
Pound the pavement east to west,
Grabbing what they can to keep a handy man,
You’ve seen Harlem at its best.

Rolling dice that never win, losing all our rent,
Or marching in the Elks parade,
We would rather run for gin than run for president,
We don’t need no park when it comes to petting in the dark.

When you’ve seen kids of four crowded ‘round the door
Dressed in pappy’s coat and vest,
Dancing with the grace that’s glorified our race,
You’ve seen Harlem at its best. ¹

“Cuz It Ain’t Gonna Last”

Flash forward to 1996. One of the theatre season’s hottest tickets is Savion Glover and George C. Wolfe’s Bring in ‘Da Noise, Bring in ‘Da Funk, which moved to Broadway after a sold-out engagement at the Public Theater in New York’s East Village. This dance musical traces the progress of African-American percussive music and movement, or “da beat,” from the Middle Passage to contemporary hip-hop. Along the way, Glover as choreographer and dance star, Wolfe as director, and poet Reg E. Gaines as writer and lyricist present a “tap-rap discourse” on the history of blacks in the United States, including depictions of slavery, Hollywood exploitation of black dancers in the 1930s, and the near impossibility of black men hailing a cab in New York City. All of the

vignettes are presented by an ensemble of African-American male dancers, a woman singer, and a narrator.

The show's first act finale, which pays an ironic tribute to the Harlem Renaissance, scores a musical coup that Broadway had not seen in ages. Dressed in black tuxedos, the four principal dancers perform a smooth, elegant tap routine that seems quite at home on a staid, conservative Broadway stage. Meanwhile, 'Da Singer, as she is referred to in the show, bedecked in sequins and fringe, stands behind a microphone and sings "I Got the Beat" as if performing in front of a 1920s nightclub audience. Completing the stage picture is an effeminate, Langston Hughes-like narrator, seated in a wing-back chair, expounding in mock Masterpiece Theatre manner upon the colorful characters who comprised the theatrical, literary, and political history of the era. Duke Ellington, W.E.B. DuBois, Wallace Thurman, and Alelia Walker are all part of his drolly delivered roster. Compared with the images of oppression and destruction in the earlier scenes, "'da beat" finally seems to have found acceptance in this hostile new world. But amidst the glittery, syncopating backdrop of this homage, the narrator states rather ominously:

Sweet Sweet Harlem

Blowin' slow

Playin' fast

Enjoy yourself

Cuz it ain't

Gonna last²

The dancers' movement mounts to a breathless, furious rate as they tap as if their lives (or livelihoods) depended upon it. Their tapping, which at first was smooth and effortless, becomes caustic, exhausting, and exhilarating. And just as the music rises to a maddening crescendo, it stops abruptly as the dancers, looking directly at the audience, punctuate their last tap with a defiant "hah!" followed by a sudden, silent blackout, and the dancers walk off the stage.

The number is a fitting metaphor for the Harlem Renaissance. As quickly as it had begun in the early 1920s, the crowds had moved on to explore newer trends. Even more significantly, the economic uncertainty and social upheaval of the 1930s brought the curtain down on Harlem's non-stop party. In the end, Harlem's prosperity was contingent on the thousands of "slummers" who went there daily, and the Great Depression brought an unceremonious finale to the gaiety (in all senses of the word) that characterized the untiring entertainment of the Harlem Renaissance. The neighborhood, which was previously an erotic playground for the white and wealthy, disintegrated further into poverty and destitution as New York's upper crust lost money or turned to new venues for entertainment. The Lafayette Theatre, Harlem Opera House, and many of the nightclubs that flourished in the 1920s went bankrupt or closed by the mid-1930s. The Hamilton Lodge drag balls, a Harlem tradition since the 1870s, ended abruptly in 1939 after a wave of panic over sex crimes seized the nation, and, according to George Chauncey, "recast the dominant public images of homosexuals."³

Black people had also lost their exotic appeal for whites. As Langston Hughes wrote, "We were no longer in vogue, anyway, we Negroes. Sophisticated New Yorkers turned to Noel Coward. Colored actors began to go hungry, publishers politely rejected new manuscripts, and patrons found other uses for their money."⁴ In addition, national distress and international hostilities of the 1930s and 1940s drastically altered the mood of the country. What was once considered progressive, shocking, or taboo, became associated with the destruction of American society and regarded as an issue of national security. Lesbians and gay men, who had been fairly visible in the early decades of the century, slunk back into the closet or declared their change in sexual orientation. No where is this sad state of affairs more evident than in the career of a celebrated entertainer like Gladys Bentley, who made her living pushing at the edges of decorum and celebrating her alternative sexuality.

But this does not mean that the Harlem Renaissance was a transient, isolated moment, as some historians have claimed, that had no impact on theatrical and social history. Popular music took off in a new direction as composers like the Gershwins, Cole Porter, and Irving Berlin "plundered," to use Robert Dawidoff's term, inflections and motifs from jazz music that had been nurtured in rent parties and nightclubs.⁵ In addition, lesbian and gay subcultures, as George Chauncey, Lillian Faderman, and Elizabeth Kopovsky Kennedy and Madeline Davis have shown in their separate studies, developed out of, or were patterned by the social networks established in Harlem. And elements of performance styles of Ethel Waters, Gladys Bentley, and Bill "Bojangles" Robinson may be found in contemporary black artists like Ruth Brown, Whoopi Goldberg, and Gregory Hines. The all-night party may have ended, but the revelers show up in new guises in new settings.

As I write this conclusion, though, the Jazz Age is indeed in vogue. This spring promises no less than two musicals, produced by two separate New York theatre companies and inspired by the same work. The Manhattan Theatre Club and the Public Theatre will both produce shows based on John Moncure March's 1928 "jazz poem," The Wild Party. For the Public's production, George C. Wolfe is revisiting 1920s New York yet again, and advanced publicity claims that the musical will bring "the dazzling decade it celebrates to sin-tillating life."⁶ At a time when Broadway is becoming more and more like a giant theme park, it is only fitting that New York of the 1920s, itself resembling a giant theme park, would receive its due.

But all the same, in this era of economic boom, there are undeniable similarities between our epoch and the 1920s that make a revival appropriate. Indeed, Wolfe articulated this notion in a recent interview with Variety. He says there are "incredible parallels with our own time in the cross-cultural, pan-sexual, pan-racial social dynamics of the late '20s." But according to Wolfe, there are also "certain emotional apocalyptic qualities" that link us to the carefree jazz age when "the whole world was dancing," and "Fascists were off in a

corner, getting organized.”⁷ By the late 1930s, the strides that blacks had made, and the visibility lesbians and gay men enjoyed seemed to be entirely built on illusion.

While examining the theatre and performance of the Harlem Renaissance, it is clear that the movement cannot be deemed a failure. Although African-American entertainers were never able to completely resist the pressure to conform to the expectations of white audiences,—the legacy of minstrelsy remained too powerful a force— their efforts to resist racist representations created some fascinating results. From a position of solidarity they had previously not enjoyed, black popular performers whittled away at the stereotypes and revealed them as cultural constructions. Perhaps only now as we look back on that pre-War, pre-Civil Rights, and pre-Stonewall era can we see the performers as truly post-modern. Their performances sowed the seeds for future generations to radically envision a society not stratified by classifications based on race, class, gender, and sexual orientation.

ENDNOTES

¹ “You’ve Seen Harlem At Its Best.” Music by Jimmy McHugh. Lyrics by Dorothy Fields. Recorded by Ethel Waters, March 30, 1934. Available on Ethel Waters, 1931-1934 (France: Classics Records, 1993).

² Reg E. Gaines, “I Got the Beat/ Dark Tower,” in Bring in ‘Da Noise, Bring in ‘Da Funk. Lyric in cast recording liner notes (New York: RCA Victor, 1996).

³ George Chauncey, Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940 (New York: BasicBooks, 1994), 359.

⁴ Langston Hughes, The Big Sea, An Autobiography (New York: Thunder’s Mouth Press, 1986; orig. published 1940), 334.

⁵ Robert Dawidoff, “The Kind of Person You Have to Sound Like to Sing ‘Alexander’s Ragtime Band,” in Prehistories of the Future: The Primitivist Project and the Culture of Modernism, Elazar Barkan and Ronald Bush, eds. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), 298.

⁶ “Public Theater Member Newsletter,” December 1999, vol. vi, issue 2.

⁷ Variety (December 13, 1999), on-line edition.

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Gladys Bentley clippings file

Blackbirds of 1928 clippings file

Blackbirds of 1930 clippings file

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