

SHADY LADIES:
SISTER ACTS, POPULAR PERFORMANCE, AND THE SUBVERSION OF
AMERICAN IDENTITY

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Abstract

“Shady Ladies: Sister Acts, Popular Performance, and the Subversion of American Identity” is a project with two major components. First, it is a historical project based on original archival research conducted at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, the Hatch-Billops Collection, and the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts. I construct and contextualize the performance histories of black and white sister acts, developing an argument for how these artists created a space for dialogue regarding the social constructions of race, gender, and sexuality through their often antithetical representations of identities in their performances. Second, I develop a theoretically informed comparative analysis of these groups’ performance and biographical histories. I articulate how women on both sides of the Jim Crow era color line negotiated and challenged social expectations.

I examine two African American groups, the Hyers Sisters and the Whitman Sisters, and two European American groups, the Dolly Sisters and the Duncan Sisters. These groups are representative of the sister act phenomenon in that they are biologically related sets of women who entered show business in pursuit of the American Dream of economic and social uplift. I argue that the performances of these women, and others like them, can be read as appropriating and/or complicating the idea of “family” to participate in and contribute to the development of personal and national identity in the United States.

Writing the histories of four sister acts is a revisionist project aimed at including women’s contributions and stories in the larger history of theatre and performance in the United States. “Shady Ladies” explores how sister acts negotiated systems of power

circumscribing gendered, racial, and sexual identities in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This interdisciplinary project contributes to a variety of fields such as African American studies, theatre and performance studies, and American studies.

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Introducing the “Shady Ladies”

Sisters

Sisters

There were never such devoted sisters

...

Two different faces

But in tight places

We think and we act as one.¹

Introduction

Sister acts have long been a fascination for audiences. They represent sameness, difference, connection, and rivalry evoking the kind of dramatic tension that theatre goers crave. We delight in their coordinating looks, clothes, voices, and choreography, and revel in their missteps. Their biological closeness but ability to be so different is a mystery and a source of endless fascination and entertainment. Sister acts harness our culture’s curiosity about bonds between women, parlaying it into a ready made audience base for popular performances featuring their relationships.

A sub-genre of the family performance troupe practice popular in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, sister acts are pairs or groups of women billed as sisters to capitalize on the phenomenon of sameness and difference inherent in many sororal relationships. These teams are made up of both actual, biological sisters as well as women (sometimes even mothers and daughters) posing as sisters.² Sister acts, like other

family oriented troupes, provide artists with a support system which makes a career in the uncertain field of show business a little easier. Though very popular throughout the twentieth century (think of the Boswell Sisters, Andrews Sisters, Zsa Zsa and Eva Gabor, Barbara Mandrell and the Mandrell Sisters, the Pointer Sisters, the Emotions, all-female groups like the Supremes, and even today's celebrity and reality star sisters such as Mary Kate and Ashley Olsen, Venus and Serena Williams, Jessica and Ashley Simpson, Kim, Kourtney, and Khloe Kardashian, and Paris and Nicky Hilton), little has been written about this particular type of performance group. This project contributes the histories of four sister acts performing from the 1860s through the 1950s – the Hyers, Whitman, Dolly, and Duncan Sisters – to the larger history of American theatre and popular performance.

Sister acts provide female artists with an opportunity to perform and contest identity in a particular way not available to non-related groups or single performers. The theme and backdrop of family reinforces identity. Because women in these historical groups were performing with family members, or posing as a family unit, their purpose, propriety, and persona were seldom questioned. They existed in duplicate, bolstered as dependable and desirable because they were a set, a team. At the same time, these acts appealed to puritanical American audiences' respect and appetite for performances and public figures (especially women) that appeared to reflect and reinforce traditional, heteronormative family values. Publicly performing their biological connection underscored sisters' commitment to not only one another, but also their shared background. Performing with family members also made a life on the stage a more respectable option for women. Playing as sisters aligned female performers with the

private sphere of family and home that women were expected to maintain and perpetuate, while allowing them to evade those traditional roles in favor of a professional performance career.

Audiences have long delighted in the idea of similarity and a supposed interchangeability amongst women, and especially sisters, whom they might perceive to be homogeneous because of their genetic ties and shared gender. As Mary Ann O'Farrell notes in her study of mid-twentieth-century musical numbers about sororal relationships and the cultivation of envy, "the fascination of the sister act lies in its veiled promise that any sister at any moment could take any other sisters' place."³ Such ideas about women are reinforced in performance by sister acts (and even chorus girls) that dress, dance, and speak as similarly and/or simultaneously as possible. Irving Berlin's song "Sisters," performed by the fictional sister act the Haynes Sisters (Rosemary Clooney and Vera Allen) in the 1954 film *White Christmas* reflects this notion of sister swapping in the lyrics "Caring, Sharing, Every little thing that we are wearing."⁴ Simultaneously sweet and sexual, innocent and incestuous, sister acts provide the promise of what O'Farrell describes as a "protopornographic entertainment, the sister act teases with the prospect of interchangeability (sharing) while invoking the alibi of transparent wholesomeness (caring)."⁵ While sister acts play publicly to fantasies about sororal sameness, at the same time these relationships provide a safe space in which the artists examined in this project are able to explore, address, and wrestle with difficult issues of identity – not only what it means to be a sister, but also what it means to be an American. Sister acts enjoyed widespread favor alongside minstrelsy and vaudeville, two popular performance practices

also aimed at explorations of personal and cultural identity in nineteenth- and early-twentieth century America.

Minstrelsy, America's first form of widespread popular entertainment rose to prominence in the 1830s. Consisting of skits, songs, and dancing, minstrelsy was performed mostly by white men, and more frequently after the Civil War by African American men. Performers used blackface, a theatrical makeup such as burnt cork or greasepaint, to create a stereotypical caricature of the appearance of blackness. These performers constructed complex performances of grotesquely exaggerated behaviors and cultural practices of African Americans as perceived by racist whites. Blackface minstrel performers enjoyed widespread popularity and toured throughout the country and around the globe. They presented and perpetuated American culture, including racist and misogynist material, the latter of which was often performed in drag, to national and international audiences. In the 1880s, minstrelsy contributed to the development of vaudeville, a genre of variety entertainment composed of several unrelated acts. Such performances represented a broad swath of American culture, the legacy of which is still seen today in popular entertainment forms such as reality television. Both white and African American performers engaged in blackface performance within minstrelsy and vaudeville, yet they often manipulated the stereotypes of race to different ends. While whites often perpetuated negative ideas about African Americans, blacks frequently performed subversively within the blackface mask, thereby calling into question the legitimacy of the racist stereotypes in which they worked.⁶

Women, and especially female performers of color, are often omitted or underrepresented within studies of such popular performance traditions. Because these

artists were not members of the dominant social class, and often experienced discrimination because of their race and/or gender, documentation of their work was not always preserved in the same manner as artists with more social capital. Furthermore, the popular entertainment genres that many historic female performers succeeded in, such as vaudeville, were predicated on performances involving techniques that are difficult to document, including improvisation and dance. The archive contains no written scripts for many artists' works. Alternately, the scripts are only the basis of what were often highly physical, improvised performances. Thus much that occurred on the stage is not apparent in what is extant on the page.

Performance and theatre scholarship, which has historically privileged printed dramatic works, has not always been open to the exploration of popular performance work. Until recently, women's contributions to genres such as minstrelsy and vaudeville have been largely silenced or erased in the archival record of performance history. Consequently, our understanding of how performance practices such as blackface, racial passing, and gender drag were performed is inaccurate and incomplete. In an effort to hear these forgotten voices, I have conducted archival research to uncover the histories of some of these important historical figures. This research focuses specifically on the history of sister acts, exploring how these female performance artists represent a collective resistant response to racial and gender-based stereotypes. This project makes evident the ways in which these sister acts borrow, comment upon, resist, and deconstruct the socially constructed ideologies of familial ties, race, gender, and sexuality within their particular historical moment.

“Shady Ladies: Sister Acts, Popular Performance, and the Subversion of American Identity” is a project with two major components. First, it is a historical project based on original archival research conducted at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, the Hatch-Billops Collection, and the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts. I construct and contextualize the performance histories of black and white sister acts, developing an argument for how these artists created a space for audience and scholarly dialogue surrounding the social constructions of race, gender, and sexuality through their often antithetical representations of identities in their performances. Second, I develop a theoretically informed comparative analysis of these groups’ performance and biographical histories. I articulate how women on both sides of the Jim Crow era color line negotiated and challenged social expectations. I argue that the performances of these women, and others like them, can be read as appropriating and/or complicating the idea of “family” to participate in and contribute to the development of personal and national identity in the United States.

I examine two African American groups, the Hyers Sisters and the Whitman Sisters, and two European American groups, the Dolly Sisters and the Duncan Sisters. These groups are representative of the sister act phenomenon in that they are biologically related sets of women who entered show business in pursuit of the American Dream of economic and social uplift. The Hyers Sisters used the integration of family and performance to develop a professional career as well as a platform for personal and racial uplift for African Americans immediately after the Civil War. The Whitman Sisters, following in the Hyers Sisters’ footsteps, are an example of a group of sisters who were able to parlay their own family ties into a larger family oriented performing act. They

successfully toured the Negro vaudeville circuit in the early twentieth century and created performance opportunities not only for themselves, but also for scores of other African American performers. The Dolly Sisters were identical twins and performed contemporaneously with the Whitmans. As immigrants from Hungary, they represented the American Dream for the millions of foreign-born Americans who flocked to the United States at the dawn of the twentieth century. Finally, the Duncan Sisters performed at the same time as the Whitmans and Dollies, exemplified the damaging legacy of racial stereotypes in popular entertainment, and carved a niche for themselves as a female comedy act that survived from the 1910s to the 1950s. While these groups are representative of the larger practice of sister acts, they are also exceptional in how each specifically negotiates elements of race, gender, and sexuality within their performances using racial passing, blackface, and gender drag. By doing so, their performances create space and opportunity for dialogue amongst historical audiences and contemporary scholars regarding the personal and social (de)construction of identity.

“Shady Ladies” expands previous theatre scholarship on popular performance, early Broadway, and vaudeville traditions. Using primary archival materials including scripts, critical reviews, artists’ scrapbooks, interviews, images, and audience reflections , I demonstrate how African American and white women in minstrelsy and vaudeville created opportunities for dialogue about the social construction of identity within their shared historical moment. This comparative analysis represents a new approach to the archive and repertoire of these artists and highlights sister acts’ participation and success in the genres of minstrelsy and vaudeville. The artists examined here challenged social expectations and limitations for both white women and all people of color in the larger

cultural sphere, created space for social response to and dialogue about issues of race and gender identities, and helped develop a greater precedent for the acceptance of female artists onstage. This interdisciplinary historical project contributes to a variety of fields such as African American studies, theatre and performance studies, and American studies.

Survey of Recent Scholarship

In the past two decades, the production of scholarship focused on performance near the turn of the twentieth century has been steady. These histories have coincided with the increase in popularity of studies in African American theatre, interdisciplinary cultural studies, studies of intersectional identities, and identity politics. The result has been several histories and case studies focusing on theatre as a site of community making and conversations surrounding the development and evolution of American national identity.

The field has produced several histories of African American theatre since the late 1990s such as David Krasner's work on African American theatre and performance which includes *Resistance, Parody, and Double Consciousness in African American Theatre, 1895-1910* (1997), *A Beautiful Pageant: African American Theatre, Drama, and Performance in the Harlem Renaissance, 1910-1927* (2002), and *African American Performance and Theater History: A Critical Reader* edited with Harry J. Elam (2001). The first two volumes have provided theatre history scholars with overviews of two extremely productive periods in the history of African American theatre. The third is an anthology of works by scholars including Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Joseph Roach, Sandra

Shannon, and Judith Williams. The range of topics, periods, and performance styles addressed in this collection bears witness to the richness of African American theatre history and the need for additional in-depth studies of particular periods, artists, and performance practices. *A History of African American Theatre* by Errol G. Hill and James V. Hatch (2003) provides another broad survey of work by blacks in theatre in the United States. The anthology *Performing America: Cultural Nationalism in American Theatre* edited by Jeffrey D. Mason and J. Ellen Gainor (1999) contributes an overview of how the nation, as well as the concept of national identity including whiteness, blackness, and immigrant identities, has been constructed in American theatre. These histories are all instructive in highlighting some of the contributions of African Americans to American theatre. Due to their nature as surveys, these texts are unable to provide in-depth analysis or examination of specific groups or performance practices. They offer an overview of African American theatre history and opportunities for additional specialized research in this area such as that undertaken here.

While broader histories of African American theatre have expanded our awareness of its role in shaping American theatre and culture as a whole, other scholarship has deepened our understanding of specific racialized performance practices. Eric Lott's *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (1993) provides an intersectional history and analysis of how race, class, gender, and sexuality were inextricably linked in popular performances aimed at and performed by male working class immigrants in America's urban areas in the second half of the nineteenth century. His study provides an exemplary model for interdisciplinary research and the complexities of projects that traverse the color line yet is focused solely on male

performers and the performance of black and white masculinities. Annemarie Bean, James V. Hatch, and Brooks McNamara contribute additional case studies of racial performances in *Inside the Minstrel Mask: Readings in Nineteenth-Century Blackface Minstrelsy* (1996). This edited collection contains new work in its attention to the intersections of race and gender in minstrelsy, as well as an array of primary materials on the subject. Michael Rogin's *Blackface, White Noise: Jewish Immigrants in the Hollywood Melting Pot* (1998) extends the conversation regarding race, gender, and class, tracing its influences into the performances and careers of Jewish immigrants in the Golden Age of Hollywood. His work further blurs the color line, articulating how the performance of racial difference reinscribes belonging for particular immigrants seeking acceptance and identification with a white American identity within the highly segregated early film industry. Like Lott, Rogin focuses on the work of male performers. These projects are critical to our understanding of how the racial and gendered performances of minstrelsy have become an inextricable part of American culture, infiltrating later forms of popular performance including vaudeville, film, and television. They also point to the need for additional histories that highlight the contributions of female performers at the turn of the last century.

Vaudeville and variety shows, which emerged in part from the popularity and broad appeal of minstrel shows, have also gained scholarly attention in the last two decades. Robert C. Allen's *Horrible Prettiness: Burlesque and American Culture* (1991) articulates the rise of the female performer in the nineteenth century, emphasizing dance and burlesque's critique of gender as an example of the transgressions possible in popular entertainment. Charlotte Canning's *The Most American Thing in America: Circuit*

Chautauqua as Performance (2005) provides an in-depth, nuanced history of touring Chautauqua performances, arguing for the recognition of these popular variety companies as early mass entertainment producers in the United States, as creators and sustainers of American culture in small-town America from 1904-1932. Canning argues these performances claimed a particular kind of homogenous American identity through the power of widespread, repetitive representation. Arthur Frank Wertheim's *Vaudeville Wars: How the Keith-Albee and Orpheum Circuits Controlled the Big-Time and Its Performers* (2006) shines light on the men responsible for merging the two largest vaudeville circuits into a chain of theatres reaching from east to west. This history examines the circuit's heyday from 1890-1920 and its evolution from a vaudeville circuit to an early movie industry dynasty responsible for entertaining millions of Americans in search of a good time.

The histories of minstrelsy and vaudeville, and performances of race, class, gender, and sexuality merge in case studies aimed at writing the histories of particular artists performing in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. M. Alison Kibler articulates the gendered symbolism in audiences, the rise of the female vaudevillian, and the labor movement in the late nineteenth century in *Rank Ladies: Gender and Cultural Hierarchy in American Vaudeville* (1999). In case studies of individual performers and acts, she examines how the ambiguous reputation of vaudeville affected female artists' careers and reputations. Harold Norton and Margot Webb, known professionally as Norton and Margot, a black ballroom dance team whose careers were shaped and dictated by racial prejudices regarding "appropriate" types of performance and cultural production for African Americans during the 1920s-1940s, are the focus of Brenda Dixon

Gottschild's *Waltzing in the Dark: African American Vaudeville and Race Politics in the Swing Era* (2000). Gottschild presents the story of Norton and Margot as part of an "invisibilized" history of African Americans living, creating, and performing in plain sight, yet hidden from public acknowledgement of their contributions to American history and cultural formation. In *Bodies in Dissent: Spectacular Performances of Race and Freedom, 1850-1910* (2006) Daphne Brooks reads archival materials including playscripts, reviews, and personal letters to develop a history of African American performance. She articulates the ways black performers from the mid nineteenth century through the early twentieth used performances such as musicals, magic, and dance as well as emerging stage technologies including panoramas to overcome familiar discourses on race and instead developed a new self-actualization and consideration of blackness in transatlantic culture. Jayna Brown's *Babylon Girls: Black Women Performers and the Shaping of the Modern* (2008) writes the histories of black chorus girls, performers who lived, performed, and toured in popular entertainment shows at the turn of the last century. She recovers the histories of these often anonymous women, presenting them as sophisticated professionals, artists, and creators of culture and society within the African American community, the American theatre writ large, and on the international stage.

Histories of specific sister acts have also been a part of the broadening field of studies in theatre, popular entertainment, and American culture. Nadine George Graves's *The Royalty of Negro Vaudeville: The Whitman Sisters and the Negotiation of Race, Gender, and Class in African American Theater, 1900-1940* (2000), Dean Jensen's *The Lives and Loves of Daisy and Violet Hilton* (2006), and Gary Chapman's *The Delectable*

Dollies: The Dolly Sisters, Icons of the Jazz Age (2007) all contribute histories of individual sister acts to the field. These histories begin to acknowledge and celebrate a particular way women – specifically sisters – performed, exploited, and celebrated gender and familial relationships onstage.

This survey of recent scholarship reflects a growing commitment to expanding theatre history to include popular performance, moving theatrical contributions of both white women and all people of color from the margins to the center of scholarly discourse and research, and to gaining a deeper understanding of performance practices through micro histories of individual artists and groups, which inherently reflect and reinforce our understanding of the field as a whole. Yet there remains room for new studies such as this one, aimed at continuing to document women’s contributions to the history of performance, identifying overlaps between black and white artists and their work, theorizing ways historical performances and archives can be interpreted, and exploring how the segregated theatre world of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, reflective of the larger society, provided or restricted opportunities for white women and all performers of color. The artists examined in this study all navigated professional, personal, and social challenges to produce performances that critiqued, celebrated, and constructed private, public, and political identities onstage.

Overview of Project

“Shady Ladies” moves beyond the broad histories or histories of single sister acts mentioned above to examine and compare several sister acts as representative of a larger practice occurring on both sides of the color line in late nineteenth- and early

twentieth-century popular performance. This project provides case study examples of black and white sister acts and other female stars working in the waning years of minstrelsy and the heyday of vaudeville and variety performance, developing histories for these artists and highlighting the ways these women all used performance techniques such as race and gender passing in their performances to critique, subvert, or reinforce social identity norms. The chapters are arranged chronologically, from the earliest group to the latest. Each is dedicated to one of the following sister acts: the Hyers Sisters, Whitman Sisters, Duncan Sisters, and the Dolly Sisters. I situate their performance careers within their historical context and provide an intersectional, theoretically informed analysis of how these artists created identities on and off stage.

American race relations at the turn of the last century were inherently binary. The categories of black and white dominated the cultural landscape, despite the presence of the indigenous population and waves of immigrants from a variety of backgrounds arriving in the United States. Racial identity was largely predicated on categorization in either one or the other of these categories. In this project, like Siobhan B. Somerville's *Queering the Color Line: Race and the Invention of Homosexuality in American Culture*,

my analysis of 'race' in this study is limited to constructions of 'blackness' and 'whiteness,' primarily because prevailing discourses of race and racial segregation in late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century American culture deployed this bifurcation more pervasively than other models of racial diversity.⁷

The strict racial demarcations present during these sisters acts' careers serve as a backdrop for the ways that these women often contested such restrictive identity coding, and sometimes reinscribed these binaries to maintain their own privilege, benefit, and security. Exploring the various approaches to race present in these sister acts underscores Matthew Frye Jacobson's argument that "race is not just a conception; it is also a perception. The problem is not merely how races are comprehended, but how they are seen."⁸ These sister acts worked within the concept of racial binaries to engage audiences in a variety of perceptions about racial identity and social position.

Writing the histories of four sister acts is a revisionist project aimed at including women's contributions and stories in the larger history of theatre and performance in the United States. "Shady Ladies" reflects Rita Felski's recognition that "[g]ender affects not just the factual content of historical knowledge – what is included and what gets left out – but also the philosophical assumptions underlying our interpretations of the nature and meaning of social process." This study examines a modern moment, exploring how sister acts negotiated systems of power circumscribing gendered, racial, and sexual identities in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. By creating this collective history I aim to expand our historical knowledge of performance by recognizing these women's contributions to performance history and the development of American cultural expressions. I explore how the sister act as a distinct genre enabled performance careers for women during this time period. This comparative history of four sister acts is representative of the artistry and entertainment of countless sororal teams including the Carolina Twins, Sutherland Sisters, Cherry Sisters, Mills Sisters, Hilton Sisters, Elinore Sisters, Nichols Sisters, and more who performed in the late nineteenth and early

twentieth centuries. They too contributed to our understanding of womanhood and American identity, and their contributions remain to be fully written into histories of popular performance.

Brenda Dixon Gottschild's observes that "[w]hen different cultures share the same geography, it is inevitable that they will also share the same biography, regardless of who is in power."⁹ Acknowledging that sister acts with various racial, sexual, and class backgrounds all engaged in performances of identity demonstrates a common experience amongst women within the world of popular performance and in the country itself. Though separated socially and professionally by segregation laws and cultural ideology, these black and white sister acts were performing contemporaneously and in the same culture. As a result, their careers reflect shared interests and concerns which, when studied side-by-side, demonstrate how women on both sides of the color line struggled with and negotiated identity in a segregated culture. Each of the groups featured in this project is ultimately concerned with social and economic class uplift. The means by which they achieve success and status differ, yet each sister act is engaged in a performance of survival and strength.

Key Terms

Throughout this project the history and analysis of the sister acts I consider are informed by or invoke several key theories or ideas. I define them briefly here to clarify their meanings and the ways they inform this project. Throughout the project I refer to the performances of each black and white sister act studied as "subversive" in some way. In doing so I mean to suggest that these sister acts and others like them are performing in

ways that contest social expectations of women, all people of color, and the economic and social realms of class identity. They are attempting to subvert, or challenge social practices, laws, and beliefs that are restrictive for women and all people of color, but they are attempting to do so in ways that are not so disruptive as to brand them as outsiders, morally questionable, or sexually loose. While many of the ideas, terms, and theories I use to examine these sister acts are drawn from black feminist, whiteness, and gender and sexuality studies, I do not claim to make interventions within these scholarly areas. Rather, this is a historical project that is influenced by the theories and scholars cited herein, whose work illuminates possible approaches to the historical archive.

Several of the artists examined here (de)construct race and gender identity not only by crafting their onstage looks, but also their sound. I draw on Laurie Stras's term "aural passing" to illuminate readings of performances and archival documentation of the Hyers Sisters careers that addresses the phenomenon of identification by means of sound. Aural passing refers to a performance in which a performer of one particular racial identity is heard and understood to be of another racial identity by the listening audience. This understanding is derived from a socially constructed notion of what members of particular races are expected to sound like – including tone, dialect, range, rhythm, and cadence of song and speech.¹⁰ I extend Stras's idea of aural racial passing to develop the idea of an aural drag, that is, a crafting of sound in order to perform across the male-female gender binary. When one sister is perceived to sound female and the other male, aural drag serves to reinforce cross dressing performances amongst sister acts, enabling sisters to more realistically represent heterosexual romantic relationships onstage.

This intersectional project highlights the ways women in sister acts performed race, class, gender, and sexuality, as well as how each group faced challenges due to its varying status as black or foreign, female, poor, or of a non-heteronormative sexual identity. Each of these identity constructs is tied to social systems of power and privilege. Black feminist theorist Patricia Hill Collins develops an explanation of how African American women specifically are disenfranchised within a socially marginalizing interlocking system of oppression based on intersectional identity traits such as race, class, gender, and sexuality. She argues that these traits come together in a web which she calls “the matrix of domination [which] refers to how these intersectional oppressions are actually organized”¹¹ into economic, political, and ideological forms of oppression designed to keep marginalized individuals in positions of social disenfranchisement. My reading of the circumstances of the Whitman Sisters’ lives and careers and how they battle systematic intersectional oppression is informed by Collins’ work.

I also draw on the theory of “racechange” developed by Susan Gubar to develop readings of the Whitman’s performances of racial identity. Gubar states:

The term is meant to suggest the traversing of racial boundaries: racial imitation or impersonation, cross-racial mimicry or mutability, white posing as black, or black passing as white, pan-racial mutuality [. . .] Racechange provides artists in diverse media a way of thinking about racial parameters [. . .] representations of racechange test the boundaries between racially defined identities, functioning paradoxically to reinforce and to challenge the Manichean meanings Western societies give to color.¹²

Gubar's theories of racial malleability inform my examination of the Whitman Sister's performances of race and how they enacted different kinds of racechange in their shows to develop an entertaining, yet subversive, vaudeville act. Related to racechange, I develop an understanding of the Whitman's work through the term "erace" by which I argue that the Whitmans strove to remove, or erase, damaging racial stereotypes in society through their performances by emphasizing positive representations of blackness in American culture.

The Dolly Sisters chapter is informed by David Roediger's theory of "inbetweenness." This condition describes the experience of millions of foreign born immigrants who found their way to the United States in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Upon arrival they quickly learned that American society was bifurcated along the black/white color line, and that their identity, professional prospects, and social standing would be determined by their categorization on either side of this line. Identifying as white, but also undeniably Other by virtue of their foreign origins, immigrants such as the Dolly Sisters experienced an existence marked by such inbetweenness. I argue that the Dolly Sisters used capitalized on this inbetweenness in their careers, parlaying their whiteness and exoticism into financial and personal success.

Finally, in my study of the Duncan Sisters I develop a reading of their performances of prepubescent girls as what I term an "infantilization routine," a kid act, in which the sisters played young girls and used high-pitched "baby" voices (another kind of aural passing). This infantile routine served them well throughout their careers as a means by which they diffused their perceived power as independent female performers,

thereby creating a performance in which they were able to act against socially acceptable roles for white women. Paired with later performances in blackface, I argue the sisters developed their own brand of what Henry Jenkins calls “anarchistic comedy,” a performance style that offers audiences an outlet from the discipline of polite society via a performance given by someone perceived to be a social outsider. These performances provide audiences with vicarious escape from social expectations while enabling audiences to distance or disassociate themselves from the performer.

Hyers Sisters

Though the Hyers Sisters have been overlooked or mentioned only briefly in most histories of American theatre, women in performance, or African American theatre, their careers and popularity have been acknowledged by a handful of performance historians including Daphne Brooks, John Graziano, Errol G. Hill, Henry T. Sampson, and Eileen Southern. These scholars have helped expand theatre history by identifying this early sister act as predecessors of turn-of-the-century early black musical comedy stars including the well known team of Bert Williams and George Walker, Aida Overton Walker, and the Negro vaudeville stars the Whitman Sisters. All of the authors above cite the Hyers Sisters’ pioneering work as “race women” committed to excellence and accomplishment in spite of prejudices they faced because of their identities as African American women. Though they record the Hyers Sisters’ artistic and class achievements, they do not unpack or analyze the intersectional identity claims that are central to the message of the sisters’ career and theatrical works.

This chapter joins various historical artifacts and previous scholarship with a new investigation of the ways the Hyers Sisters' performances portrayed race, class, gender, and romantic relationships between African Americans during a period of remarkable transition in the United States, especially for African Americans. I develop their history through newspaper articles and reviews, play scripts, promotional portraits, and advertisements, and by engaging secondary scholarship about their work. The Hyers launched their careers by performing vocal concerts; however their most significant work was their repertoire of full-length melodramatic plays featuring plots and characters that highlighted musical performances. These works, written specifically for the Hyers Sisters, were the early forerunners of modern American musical theatre. Examining their early careers as classical vocal musicians and their involvement in three major theatrical productions: *Out of Bondage*, *Peculiar Sam*, or *The Underground Railroad*, and *Urlina, the African Princess*, I provide examples of how the Hyers Sisters used minstrel stereotypes of blacks as well as gender drag within their shows. They performed a variety of roles while challenging social limits of class, gender, and race and maintaining favor with critics and audiences. The Hyers Sisters' range of repertoire and performance techniques strengthened their careers, making it possible for them to work in a white, male dominated profession. Their longevity and success laid the foundation for future sister acts as well as the expansion and development of black musical theatre and popular performance in the decades to come.

Whitman Sisters

The Whitman Sisters, like the Hyers Sisters, created and accentuated a high class reputation on their tours. The sisters were always quick to point out their religious background as daughters of a minister, employing their parentage and status as a family performance troupe to protect themselves against any challenge to their moral or social respectability. Their predecessors, the Hyers, catered to mostly white, upper class audiences in California, the Midwest, and Northeast with their renditions of European classical opera accentuated with a few selections of traditional Negro spirituals. In contrast, the Whitman Sisters did not perform full-length plays, choosing instead to develop detailed variety shows featuring popular and emerging jazz tunes, spirituals (another nod to their religious roots), and energetic tap dancing performed with a large touring troupe. They maintained a commitment to performing for mostly African American and sometimes racially integrated audiences in the South. Much like the Hyers, the Whitmans were also dedicated to a routine that accentuated their strengths and created performance opportunities for other black artists. They also strove to offer high quality entertainment to the paying public, and portrayed themselves as respectable ambassadors of African American racial uplift and community. While the Hyers accomplished these goals by adopting classical European performance techniques including operatic musical selections and full-length plays, the Whitmans were successful at performing variety shows including spirituals, dance, and jazz, genres associated with African American culture and the rise of modernity during the early twentieth century in the United States.

This chapter expands and deepens Nadine George Graves's history of the Whitman Sisters. My reading of their performance archives is informed by the work of black feminists Patricia Hill Collins and bell hooks and the queer and gender theories of Judith Butler. I relate the Whitmans' performance practices such as race and gender passing to performances of other contemporary female artists including Florence Mills and May Irwin. These comparisons reflect the popular treatment of race and gender by female performers at the time, and highlight the Whitman Sisters' unique approach to identity politics made possible within their family troupe. I identify their contributions to the development of modern African American female and familial identities. The result is an intersectional analysis of the Whitman Sisters' efforts to maintain respectability and achieve upward social mobility within the competitive vaudeville industry through their contestation of race, gender, and sexual stereotypes of African Americans. Their accomplishments ultimately earned them top billing and renown as artists in their own right. They were known as "the royalty of Negro vaudeville."

Dolly Sisters

Drawing on David Roediger's, Matthew Frye Jacobson's, and Richard Dyer's theories of whiteness, immigration, class, and identity and expanding Gary Chapman's 2006 popular biography *The Delectable Dollies*, I examine primary archival sources and previous literature to create an analysis of the Dolly Sisters' lives and career in the spotlight of vaudeville. The Dollies lived their lives as a balancing act, capitalizing on their ability as "white" immigrants "to keep both similarity and difference at play."¹³ The Dollies exploited and encouraged interest in their glamorous, exotic, carbon-copy

appearance and deportment, capitalizing on them to achieve successful careers and society positions. They commodified their ethnic difference while simultaneously establishing their cultural whiteness in order to assimilate in the New World. Their entry into high-class society and their lavish displays of financial success by means of conspicuous consumption served to underscore their whiteness, since economic excess, aristocratic lovers and marriages, high profile divorces, and social acceptance were social privileges seldom achieved or allowed to individuals of “other” races.

Such “inbetweenness” can also be interpreted as the Dolly Sisters’ embodiment of a particular American experience given their status as immigrants *and* identical twins. Like many European immigrants at the turn of the century, they were at the same time white and Other, simultaneously the same as and different from the dominant white society they attempted to access. As sisters, the Dollies belonged to the select but popular category of sister acts, family acts, and glamorous entertainers. As identical twins, they were removed from and a step above “mere” sisters, or sister “acts.” Due to their biological duplication, the Dolly Sisters were regarded as genetically “more real,” closer, and as different from the average female performer or audience member. This account and examination of their careers reveals how they embodied and mirrored performances of sameness and difference, emphasizing their identical visages using choreography, costuming, and mirroring routines.

The ability to span ethnic, racial, and cultural lines during a period of great racial and labor unrest between native born, English-speaking white and black Americans and foreign born immigrants was the Dolly Sisters’ vehicle to fame and fortune in the 1910s. They are remarkable for their ability to negotiate the complex racial and cultural system

in place during their arrival in the United States by celebrating their difference and sameness. They epitomize the resilient nature of so many immigrants attempting to find fortune by adopting, mirroring, and expanding what it means to claim an “American” identity.

Duncan Sisters

The Duncan Sisters, a white sister act performing contemporaneously with the Whitmans and Dollies, created the type of negative stereotypical work by white performers that the Whitman and the Hyers Sisters endeavored to negate. Rosetta and Vivian Duncan, two fair, blonde sisters from California, created a vaudeville act that capitalized on the culture’s enthusiasm for racist comedy, female bodies on display, and a longing for good old-fashioned minstrelsy. Launching their careers in the 1910s, the Duncan Sisters parlayed their acting and musical composition skills into the comedy routine that would define their career and vaudeville legacy. Rosetta and Vivian personified Topsy and Eva, two characters so intertwined in the American psyche that they might as well have been sisters, for close to forty years in *Topsy and Eva* (1923). I develop a history of the sisters’ careers by examining archival material including the play script, reviews, press about the multiple revivals of the show, playbills, and production and publicity photos.

By exploring their work within the parameters of this project, in comparison to African American sister acts and another contemporaneous “white” sister act, I demonstrate how their representations of race and gender – including blackface performance – reflected and contrasted the performances of other women along the color

line. The Duncan Sisters are of specific interest because of how they used negative racial stereotypes in their performances to shield themselves against public criticism of their private lives. By calling public attention to performances of stereotypes that were not part of their own identities, such as blackness, the Duncans created private spaces wherein their personal identities were protected from critique. This was particularly true for Rosetta, whose career in blackface served as a mask hiding her own lesbianism. During a time of great cultural obsession and anxiety concerning race, the work of sister acts like the Duncans – founded on the visage of familial identity which included race – were predicated on real or artificial biological connections, reflecting Richard Dyer’s assertion that, since “race is always about bodies, it is also always about the reproduction of those bodies.”¹⁴ Sister acts emphasize these connections through their performance of genetics, reproductive heteronormativity, and racial identity. Performing together, “the black and white Duncans (sisters under the skin)”¹⁵ mirrored and underscored each other’s identity. They simultaneously appropriated and rejected the Other that they were not.

Viewing the Duncan archive with an understanding of Brenda Dixon Gottschild’s and Eric Lott’s theories of appropriation and love and theft between black and white cultures in America, as well as E. Patrick Johnson’s concepts of appropriating blackness, I consider the Duncan Sisters’ performances of race, gender, and sexuality as acts based on social and economic survival. The appropriation and fabrication of blackness in their shows points to a nuanced representation of the contentious connections between black and white women in the United States. This study helps write the history of an overlooked but significant female comic pair while revealing and naming previously

unacknowledged ways that white women have contributed to the ongoing marginalization and denigration of black women in the United States.

Though the culture in which these sister acts performed was a segregated one, contemporary studies of them should be integrated. When historical or contemporary studies are consistently segregated by race we run the risk of overlooking or ignoring the larger cultural narratives that become apparent when performance is viewed *in toto*. Examining historical performance practices of black and white women simultaneously strengthens the visibility of women on both sides of the color line. The contributions of black and white women are then recognized equally, rather than in isolation, in competition with, or otherwise apart from one another. Studies such as “Shady Ladies” work to integrate studies of all women’s performance practices, and to recognize them as an integral part of what has occurred in the larger sphere of culture and performance.

By viewing the historical experiences of black and white women simultaneously we are able to better understand the shared social, political, and cultural circumstances that affected, and continue to impact our lives and careers, albeit in very different ways. “Shady Ladies” is inspired by black feminist theorists who have encouraged dialogue, awareness and respect of differences, and solidarity between women across racial and cultural lines. These conversations are challenging since, as bell hooks notes “different cultural backgrounds can make communication difficult. This has been especially true of black and white female relationships.”¹⁶ But by developing a comparative analysis of black and white women’s work, I demonstrate that their work creates, when one listens to their voices simultaneously, an opportunity for dialogue and critique of social identity

constructs within their own historical moment. This analysis is also representative of how contemporary scholars can expand discussions about the experiences and contributions of women on both sides of the color line.

This project does not attempt to paint a picture of social equality amongst segregated women. Rather, it provides an understanding of how each sister act negotiated their particular circumstances using similar tactics in order to overcome shared gender, and racially specific, barriers and prejudices. In recognizing their similar approaches to different social challenges, it becomes apparent that these sister acts all developed a practice in which representational systems such as gender, sexuality, class, and race were negotiated within feminist performances. Elaine Aston calls these kinds of acts a “sphere of disturbance”¹⁷ wherein social norms are contested and complicated to achieve social capital or spark awareness and discourse. These acts reflect how, as Kum-Kum Bhavnani explains “‘difference’ is a concept that can be worked with, rather than being a concept that divides women from each other.”¹⁸ Difference is the starting point for conversations about how the Hyers, Whitmans, Dollies and Duncans all used performance – and the performance of difference – as a means to achieve similar personal, professional, and political objectives in their careers. Their performances of social and cultural difference enacted through their performances of familial sameness makes sister acts a rich site for analysis.

Sister acts are all ultimately moving towards the same goals of upward social and economic mobility. The sister acts examined here employ difference in their performances as a means of self actualization, social advancement, and economic survival. Creating identity through performing both a personal identity, such as that

supported by the frame of the sister act, as well as performing difference through an embodiment of the Other, is a powerful tool of self-definition. Peggy Phelan notes that “[s]eeing the other is a social form of self-reproduction. For in looking at/for the other, we seek to re-present ourselves to ourselves.”¹⁹ The sister acts studied in “Shady Ladies” looked across social borders of race, gender, and sexuality to acknowledge not only other women and social groups, but also how they were viewed within their society, and to communicate how they desired to be viewed in performances of recognition and self-actualization. This study celebrates the individual stories of these women while at the same time encouraging a broader understanding of their similarities. By realizing the histories of sister acts, we can celebrate their performances of sisterhood while working towards Sisterhood in our scholarship and contemporary culture.

**The Hyers Sisters:
Pioneers of (African) American (Musical) Theatre**

*Each in your voice perfection seem, –
Rare, rich, melodious. We might deem
Some angel wandered from its sphere,
So sweet your notes strike on the ear.
In song or ballad, still we find
Some beauties new to charm the mind.
Trill on, sweet sisters from a golden shore;
Emma and Anna, sing for us once more;
Raise high your voices blending in accord:
So shall your fame be widely spread abroad.*²⁰

Introduction

The Hyers Sisters, Anna Madah (1855-1925) and Emma Louise (1857- c.1899) (figure 2.1), began their careers as young vocal geniuses presented in concert by their parents at the Metropolitan Theatre in San Francisco in 1867. Performing for the first time only two years after the end of the Civil War and four years after the Emancipation Proclamation, the sisters, just ten and twelve years old, initially focused their repertoire on classical musical selections, emphasizing their skill and training as singers. As lyric singers performing operatic pieces, Peter Hudson identifies the Hyers as some of the earliest African American “cross over artists” of the nineteenth century, who

“transgressed the boundaries between high and low culture by playing the marginal American concert stages . . . as well as minstrel and vaudeville shows” in an attempt to gain success despite frequent restrictions from major (white) American stages and touring circuits.²¹ African American cultural historian Eileen Southern notes that performance careers, especially for black artists, were particularly difficult at this time, when “America generally ignored its own musicians, white as well as black, preferring to import its musical culture from Europe. Black performers were further limited by racial prejudice, especially when they attempted to sing anything other than spirituals or minstrel songs.”²² Within this context at the very start of their careers, the Hyers strove to demonstrate not only their personal talents, but also to act as representatives of the larger, newly freed black population, representing the abilities and respectability of African American individuals and artists. Their careers are representative of not only wider efforts at racial uplift and class appropriation by blacks but also modern national identity development at work during the Reconstruction era.

The Hyers Sisters were not the first sister act on either side of the color line or the only one performing during their lifetime. The Carolina Twins (figure 2.2), a set of conjoined African American twins born into slavery in North Carolina in 1851, were famous performers in P.T. Barnum’s American Museum in New York and the Barnum traveling circus. They were displayed as human oddities and also performed as dancers and musicians throughout the United States and abroad, including an appearance before Queen Victoria in 1871.²³ Other Hyers contemporaries were the Seven Sutherland Sisters (figure 2.3), white singing sisters well known in vaudeville, on Broadway, and in sideshows for their astoundingly long hair (six to seven feet each) and their musical

abilities. The Sutherlands capitalized on their locks and looks, parlaying their abundance of hair into a successful line of beauty and hair products, fashion endorsements, and a parade of tabloid-worthy romantic entanglements.²⁴ These and other sister acts were known throughout the country and abroad.

What makes the Hyers Sisters remarkable is their success as class conscious and exemplary role models during the heyday of their careers, c.1867-1893. Earlier and fellow sister acts focused their performances on traditional vaudeville material such as popular musical numbers, with their relationship as sisters being the primary novelty of their act. The Hyers Sisters pushed the limits of performance expectations for women. Emma Louise and Anna Madah often performed opposite of one another, and as opposite genders, which they portrayed in both their vocal and dramatic performances. Additionally, they pushed racial boundaries by staging one of the first black musicals set in Black Africa (*Urlina, the African Princess*), performing for black and white audiences, integrating the cast of their production of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and collaborating with other African American women such as playwright Pauline Elizabeth Hopkins.

While little has been written about the Hyers Sisters in most histories of American theatre, women in performance, or African American theatre, their success has been documented by a few noted performance scholars including John Graziano, Errol G. Hill, Henry T. Sampson, and Eileen Southern. These historians have made major contributions to theatre history by identifying these women as the predecessors of *fin de siècle* early black musical comedy stars such as Bert Williams and George Walker, Aida Overton Walker, and the Whitman Sisters. All note the Hyers Sisters' groundbreaking work as "race women" committed to exemplary achievement despite, and sometimes in

celebration of, their race. Yet their documentation of the Hyers Sisters' achievements stop short at recognizing their artistic and class achievements, not fully unpacking and analyzing the intersectional identity claims that can be read in the women's work.

This chapter brings together varied historical materials and previous scholarly work with new analysis of how the Hyers Sisters' performances depicted race, class, and gender during a time of tremendous change in the United States, particularly for African Americans. By reading their history through performance artifacts such as reviews, playscripts, promotional portraits, and advertisements, and by engaging secondary scholarship about their work, I contribute additional insight into the Hyers Sisters' often overlooked contributions to the founding of American and black musical theatre and the development of American popular entertainment. Examining their early careers and three major productions: *Out of Bondage*, *Peculiar Sam*, or *The Underground Railroad*, and *Urlina, the African Princess*, I demonstrate the Hyers Sisters' ability to perform a range of roles and challenge social limits of class, gender, and race while remaining popular with both critics and audiences. This sense of flexibility with regard to repertoire and performance secured their careers, enabling them to work in a male and white dominated industry, and helped them to lay the groundwork for the emergence of future sister acts as well as the growth and development of black musical theatre and popular entertainment in the decades to come.

Early Career

Anna Madah and Emma Louise were born to free black parents from New York, Samuel B. Hyers and Annie E. Hyers, who traveled west to California in 1856.

Consequently the sisters were, from the very beginning of their lives, part of an elite number of African Americans, a group W.E.B. DuBois would later identify as “the Talented Tenth.”²⁵ Beginning their lives as free blacks in a position of relative class privilege was an enormous advantage to the sisters, who continued to pursue social uplift and professional equality, and served as examples for other aspiring African Americans throughout their careers. Settling in Sacramento and beginning their family, Samuel and Annie Hyers, musicians themselves, trained their daughters from an early age, then provided them with opportunities for professional instruction including singing lessons with opera star Josephine D’Ormy. With this early and rigorous training, and the strong guidance and management of their father, the Hyers Sisters, at ten and twelve years of age, began their concert career giving recitals around San Francisco and Oakland.²⁶

From the start of their careers, the Hyers Sisters elicited immediate critical acclaim and fascination with their unusual vocal and dramatic talents. In an April 27, 1867 review of their debut concert, *The Chronicle* (San Francisco) notes of the sisters:

Their musical power is acknowledged; and those who heard them last evening were unanimous in their praises, saying that rare natural gifts would insure for them a leading position among the prima donnas of the age.

Miss Madah has a pure, sweet soprano voice, very true, even, and flexible, of remarkable compass and smoothness. Her rendition of ‘Casta Diva,’ and her soprano in the tower scene from ‘Il Trovatore,’ and Verdi’s force e’ luci che l’anima,’ as also in the ballad, ‘The Rhine Maidens,’ was almost faultless, and

thoroughly established her claims to the universal commendation she has received from all the connoisseurs in melody who have heard her.

Miss Louise is a natural wonder, being a fine alto-singer, and also the possessor of a pure tenor-voice. Her tenor is of wonderful range; and, in listening to her singing, it is difficult to believe that one is not hearing a talented young man instead of the voice of a young girl. Her character song is one of the greatest 'hits' ever made; and henceforth her position as a favorite with an audience is assured.²⁷

Emma Louise and Anna Madah Hyers are heralded as “prima donnas of the age” and a “natural wonder” – a warm welcome to the stage if there ever was one. Performing works from the classical Western operatic repertoire lent the sisters immediate cultural cache. It is important to note that rather than launching their careers as part of a picanniny chorus – a type of popular performance troupe of often anonymous and uncredited young African American children who performed in minstrel and plantation shows as dancers, often with a white female lead²⁸ – the Hyers, with their parents’ guidance and management, presented themselves as leading ladies in their own right, capable of performing major artistic works with “almost faultless” ease. Their abilities were evident from the start, and they earned additional critical acclaim in future reviews of their concert tours.

In their next major concert, given in Salt Lake City in August 1871, the Hyers Sisters again chose to emphasize their classical training and musical talent by performing portions of the two scenes from the first and second acts of Donizetti’s opera *Linda di Chamounix*. The concert review in *The Deseret News*, written by Professor John

Tullidge, details the technical difficulty of the piece and commends the Hyers Sisters' success with the work. While lengthy, it is worth including here in its near entirety, for it demonstrates the thoroughness with which these young women were often critiqued and found to be successful in their endeavors.

The first act opened with a recitative e cavatina, selected from No.4, on the words, 'Ah, tardai troppo eal nostro favorito' [I delayed too long, and at our favorite meeting place...].

The recitative is in A flat major. But there are no flats or sharps in the signature: these are placed before the notes as required. When the transitions are rapid, as they are in this piece, it renders the reading very difficult in securing correct intonation. But notwithstanding these frequent changes, and intricate skipping intervals, Miss Anna accomplished the difficulty with ease, and perfectly in tune. The rapid cadence on the dominate was artistically rendered.

The aria follows with an allegretto in three-four time, and the execution in this division is very rapid; but the vocalist was equal to the task, and performed it with ease and grace. But the most astonishing feat was the cadenza in the cavatina: the singer, instead of closing on D flat – fourth line of staff – took an improvising flight, catching in that flight an appoggiatura grace on the note E flat above the lines; and closed with the D-flat, a note below on the pause.

This is a dangerous flight for one so young: nevertheless, the note intoned was clear, distinct, and bell-like.

Miss Emma sang the alto in the 'Carlo Ballato' with Miss Anna, in a duetto on the words, 'Qui si pria della partenza' [Here is the text of its own departure]. The alto takes the notes a sixth below the soprano, and her deep mellow voice produced fine effect. The next is a recitative by soprano and alto. In this division the intervallic skippings are difficult; but they are correctly interpreted. The alto then takes up a larghetto in six-eight time, key D minor. This portion required much *con dolore* expression, which was delivered with much tremolo effect by Miss Emma; and her rich, pure contralto voice in the low register told well. The scene finished with a duet by the two sisters, who were warmly and deservedly applauded.

The scene in act second contained much of the same forms of execution as the first . . .

Part third commenced with the Magic-wove Scarf,' from Barnett's opera of 'The Mountain Sylph.'

The scene of the scarf is laid in Scotland. The mountain sylph is a fairy, and falls in love with the tenor, a young Scotchman. The baritone is a Scotch necromancer. The young lover, fearful of losing his fairy love, appeals to this demon for aid; and he, wishing to destroy the power of the fairy, gives the young man the 'Magic-wove Scarf' to throw around her. He was enticed, and threw the scarf around' but, the moment it touched her, she became spell-bound, and is supposed to die, but is released by a fairy of superior power.

The trio opens with a fine baritone solo; and, considering Mr. Hyers is not a professional singer, the part was creditably rendered.

The tenor, Miss Emma, conveyed the author's meaning truly, and her imitation of that voice took her to the F sharp below the staff. This note was intoned with perfect ease.

In Miss Anna's part there are some beautiful rouladial passages, which were delivered by the young lady smoothly and distinctly; and, when she became spell-bound by the scarf, her *espressivo* and *energico* were fine.

The trio throughout was creditably performed, and was loudly applauded by the audience. . . .

Both of the sisters sing in the Italian with fluency and with correct pronunciation.²⁹

Remarkably, these early reviews do not emphasize the Hyers Sisters' race, which is often given as an identity qualifier in press releases of this time. Rather they are reviewed it seems, solely on the basis of their abilities alone, even by white critics and experts such as Professor John Tullidge. Much of their success with the press centers on their abilities in spite of their young age – these sisters are prodigies, made even more remarkable because they occur in duplicate, viewed by the often prejudiced press and public as the perfect package of exceptional strengths, despite age, race, and gender.

These reviews highlight the contrast in the two sisters' abilities, setting them in juxtaposition to one another, inviting comparison by the reader via the descriptions rendered by the critic-listener. These descriptions are based largely on the young women's voices, Anna's being a high soprano and Emma's a deep contralto. They choose to perform roles opposite one another, rather than creating a melodic blending popular

with much later sister groups such as the Boswell Sisters, a white sister act from New Orleans popular during the 1930s, and well known for their harmonizing and what Laurie Stras identifies as “aural passing,” that is, their mastery of a “black sound.”³⁰ This pairing and emphasis as aural opposites strengthened their professional presentation as a performance team, bound by sound and by blood.

In the two reviews of the sisters’ early concerts above, “Miss Anna” is cast in the role of the hyper-feminine soprano, described repeatedly as possessing a “beautiful,” “pure,” and “sweet” voice. After an 1871 concert *The Daily Herald* of St. Joseph, MO proclaimed “several competent musicians listened to Anna Hyers last evening, and unanimously pronounced her perfectly wonderful. . . . her voice the most sweet and musical we ever listened to.”³¹ Just a few weeks later, Cleveland’s *The Daily Leader* heralds Anna as “an exceptionally pure, sweet voice.”³² In contrast, Emma Hyers is possessed of a deep contralto voice so deep that even at the age of ten, the press recounts hearing “a talented young man instead of the voice of a young girl.”³³ Her performances are likewise described in stronger verbiage as “hits,” and “mellow,” and she is continually allowed to “possess” a “voice of remarkable quality” whereas her sister consistently “has an exceptionally pure, sweet voice.”

These continual distinctions between the gendered sounds and fine quality of the sisters’ voices enable what can be called “aural drag” in which the siblings “pass” in the ears of their audiences as a mature woman and man, playing opposite one another in pieces such as Barnett’s “The Mountain Sylph.” Because African Americans seldom performed concert music during this time, especially as adolescents, this credible sounding “aural drag” also enabled the Hyers to gain recognition as the highly refined

and trained performers that they actually were. While their identity and physical appearance as young African American women would not normally have allowed them access to high society, their voices immediately opened doors and access to stages and culture. For instance, *The New York Tribune* noted during one of the sisters' New York performances:

A concert was given last evening by the Hyers sisters at Steinway Hall. These two young colored girls, who have received a musical training in California, are by no means mere 'Jubilee' singers, as the programme of last evening clearly shows. It embraced several airs and duets from 'Martha' and 'Trovatore,' the last being the 'Miserere,' which called forth hearty applause.³⁴

The Evening Telegram corroborates this positive review, emphasizing the respectability demanded by performers of the Hyers Sisters' caliber:

The selections last evening embraced a high order of music, operatic and otherwise; and were rendered with a taste and grace that elicited frequent applause.

One of the young girls possesses a very pure soprano, and the other an equally excellent contralto voice; and, singly or together, their execution is marked by a refinement, culture, and attractiveness that deserve first-class audiences and first-class appreciation.³⁵

Such stellar reviews would not have been possible for the Hyers were they not devoted to the representation of high class distinction which they maintained throughout their careers. While their background was one of privilege, the public's recognition of their class status was hard earned, and precarious. *The Daily Herald* of St. Joseph, MO describes them as "two colored ladies, or girls, aged respectively sixteen and seventeen years; but their singing is as mature and perfect as any we have ever listened to."³⁶ For African American teenagers to be referred to as "ladies" by a newspaper in a former slave holding state just eight years after Emancipation is remarkable and attests to their true refinement and abilities. Yet the title "ladies" is not given without qualification. While the alternate gender identifier "girls" used immediately following the first term is qualified with the sisters' ages, it is worth noting that the term was also the common and belittling way whites referred to black women of any age, just as "boy" was used to refer to black men of any age at this time. While gaining respect and class privilege, the Hyers Sisters continually countered racial discrimination and prejudice, overt or slight, throughout their careers.

In the late 1870s and early 1880s the Hyers Sisters Combination continued to be managed by their father, Samuel B. Hyers. The sisters' parents eventually separated and their mother remarried. In 1882 Sam Hyers introduced a new female performer to the company. Mary C. Reynolds was also a contralto, competing directly with Emma Louise for roles, and barely a teenager when she married the Hyers Sisters' father (who was then 53) and became known as May Hyers. These strained family ties and working relationships forced a break between the sisters and their manager father.

At age 17 and 19, the Hyers sisters established their own company and continued under the name Hyers Sisters Combination while their father maintained his own company, S.B. Hyers Colored Musical Comedy Company. These two Hyers troupes criss-crossed the country for the next decade, most likely causing confusion amongst audience members. Even now, attention must be paid to who is being acknowledged in historical records of performances.³⁷ Beginning with their original company, the sisters headlined what was “the first black repertory company to attract attention after the African Grove company,”³⁸ William Alexander Brown’s company and the first all black theatre operating in the late 1810s in New York. The Hyers were very successful, employing great performers including minstrel stars Sam Lucas and Billy Kersands and female impersonator Willie Lyle in their troupe.³⁹

Out of Bondage

I went a mile and a half in the most furious tempest of wind and snow that I have seen for five years, to see the plantation sketches of the Hyers Troupe and hear their exquisite music, and I would go three miles through just such a tempest to have that pleasant and satisfactory experience again.

Your friend,

Samuel L. Clemens [Mark Twain]⁴⁰

After establishing their reputation as major vocalists through tours and successful stints as soloists at major cultural events such as producer P.S. Gilmore’s massive

World's Peace Jubilee in 1872, the first major theatrical production of the sisters' troupe was presented in 1876. Arguably their most important and popular work, *Out of the Wilderness*, later renamed *Out of Bondage, or, Before and After the War*, was written for the troupe by Joseph Bradford and embellished with the performers' own authorial imprints through improvisation, flexible song selection, and character portrayal in performance. Eileen Southern provides important background information on the playwright, script, and production in *African American Theater*, volume 9 of the *Nineteenth-Century American Musical Theater* series. She notes that Bradford was born to a wealthy white slave-holding plantation family near Nashville, Tennessee and broke ties with them when he enlisted to fight for the Union during the Civil War. After his military discharge he pursued a career in the theatre, and was commissioned to write *Out of Bondage* especially for the Hyers.

Southern credits the commissioning of the play and the Hyers Sisters' management to the white-run Redpath Lyceum Bureau of Boston beginning in 1875 and provides archival evidence of their promotion of the show in the 1876-1878 seasons, making the Hyers "the only black concert company under professional management anywhere at that time."⁴¹ Yet by most accounts their father continued to manage the group until 1883, as noted above. This discrepancy in the history should be noted and points to the possibility that the Hyers Sisters' popularity and potential for great success demanded production management from a professional organization who could expand their profile while their father continued to manage the day-to-day activities of his daughters and the troupe. Redpath's own promotional materials support this theory, in that they emphasize the young sister's propriety by assuring potential audiences and

booking venues that “[i]n all their trips they are always accompanied by their father, who takes care to make their lives as quiet and secluded as possible for public persons’ lives to be.”⁴² In this way Redpath promoted the Hyers Sisters as professionals and encouraged their respectability in the communities to which they traveled.

The show opened on March 26th at the Academy of Music in Lynn, MA, and toured northeastern states for several months before embarking on a cross-country tour playing heavily to northern and mid-western states (it was nearly impossible for African American artists, and especially black women, to travel to Southern states as racism and terrible travel conditions made movement of large groups both difficult and dangerous). The extant play remained popular with the Hyers Sisters’ audiences for years, and, unlike minstrel shows at the time that played exclusively on stereotypes and grotesque depictions of black life, *Out of Bondage* was billed by Redpath as “The Great Moral Musical Drama,”⁴³ and was indeed a melodrama touching on the themes of freedom and slavery made popular on the stage during the frenzy of the *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* phenomenon beginning in the 1850s. With comedic moments and a strong cast of close-knit family members, *Out of Bondage* was one of the first plays performed by blacks that attempted to sensitively portray the stories of enslaved African Americans while simultaneously recognizing the need to use familiar character types in order to please audiences. Eileen Southern notes,

It was important to all concerned – Redpath, the troupe, and the playwright – that the kind of stage activity envisioned for the newly organized Hyers troupe differ sharply from the typical minstrel show. Since up to this point, white America had

accepted black actors on the stage only in stereotyped roles, particularly as blackface minstrels, the Redpath venture represented an abrupt break with the past, and all participants worked hard to assure its success.⁴⁴

The Hyers found tremendous support from the abolitionist minded Bradford and the Redpath group, which was aware of changing sensibilities regarding race and the lucrative commercial possibilities for a popular and talented group such as the Hyers Sisters. This successful professional affiliation between blacks and whites represents a rarity at the time and is a testament to the respect and admiration the Hyers garnered from all they encountered.

The respect the Hyers Sisters received from their management company was tempered publicly by a need to recognize that public perceptions of African Americans generally were often still based in large part on prejudice and stereotype. A description of *Out of Bondage* from a February 20, 1890 production playbill at the Los Angeles Theatre in California provides an example of how the production was advertised to simultaneously attract lovers of minstrelsy and maintain a sense of respectability about the performers themselves.

A comedy of interest, sparkling with old time jubilee music and portrayals of Negro characteristics, *presented by the greatest and most refined company of colored comedians and singers*. . . . A unique Comedy, picturing the Darkey as he existed in Ante-Bellum Days, showing his humorous characteristics *without*

burlesque. Introducing Musical Novelties and the Old-Time Southern Camp-Meeting and Jubilee Melodies (emphasis mine).⁴⁵

The play provided a variety of entertainments (drama, song, and dance) under one title but refused to cater explicitly to racist expectations and stereotypes made popular by blackface minstrelsy. Instead, the Hyers Sisters worked to emphasize the black and American qualities of black Americans through the use of dialects, regional comparisons (traditions of the South versus new practices in the North), and traditional “Negro” music such as the “old-time southern camp meeting and jubilee melodies,” all contrasted with a rousing concert of classical European music during the show’s finale. All of this was done in a manner which emphasized black Americans’ ability to find humor and joy in life despite dire situations such as slavery, but “without burlesque,” and never making blackness the butt of any joke. This attempt at a more sophisticated, comedic high road enabled the Hyers to present a piece which provided professional opportunities for black performers to portray truer characters rather than mere caricatures, and entertainment which was neither insulting to black nor threatening to white audiences.

Out of Bondage depicts the story of one slave family’s experiences in the antebellum South and their struggles to enter free society at the end of the Civil War. After liberation by Union troops the family fragments when four younger family members travel North from Georgia in the hopes of making a living as musicians while older family members stay behind, feeling too old to begin a new life in the foreign cultural environment of the North. The play features gentle race-based humor and lines spoken in dialect yet does not bend entirely to popular racist humor of the time to

represent its black characters. Rather, the piece pointedly acknowledges the struggles of blacks and their hope for redemption from racism. In one scene set around the family dinner table in a slave cabin, Emma Louise Hyers playing the young precocious slave Kalooah, discusses religion and race with the older Uncle Eph, played by Sam Lucas.

KAL: I say, Uncle Eph, wuz Adam a black man or a white man?

EPH: Why a Black man of course. What makes you ask such foolish questions.

KAL: Den whar did all de white folks come from?

EPH: Well one day de Lord got down on some ob de cullud people, an he white-washed ‘em as a terrible example to ebil-doers.

KAL: Den whenever de Lord gets down on a cullud pusson, he white-washes dem?

EPH: Yes, indeed, chile.

KAL: I jus wish he’d get down on me for a while.⁴⁶

In this brief interchange occurring in the first act, Bradford reverses the “curse of Ham” found in Genesis 9: 20-27 wherein the son of Ham is cursed into slavery as a punishment to Ham for seeing his father’s nakedness. In Uncle Eph’s story, blacks are figured as favored people, those God intended to create, while whites are cast as the “ebil-doers” of society, punished by God with whitewashing. Such punishment, as understood and explained by Uncle Eph, strips the “ebil-doer” of what makes them great – their color, that which is denigrated by whites – and all good that is associated with it. For Kalooah, the punishment is a twisted blessing, one which simultaneously strips and bestows

privilege. What Etienne Balibar terms the “stigmata of race,”⁴⁷ that is, the marking of difference, defect, and distain normally attributed to blackness, is portrayed here by the old slave as a punishment of whites, couching racial injustices in gentle humor. But is laced with the irony of recognition inherent in the wistful wishing for not less, but rather a *different* color, which would signal a difference in social position, as articulated in the response of the younger character. The character of Kalooah and *Out of Bondage* itself demonstrate the desire within this household for upward social mobility, a desire to contribute to and be respected by society, and to emerge “out of bondage” from a crippling past full of racism, poverty, and slavery.

In act three, the family reunites in Boston and old Uncle Eph and Aunt Naomi discover that the younger generation is living successfully in the North as professional musicians. The play ends with the former slave family characters reminiscing through an impromptu jubilee song celebration, followed by a concert wherein the Hyers and fellow performers John Luca and Wallace King sang operatic excerpts including Verdi, Flotow and Balfe.⁴⁸ Other scholars have noted that the Hyers Sisters’ concerts and plays regularly featured both African American and classical European musical selections. In her earliest published writings on the Hyers, Eileen Southern observed “[a]ll the Hyers productions were adapted so as to display the fine voices of the performers, and it is of interest that genuine plantation songs were included along with lighter pieces and concert/opera music.”⁴⁹ The Hyers Sisters made their careers in what Katherine K. Preston calls “the wonderfully diverse, rich and confusing jumble that was the American musical-theatrical world of the last third of the nineteenth century.”⁵⁰

But what has yet to be articulated is the specific way that the Hyers performances worked to elevate black culture to that of whites by performing both African American and classical Western pieces on the same bill. While other contemporaneous black performing groups such as the Fisk Jubilee Singers (with whom the Hyers shared billing at the World Peace Jubilee in 1872) and the Nashville Students Jubilee Singers performed an array of musical selections, none did so in the theatrical format of a touring repertory company and within the context of dramatic works. In doing so, the Hyers Sisters demonstrate that blacks are able to successfully perform not only popular vernacular music, but also a difficult classical repertoire, and to adeptly perform as actors in dramatic works rather than simply stereotyped puppets in minstrel shows. By subversively mixing expectations of popular black performance with demonstrations of their skill and performance prowess, the Hyers met audience demand while working to change assumptions about the limitations of blacks as performers and as members of society.

Reviews of *Out of Bondage* point to the novelty of such a performance. The *Muscatine Journal* of Iowa enthused

The acting is liberally interspersed with plantation and jubilee songs . . . The rendering of these quaint melodies was marked by a beauty, richness, and weird fascination indescribable, and which we have never heard equaled by any other troupe. The other part, introducing a higher order of music, - American character songs, operatic selections, quartettes, etc., - met with the most appreciation and showed that the troupe, in voice and culture, could compare with any of their

white brethren and sisters in the successful rendition of the best and most difficult music. We were particularly struck with the thought that while white vocalists have attempted in vain to render naturally the jubilee songs of the South, this colored troupe not only gave them with all the humor and pathos of the blacks, but also challenged the white race in their artistic execution of the higher class of music.⁵¹

Although this review still smacks of the racist, prejudiced view that white and Western culture is of a “higher class” than that of blacks, at the same time it places great value on black music and acknowledges the abilities of the performers in the Hyers troupe, “albeit the blood of the African flows in their veins.”⁵² While the Hyers could not have been expected to eradicate racism and prejudice through every performance (and I am not suggesting that this was their aim), they were highly successful at advocating cultural equality while celebrating difference in not only their concerts but also their musical plays.

In addition to presenting their own mini-concert as the finale of *Out of Bondage*, the Hyers also invited local individuals to participate as extras during the emancipation scene at the climactic end of the second act and for singers present in the audience to join them onstage at the end of the show. “Their lyric theatre productions focused on the rapid improvement of the race from slavery to freedom or from the slave cabin to the concert stage, a potential they demonstrated by inviting blacks from the communities where they appeared to join them on stage during performances.”⁵³ This practice allowed black audience members to not only witness upward mobility in the play, but also to experience

it viscerally through participating in the performance themselves. By breaking the fourth wall and initiating contact and recognition with the audience, the Hyers Sisters enhanced their reputation as messengers of uplift and models of respectability for both blacks and whites.

Blacks performing in the show with the Hyers were able to either relive or encounter for the first time, the cathartic experience of emancipation by the arrival of Union troops and deliverance from the old ways of the South via the dramatic staging of a gunboat, propelled by the modern miracle of steam. The dramatic stage directions for this climactic moment read: “full of soliders and colored refugees, who are cheering heartily. . . the gunboat move[s] across the stage and the stern is just visible, right upper entrance, with Kaloolah, Narcisse, Prince, and Henry waving their handkerchiefs in farewell as the gunboat steams away.”⁵⁴ This kind of transformative and highly technical theatrical moment made for a powerful performance to be sure, and was in line with other popular melodramas such as Dion Boucicault’s *The Octoroon* (1859) and William Wells Brown’s *The Escape, or Leap to Freedom* (1858), which also depicted the geographical and social mobility of blacks and capitalized on mid-to-late-nineteenth century preoccupations with social and technological change in the age of modernity through escapes via waterways that would take them North.

In 1876, the year of the United States’ first centennial celebration of independence, playwright John Bradford, management company Redpath, and the Hyers Sisters’ Combination Company delivered a play that encouraged cross-racial healing, forgiveness, and acceptance, as well as a message of personal responsibility and commitment to universal social change. At the top of act three, Uncle Eph and Aunt

Naomi are reunited with the younger members of their family. Uncle Eph questions why the younger generation works for a living, recalling that prior to their journey North, the naïve young character Prince vowed that when he reached freedom, “I aint gwint to work no mo’, I’s neber gwine to git up till de sun’s an hour high,” and Kaloolah fantasized that she was “gwint to live in a big house all by [her]self, an’ hab de white people wait on me.” After five years in the North, the characters’ dialects are shed, and they are able to rationalize, appreciate, and articulate their freedom and the opportunity it affords them to work in the profession of their choosing. Narcisse (played by Anna Madah Hyers) extends a healing olive branch, saying “let us never forget the debt of gratitude we owe the white people. . . . Let us always remember that our way to freedom lay through the red sea of their blood, which was poured out for us like water. . . . [F]reedom does not mean idleness but labor – that neither man nor woman has any right to live in the world without striving to make it better.”⁵⁵ While her gratitude intones a paternalistic debt to whites, it also encourages blacks to move beyond victimhood and to focus on improving their social position now that they are free.

The Hyers Sisters personally embodied the upward socio-economic-cultural mobility of the characters they portrayed in *Out of Bondage*, a play they maintained in their repertoire for fifteen years. Their performances demonstrated the belief in the possibility for all African Americans to achieve success in the field of their aptitude and choosing, if they worked hard and were afforded the opportunity and means to excel. The sisters became the corporeal manifestation of racial uplift, “living the dream” represented in the theatrical fantasy they presented to audiences and calling for continued movement towards social equality between the races.

Peculiar Sam; or, The Underground Railroad

Shortly after the success of *Out of Bondage*, the Hyers Sisters and Sam Lucas collaborated with a fellow member of Boston's African American arts community, the then twenty-year-old playwright Pauline Elizabeth Hopkins, to present Hopkins's extant play *Peculiar Sam; or, The Underground Railroad*. Copyrighted and first produced the same year as the Kansas Exodus of 1879,⁵⁶ the first great migration of African Americans after the Civil War, *The Underground Railroad* represents the first full-length play – musical or otherwise – to be written for and performed by an all-black cast by an African American author. While addressing many of the same issues of blacks' transition from slavery to freedom as the Hyers Sisters' production of Bradford's earlier play, and William Wells Brown's *The Escape, or Leap to Freedom*, both of which Hopkins would have been familiar with and probably used as inspiration for her work, Hopkins scholar Lois Brown notes that *The Underground Railroad* "provided American audiences with the first staged reenactments of slavery that were not offered through the lens of white imagination."⁵⁷ Hopkins's play expands the themes of slavery, freedom, and the African American family unit depicted in Bradford's *Out of Bondage* through a more sophisticated use of dialect to create characters, challenge minstrel stereotypes, and expand African American characterization through the introduction of a realistic romance between black characters.

Like *Out of Bondage*, Hopkins's *The Underground Railroad* was written as a vehicle for the Hyers Sisters and Sam Lucas, young stars whose names would make the public and critics take notice of the emerging playwright's work. The play portrayed the

journey of one African American slave family from the bonds of slavery on a plantation (this time in Mississippi) to freedom in the North (this time in Canada) in a melodrama punctuated by jubilee songs and spirituals. While the plot points of both plays are similar, Hopkins provides a four act dramatization of the actual journey of the slaves North using the web of the Underground Railroad as their means out of bondage. The cast is comprised of Sam, described by the playwright as “a peculiar fellow” and played by Sam Lucas; Jim, a black overseer; two field hands, Pete and Pomp; Virginia, Sam’s love interest, played by Anna Hyers; Juno, Sam’s sister, played by Emma Hyers; Mammy, Sam’s mother; and Caesar, a station master. In addition to depicting the ordeals of escaping slavery, Hopkins provides us with the first portrayal of a romantic relationship between two black characters on stage – Sam and Virginia – written by an African American female. While William Wells Brown, the earliest known African American playwright, depicts romantic love between a pair of runaway slaves in *The Escape, or Leap to Freedom*, his play was never fully staged. This is the first known instance of its depiction by an African American woman and performance by an all-black cast. In their self-generated work the Hyers and Hopkins anticipate W.E.B. DuBois’s 1926 call for theatre “about us, by us, for us, and near us” in this early and little known but important landmark African American play.

When the white plantation master dies prior to the beginning of the play, his young heirs unceremoniously wed Virginia to the bumbling plantation overseer and fellow slave Jim. This is not a union based in love. This news is brought to Sam by his mother, Mammy, his sister Juno, and Virginia herself. Mammy breaks the news,

For de Lorst' sake boy do you kno' what dey's gone an' done up to de big house? Dey's gone an married dat dear chile, dat lamb ob a Jinny, to dat rascal ob an oberseer Jim. . . . yes, deys brund dat gal up like a lady, she neber done nuthin' but jes wait on Marse fambly, an' now ole Marsers' dead deys gone an' married her, *their* way to Jim, an' de gal can't bar de sight ob him. Its de meanes' thing I eber seed.

Virginia seeks solace in the slave home, explaining what has happened and why she plans to run away rather than stay on the plantation in a marriage against her will:

Yes Mammy and Sam, I have come to say good-bye, its [sic] hard to leave the place where I was born, but it is better to do this, than to remain here, and become what they wish me to be. To fulfil [sic] this so called marriage.

Juno enters with Virginia and corroborates the details of the "ceremony:"

Yes Mammy, onlies' thing they done in de worl' was, Marse he say: 'Jim, you want to marry Jinny?' Jim, he say yes, course Jim say yes. Marse he say: 'Jinny you want to marry Jim? Jinny her say no, like to kno' what Jinny want of ignerunt ole Jim. Marse say: 'You man an' wife, an Lor' hab mussy on you soul! Dat no kin ob weddin'.⁵⁸

Each woman vocalizes the news differently, allowing dialect to demonstrate the variety of characters, linguistic abilities, and social opportunities inherent within the slave population. While they all articulate the events in their own way, they are united by the injustice of the situation and their allegiance to one another. Hopkins uses marriage in this instance as an example of civil rights withheld from slaves, who were often forced into arranged relationships, and of the sexual servitude to which African American women were so often subjected (for Virginia was the one who did not want to be married to Jim, though in actual relationships the resistance certainly could come from either side). Hopkins provides one of the first serious dramatic portrayals of the dismay, danger, and disrespect suffered, not only by African American women, but also men. We are witness to Virginia's misery in her abuse, along with Sam's refusal to allow her to be married to Jim, his vows of love and respect for his "Jinny," and his decision to "steal" his family away to freedom.

Virginia's true love, Sam, puts into action his long latent plans to transport his family and Virginia to freedom in Canada, "Jinny you isn't 'fraid to trust ol' peculiar Sam, I kno'. Kase you see Ise allers willin' to die fer you. You need't bid any on us good bye, kase dis night I tends to tote you and Mammy and Juno 'way from hyar. Yas, an' I'll neber drop ye till Ise toted you safe inter Canidy."⁵⁹ Peculiar Sam lives up to his name here. While operating in thick dialect and thus communicating in the form made most familiar by blackface minstrelsy (where, ironically, Lucas rose to fame), the character of Sam nonetheless articulates real human feelings of love and devotion not previously allowed to black men in performance or in daily mixed race life. He decisively acts as the head of his household, pledges devotion and love (rather than hypersexual lust) to Jinny,

and enacts a plan to extract his family from the clutches of slavery. Lois Brown supports this analysis, noting

Hopkins systematically endows her central black hero with an emphatic masculinity and an increasingly inspiring race-consciousness. In effect then, at a time when blackface minstrelsy was the primary vehicle through which blackness was imagined on the American stage, Hopkins engineers a humanizing minstrelization and performs a keen double-edged satire.⁶⁰

The “peculiar institution” of slavery, the prejudice against black men springing from it, and the negative stereotypes about blacks developed in minstrelsy are no match for this peculiar fellow. By engaging with part of contemporary performance practices, such as dialect, Hopkins was able to manipulate stereotypes by communicating other empowering messages of black capability and humanity, which were seized on and embodied by the performers.

The family travels together as a unit, working to outwit the evil overseer Jim, who trails them attempting to bring them back to the plantation. Stopping at a station on the Underground Railroad run by an older African American male named Caesar, the family is tracked down by Jim. Hopkins writes a clever exchange in which Sam disguises himself as Caesar, tricking Jim into giving him reward money for (false) information on his own whereabouts! Sam ultimately captures Jim, bringing him along to the next station at which the remainder of the family is hiding.

He instructs his sister Juno, played by Emma Louise Hyers, to guard Jim with the master's gun, which Sam has brought along from the plantation. In a comically subversive reversal of power and gender norms, Juno leaps at the chance to play overseer to the overseer, explaining how she came to master the master's gun.

JUNO: Why I kno's all 'bout shootin' dat gun. I used to go up inter Misses room, an' shoot dat ol' gun at de bedstead, an' Marse, he, he, Marse an' Misse wonder how dat bedstead kamed full ' holes. . . . {Walks round Jim, and plays at shooting him. Jim rolls his eyes in terror.} If you move one har, yas ef you wink, I'll shoot dem feet clean off ob you. . . . [The company prepares to move to another location on the Underground Railroad.] I jes comed back to take a las' look at you, ef you dare to move or even breaf hard, I'll shoot de top ob dat ugly black head o' yourn clean off. 'Deed I will. . . . {Still threatening she exits.}⁶¹

In this powerful encounter, Juno demonstrates her ability to use the master's own symbol of violent power to first defile the marital bed of her owners (the very people who disrespectfully forced Virginia into an unwanted marriage to Jim), and second to command subservience from a fellow slave who had sided with the master rather than remain loyal to the plantation slave community. She demonstrates unexpected female control and strength, demonstrating the ability of African American women to command respect and to handle systems of power (i.e. firearms) traditionally attributed to men. While Hopkins couches these events in non-threatening humor, the scene enables Emma Hyers to demonstrate character depth, mixing comic relief with a kind of calm rage,

depicting the (especially female) slaves' rage at their exploitation (sexual, emotional, and economic) and their determination to maintain the control of their lives and bodies that they have slowly gained thus far on their journey along the Underground Railroad. Her threat to shoot off Jim's feet and the top of his head indicate what is most important to these slaves. While a master might value a slave's hands for working, and body or genitals for reproducing and maintaining the labor pool, Juno outlines an alternate physical value system for these slaves on a quest for freedom: feet and brains. Their feet symbolize the mobility that will ultimately carry them to freedom, while keeping their heads about them allows them to outsmart Jim and overcome obstacles on their journey. Physical threats to these two body parts by Juno to Jim emphasize her dominance in the scene and the very real, very high stakes for slaves making the journey to freedom.

In the final act, which takes place six years later, after the end of the Civil War and on Christmas Eve, we learn that Mammy and Caesar, the station master who helps them escape, have wed, Sam is a newly elected congressman in Ohio, and Jim appears, announces he is a successful lawyer in Massachusetts, and releases Virginia from any obligation to their improper marriage so she may wed Sam and live happily ever after. While the play ends happily, there is nevertheless an ominous shadow of slavery present in the reappearance of the old overseer, who must grant permission for Virginia to (re)marry. Such a scene makes evident the long reaches of the "peculiar institution" into the new lives of Peculiar Sam and Virginia, demonstrating the legacy of slavery through time, space, and souls.

Audiences of the time were not always prepared for the play's message; indeed Sam Lucas himself believed that the "piece failed as the time was not propitious for

producing such a play.”⁶² It nonetheless acts as a historical document, remembering and reenacting the trials of enslaved blacks, the struggle for freedom, and the ongoing quest for equality. *Peculiar Sam; or, The Underground Railroad* was not as widely heralded by critics as *Out of Bondage*; in fact the *Minneapolis Tribune* criticized it as “a shred of plot on which is hung more or less of music and a portrayal of the slave life similar to that in *Out of Bondage* . . . written to afford Sam Lucas, formerly the chief attraction with the Hyers Sisters combination, an opportunity to display his comicalities. The piece is said to resemble very much the Hyers Sisters’ *Out of Bondage*.”⁶³ It nevertheless toured broadly, playing “repeatedly in major cities of the Northeast and Midwest such as Boston, Buffalo, Chicago, Minneapolis, Milwaukee, and St. Paul.”⁶⁴ Hopkins, the Hyers, and Lucas attempted to portray the plight of blacks with humanity and respect, while their collaboration worked to uplift one another’s careers out of the depths of obscurity, the precariousness of uncertainty, and the trap of minstrelsy. In remembering the injustices of slavery, the production also called indirect attention to ongoing problems of prejudice still festering during Reconstruction.

Urlina, the African Princess

Urlina, the African Princess (alternately known as *Princess Orelia of Madagascar*, and *Orelia, Princess of Madagascar*) also debuted after the success of *Out of Bondage* and was performed in repertoire with the earlier work beginning in 1879. Like the Hyers Sisters’ previous productions, *Urlina, the African Princess* also toured widely, receiving acclaim as far north as Victoria, British Columbia. The *Daily Colonist* newspaper reviewed the May 8, 1879 performance, noting that “Victorians have seldom

been afforded so good an opportunity for hearing admirable singing, witnessing very natural acting and beholding the most gorgeous and costly of costumes, as that presented by the Hyers Sisters combination last night at the Theatre Royal in their original oriental extravaganza entitled ‘Urlina, the African Princess.’”⁶⁵

The production was billed as an “opera bouffe,” or comic opera, and told a love story of the beautiful African princess Urlina who is kidnapped and whose claim to her father’s throne is thwarted by a rival king whose son, Prince Zurlaska falls in love with Urlina’s picture and decides to help her. With the aid of his servant Kekolah (both of whom are captured by the usurper’s soliders) Zurlaska is freed, united with Urlina, and overthrows his evil tyrant father. While this play is not extant, and there is less extant archival evidence of the work than their previous play *Out of Bondage*, nevertheless there is some valuable material in the way of historical documentation and previous scholarship on the piece that allows for additional commentary. Other scholars (Hill, Southern, and Graziano) make note of the show’s known themes and plot summary; I expand upon this work by providing additional analysis of the Hyers Sisters’ treatment of gender through the play’s traditional use of English pantomime conventions such as cross-dressing (both male and female) in the play.

The play’s location and characters are notable because this is the first known African American play set in Africa. This fact suits the Hyers Sisters’ ongoing mission to encourage racial pride. They were noted in press surrounding the production as acknowledging that they “claim to be of African extraction. [Additionally] [t]he music is taking, the singing is good, the costumes are bright and the scenery is effective.”⁶⁶ Using a familiar Western genre such as opera bouffe to treat a foreign, never before treated

topic – African royalty – was a clever, non-threatening way to approach the topic while continuing to promote class respectability for blacks. As Daphne Brooks notes, these “black female musical artists embraced diva-like monikers and assumed the role of the regal hero[ines] of their culture. They were presumably performing through song the role of lost royalty to a mythically rendered ‘African’ past.”⁶⁷ The Hyers began a trend of African American theatrical performances characterized by a stylized longing and desire on behalf of blacks to know and take pride in the continent from which their ancestors came. These shows also reflected the widespread exoticized treatment or fascination with diasporic African culture in Victorian performing and visual arts (such as Picasso’s cubist painting *Les Femmes d’Alger* (1907) which bears Africanist influences). Later dramatic works that are similar in vein and scope, i.e. the noble and respectable heritage of all Africans and African Americans, can be said to include works such as Will Marion Cook’s *Jes’ Lak White Fo’ks* (1899), Bert Williams and George Walker’s *In Dahomey* (1903), and *Star of Ethiopia* (1913) by W.E.B. DuBois.

As John Graziano notes, this fascination with and Victorian representation of the exotic fits widely accepted notions of Orientalism popular at the time. Such representations of exoticism are also apparent in other musical performance pieces such as Giacomo Meyerbeer’s *L’Africaine* (1864) and Gilbert and Sullivan’s *The Mikado* (1885). These artistic representations of the Other served to provide a kind of voyeuristic access to the exotic through performance, a representation meant to conjure feelings of power, superiority, and even consumeristic claim (as viewers were paying for this experience) on the subjects of these works through a seemingly innocuous means of spectacular entertainment. Yet the Hyers Sisters’ work appears to be a clear departure

from other Orientalist pieces in its refusal to exoticize to the point of dehumanizing its characters. The Hyers took the show – a comedy – almost too seriously, to the point of endangering the success of the piece. Graziano notes that with *Urlina, the African Princess*, the Hyers once again succeeded in creating a delicate balance, presenting a work “devoid of the stereotypes of minstrelsy”⁶⁸ that was still appealing to audiences not yet entirely accustomed to watching “straight” performances by African American performers.

Anna Madah played the title character, while Emma Louise performed the breeches role of Prince Zurleska. Although this play is not extant and we have no real knowledge of the scripted characterization of these characters, production portraits do exist and provide powerful iconographic clues to the ways these performers and characters could be read by their contemporary audiences and today’s historians. While performing opposite genders, each woman’s characterization pointed to her own femininity and physical beauty. In figure 2.4, Anna Madah is depicted as the princess Urlina. Reclining upon a botanical heap, Anna Madah endows Urlina with a kind of calm power. She stares directly at the camera, returning the gaze of the viewer and acknowledging the full landscape of her body, made accessible to the observer by her pose. Her costume is both exotic and erotic, showcasing her legs with Romanesque sandal-like shoes that lace up her calves, a short, side-slitted skirt falling open towards the camera which highlights her legs, and a fitted, sleeveless bodice that exposes her toned arms ensconced in decorative metal bands. She is heavily accessorized with jewels, and wears an elaborate headdress, symbols of both her own and her character’s value, power, and wealth. Such a costume would have played to audience’s desires to consume

the female figure while at the same time remaining respectable, and perhaps avoiding association with the less respectable emerging “leg show” burlesque genre, by withholding complete female bodily exposure. According to the *Daily Colonist* review, Anna Madah’s “acting last night was unassuming, but as lifelike as possible.”⁶⁹ Clearly, her performance was a concerted attempt at a realistic, respectful representation of black life.

Prince Zurleska, played by Emma Louise, “a very pleasing actress, full of that dash and vivacity requisite to render the character thoroughly successful,”⁷⁰ is a more complicated read. Figure 2.5 depicts her breeches costume and physicalization of the lovelorn prince. Here, she channels masculine confidence while maintaining a kind of feminine restraint, leaning against a large draped urn, while folding her arms across her bosom and her exposed legs at the ankles. Unlike the hyper-feminine Anna Madah’s direct confrontation of the viewer and open, prone body position, the more masculine Emma Louise averts her eyes to an unseen point of interest, remaining physically upright yet distanced from the viewer, despite her very revealing costume. Such a role maintains echoes of Emma Louise’s earliest critical reviews, in which listeners express amazement that “it is difficult to believe that one is not hearing a talented young man instead of the voice of a young girl.”⁷¹

The use of the breeches role in this production enables the Hyers to present a depiction of black masculinity that upholds such manhood as noble, romantic, and desirable. Black male performers of the time were seldom allowed to perform serious romantic lead roles; indeed, even Sam Lucas’s performance as the hero and love interest in the Hyers Sisters’ production of *Peculiar Sam; or, the Underground Railroad*, while

remarkable and groundbreaking, was only possible using heavy dialect, light comedy, and constant performative references to his success on the minstrel stage. In *Urlina* the male cast members were relegated to playing villains or comedic supporting roles. By assuming the role of the male suitor, Emma Louise is able to create a black romantic male hero precisely because that is what she is not. She remains unhindered by the social limitations, prejudices, and fears inherent in white America's demonization of black male sexuality. Her transvestite embodiment of that which is lacking in the theatre, and that which is discouraged and diminished in reality is what Marjorie Garber calls "both a signifier and that which signifies the undecidability of signification. It points towards itself – or, rather, toward the place where it is not."⁷² By assuming the male costume within the widely accepted Western practice of English pantomime and breeches roles, Emma Louise's performance can be read as a use of what Garber describes as

transvestism [as] a trickster strategy for outsmarting white oppression, a declaration of difference . . . The use of elements of transvestism by black performers and artists as a strategy for economic, political and cultural achievement . . . marks the translation of a mode of oppression and stigmatization into a supple medium for social commentary and aesthetic power.⁷³

Beginning with their opposite sex pairings in their early concerts as adolescents and continuing through productions such as *Urlina*, the Hyers Sisters negotiated social barriers to representations and expressions of black masculinity, romance, love, and human emotion. By performing opposite one another, though they were both women and

sisters, they avoided the public's scorn for witnessing serious romantic realism onstage between a black man and woman or between two women. They also eluded possible damage to their own pristine reputations by evading love scenes with men onstage. Such public displays of sexuality would have marked them as "loose" and morally questionable. While critics harped, "they are an earnest pair, but really dead earnest is not exactly the spirit in which to approach burlesque,"⁷⁴ such seriousness may have been indicative of their desire to represent black entitlement to public displays of love and devotion not currently afforded to black men while maintaining their reputations in the public eye. In the role of Prince Zurleska, Emma Louise had the opportunity to represent an ideal of black masculinity. This practice of black women depicting a black male ideal will resurface again in the Whitman Sisters' portrayal of the New Negro during the Harlem Renaissance.

In addition to the highly gendered performances by the Hyers Sisters, Willie Lyle, famed female impersonator, played a maid while well-known comedian Billy Kersands triumphed in multiple roles including an "Irish missionary, a pigtailed Puritan and a Christian Chinaman."⁷⁵ The characters and casting clearly follow the edicts of English pantomime style such as a young ingénue, a young male lover played by a woman as a breeches role, an older female dame character played by a man, and a variety of comical characters.⁷⁶ Thus identity crossing was a prevalent part of the show – gendered, racial, and cultural. The production seems to work at the intersections of identity – what it means to be American, an individual, an African – as depicted through European performance genres. In doing so, the play may have attracted audiences who would not have given air to the play's themes had it been performed in an overtly political manner.

Yet wrapped (literally and figuratively) in the reassuring velvets of Victorian gentility and high European humor, the piece became acceptable and even “classy.” While maintaining their reputations as producers of entertainment with cultural cache, the Hyers collaboration with Kersands and Lyle contributed star power to the show. Additionally, they lent their expert comedic natures which must have contrasted well with the sisters’ serious performances.

Emma Louise’s gender bending, Lyle’s and Kersand’s drag and cultural comedy, and the themes of African royalty couched within this opera bouffe performed in the style of English pantomime are direct embodiments of Garber’s argument that

Cross-dressing is about gender confusion. Cross-dressing is about the phallus as constitutively veiled. Cross-dressing is about the power of women. . . . Cross-dressing is about the anxiety of economic or cultural dislocation, the anticipation or recognition of ‘otherness’ as loss. All truths, all partial truths, all powerful metaphors. But the compelling force of transvestism in literature and culture come not, or not only, from these effects, but also from its instatement of metaphor itself, not as that for which a literal meaning must be found, but precisely as that without which there would be no such thing as meaning in the first place.⁷⁷

Within the plot of *Urlina, the African Princess* cultural and gender cross-dressing is used as a non-threatening alienation technique to help to pinpoint Africa as a place of origin from which meaning and identity emerges. Acknowledging Africa as a place possessed of an identifying culture, the play acknowledged the continent as contributing to circum-

Atlantic culture just as much as Europe and the United States. The Hyers used the popular practice of breeches roles to cross gender and genre to discuss Africa and the nobility of Africans, thus underscoring their ultimate humanity and quality as equal to, even if different from, that of white Europeans and Americans. By employing what Garber terms “cultural dislocation” – that is, discussing Africa and African characters through a European performance technique – the Hyers highlight this distinction by abstracting it, creating an awareness of the hybridity of American culture beginning to be acknowledged at this time. The play thus becomes a metaphor for the cultural history and story of blacks in the United States.

Conclusion

The Hyers Sisters’ performances were shows of talent, class, status, and beauty. The sisters were presented as models of womanhood, representative of to what greats women and all African Americans in their audiences should aspire. They were unusually public, yet not overly or threateningly independent, given their father’s early and strong management of their careers. They both married in 1883 – Anna Madah to Henderson Smith, a cornet player, and Emma Louise to a bandleader, George Freeman, the latter wedding taking place onstage as part of a mixed race cast production of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*.⁷⁸ This performance of personal identity fulfilled society’s marital expectations for women at the time, but also once again publicly performed family responsibility, and heterosexuality, while demonstrating black humanity by performing a ritual of human love not legal for slaves, whom they portrayed in the *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* production.

The Hyers strove to provide audiences with a high class, quality entertainment and cultural experience regardless of whether they were performing classical Western music or black jubilee or spiritual renditions. Their efforts were noted time and again in the press as exceptional in a field saturated with imitation acts. Chicago's *The Inter-Ocean* praised them saying "[t]here is an indescribable charm, an originality and feeling of reality about the songs of these dark-skinned artists which is positive relief from the hackneyed rubbish of the bogus, cork-grimed variety man."⁷⁹ The Hyers presented a realistic representation of black life to audiences rather than grotesquely exaggerated stereotypes, and audiences appreciated and noted the distinction.

In addition to the impactful plays *Out of Bondage*, *Peculiar Sam; or, The Underground Railroad*, and *Urlina, the African Princess*, the Hyers also toured as singers in minstrel companies, most notably as part of and the only women in the Callender's Minstrel Festival in 1883 (which was also the troupe which performed the *Uncle Tom's Cabin* production mentioned above). While they often supplemented their incomes by performing limited engagements in such troupes, these were secondary to their efforts to maintain their own company and careers. "The Hyers Sisters company may not have been able to compete with the minstrel troupe in the salaries it offered, but it did provide opportunity for the gifted artist to perform materials that affirmed his human dignity and reflected his professional training."⁸⁰ The sisters performed together into the late 1890s, at which point Emma Louise Hyers died (c. 1899).

Anna Madah Hyers continued performing on her own in troupes and tours such as John Isham's Octoroon Company and his Tenderloin Coon Company, M.B. Curtis' All Star American Minstrels (alternately M.B. Curtis' Afro American Minstrels), and Ernest

Hogan's Minstrels, touring the United States and abroad including Hawaii, Canada, New Zealand, and Australia, where she was well received. In a letter to *The Freeman* in Indianapolis, artist Henderson Smith wrote that "[t]he prima donna, Miss Madah Hyers, is about the most cultured operatic star that has ever been our lot to hear, and she is nightly bringing down the house."⁸¹ She earned the title the "Bronze Patti," a nod to contemporary singer and vaudeville star Sissieretta Jones, known as the "Black Patti," a reference to her own aural likeness to the famed Italian singer Adelina Patti. Her last major performance was as a performer in the cast of the early twentieth-century Bert Williams and George Walker hit *In Dahomey* (1902). Such a finale – in the first major black musical on Broadway – must have been a fulfilling end to a ground breaking career that was devoted to the advancement of African Americans and women in the performing arts and society at large.

**The Whitman Sisters:
The Royalty of Negro Vaudeville**

There is one other thing that was true of this group. The show business world expected troupes to continue the cake walk, minstrel, buck and wing type shows that followed slavery and the Al Jolson type foolishness. Mabel, Essie, and all the rest would have none of that. Their's[sic] was to be a show of quality, the very best they could produce.¹

Introduction

The Hyers Sisters are the forgotten darlings of the Reconstruction Era stage who served as embodiments of racial uplift and representatives of the potential of African Americans when given the opportunity to succeed. Their artistic and personal lives demonstrated a commitment to racial uplift and class mobility despite the intersectional oppression they were faced with as African American women. The Hyers Sisters created a model and opportunity for future sister acts and African American women with the talent and passion for pursuing a career onstage. Following in their footsteps, the Whitman Sisters began performing in the late 1890s as the Hyers Sisters made their exit from public life and the stage. According to their family history *Wider Windows to the Past: African American History from a Family Perspective*, written by their cousin Ernestine Garrett Lucas, the Whitman Sisters were part of the nation's first generation of blacks born into freedom after the Civil War. They were part of the first generation of African Americans born free who managed to succeed in their chosen occupation despite systematic racism enforced by cultural ideology and legal restrictions such as Jim Crow

segregation. Such laws allowed for the separate accommodation of blacks and whites in public places, and the Supreme Court case *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) that “creat[ed] a bifurcated racial order and formaliz[ed] the legal segregation of races.”²

The Whitman sisters, Mabel, Essie, and Alberta (figure 2.1) were the daughters of former slaves Reverend Albany Allson Whitman and Caddie Whitman. “Baby” Alice Whitman was adopted into the family by Caddie Whitman shortly after her husband’s death in 1901 and was always treated as a full-fledged member of the family.³ As Nadine George-Graves, author of the only book length project on the Whitmans notes, the daughters of a prominent African Methodist Episcopal minister lived in Kansas, Missouri, and Georgia as children and received advanced education at the New England Conservatory of Music in Boston, and Morris Brown College in Atlanta. They were encouraged from a young age to develop their talents for dancing, singing, and instrumental music, and gave their first performances at church fundraisers. These early church performances would influence the remainder of their careers, during which time they always attended, tithed, and performed at churches in the communities they toured. Mabel and Essie began performing professionally as singers in 1899 under the supervision of their mother and to the disapproval of their father (who rejected an offer by the early black musical theatre star George Walker, partner to Bert Williams and husband of Aida Overton Walker, to take the young ladies on a performance tour of New York). They were soon joined by Alberta, and then by Alice, who joined her sisters in the group in 1910 after their mother’s death.

The sisters and their touring company of artists, human oddities (such as a midget known as Princess Wee Wee), and youth performers (called pickaninnies, or “picks”)

toured the country in a variety of single engagements and circuit bookings, including the Family United, Publix, S.H. Dudley, and Pantages circuits. The Whitman Sisters joined the Theatre Owner's Booking Association (T.O.B.A., or Toby) in the 1920s, gaining further exposure through wider circulation. The sisters' final performance together was the 1936 "Swing Revue." By 1969 Mabel, Essie, Alberta, and Alice Whitman had died, leaving their fading legacy in the stars of American entertainment they helped create.

Like the Hyers Sisters, the Whitmans developed and emphasized a high class status on their tours. As daughters of a minister, the sisters were always quick to point out their religious background, using it and their status as a family troupe to shield themselves against any doubt about their respectability. Their predecessors, the Hyers, courted mostly white, upper class audiences in California, the Midwest, and Northeast with their performances of classical European operatic works punctuated with folksy spirituals. While the Hyers began their careers giving vocal concerts, their greatest work was their repertoire of full-length plays with plots and character development which couched their musical numbers. These plays, commissioned especially for the Hyers Sisters, can be recognized as early forerunners of modern musical theatre.

The Whitmans, in contrast, never performed full-length plays, but instead created elaborate variety shows with their touring group, and remained committed to performing for mostly African American or integrated audiences in the South through the performance of popular and emerging jazz, spirituals, and energetic tap dancing. While touring in the South remained difficult due to segregation and racial prejudice, the Whitmans were able to do so more easily than the Hyers. This was because the black variety circuit was more established at the turn of the century than it was during the

Hyers Sisters heyday in the Reconstruction Era. The Whitman Sisters' strong connections to religious communities due to their insistence on their status as a family troupe and as the daughters of an A.M.E. minister provided performance venues and travel support such as lodging in private homes in the black community.

Because the Whitman Sisters' show was never a full length dramatic work, was constantly changing, and incorporated improvisation as a matter of course, no scripts of their performances are extant. Little documentation of the exact content of their shows survives and two house fires destroyed much of their touring and company memorabilia.⁴ Like the Hyers, the Whitmans were committed to a performance regime that highlighted their strengths and provided opportunities for other black performers. They also attempted to provide high caliber entertainment to paying audiences, and presented themselves as morally sound and as respectable representatives of the African American community. Yet while the Hyers accomplished this goal by assuming classical European performance practices such as operatic musical selections and full-length plays, the Whitmans did so through performing religious spirituals in addition to variety, dance, and jazz, genres associated with African American culture and the rise of modernity during the early twentieth century in the United States.

The Whitman Sisters are the focus of Nadine George-Graves's historical narrative *The Royalty of Negro Vaudeville: The Whitman Sisters and the Negotiation of Race, Gender, and Class in African American Theater, 1900-1940* (2000), are featured for several pages in Jean and Marshall Stearns's *Jazz Dance: The Story of American Vernacular Dance* (1968), and are mentioned in passing in several other recent performance histories such as *African American Performance and Theater History: A*

Critical Reader (2001), *Bodies in Dissent: Spectacular Performances of Race and Freedom, 1850-1910* (2006), and *Babylon Girls: Black Women Performers and the Shaping of the Modern* (2008). Yet none of these volumes seeks to situate the Whitmans as part of a larger study of how sister acts thrived in the *fin de siècle* United States. Further, none of these studies provides an expanded theoretically informed analysis of the extant archival materials such as press clippings and photographs documenting their performances to arrive at an in depth reading of these materials that explores how the Whitmans negotiated the intersectionality of their identities in their performances.

For example, Jo A. Tanner argues in *Dusky Maidens: The Odyssey of the Early Black Dramatic Actress* that

in the 1890s . . . with the development of Black musical such as *The Creole Show*, Black women gained respect and prominence on the American stage. . . . [This] provided a new image for the Black woman's re-entry (with the earlier entry being the Hyers Sisters in their *Out of Bondage*, c. 1876) to the American stage.⁵

While Tanner's exploration of black women's rise in the legitimate theatre is notable, and she does briefly acknowledge the work of the seldom cited Hyers Sisters, statements such as the one above overlook and undervalue the contributions to the visibility and respectability of black women being made by contemporaneous variety performers such as the Whitman Sisters, whom Tanner fails to cite at all. More work is needed to expand the history of performance at the turn of the century to include artists such as the Whitmans who found ways to perform outside of the confines of "legitimate" theatre

(where due to racism and sexism, performance opportunities for black women were few and far between) while still contributing to the success of blacks in the burgeoning U.S. entertainment field.

The Whitman Sisters' performances can be considered examples of a burgeoning black feminist ideology gaining ground in the early part of the twentieth century. Patricia Hill Collins's *Black Feminist Thought* describes the historic and ongoing oppression experienced by women of color such as the Whitmans. Her explanation of oppression as being three tiered – economic, political, and ideological – informs my analysis of the cultural context in which the Whitmans performed. Collins observes that the labor of black women has been and continues to be exploited in demeaning, low paying, physical, or service based positions. The rights of black women to fully participate in our democracy through practices such as voting have been (and some argue continue to be) denied or withheld. Black women continue to struggle against the perpetuation of damaging, negative stereotypes of black women, which adversely affect their image and perceived value in the public eye. Oppression, like identity is intersectional, meaning women of color can experience discrimination that targets them as both female *and* black, rather than simply one or the other. Such intersectionality also extends to discrimination based on other socially constructed identity traits and material conditions such as sexuality and class. Collins presents these conditions of oppression as experiences commonly shared amongst women of color, but emphasizes the point that there is no one, universal black female experience. She gives value and voice to individual experience rather than an essentializing notion of The Black Woman.⁶

Collins theorizes that African American women are disenfranchised within a socially marginalizing interlocking system of oppression based on intersectional identity traits such as race, class, gender, and sexuality. These identity markers are reflected in a “supposedly seamless web of economy, polity, and ideology [and] function as a highly effective system of social control designed to keep African-American women in an assigned, subordinate place.”⁷ These intersectional identity issues were circumstances of the Whitman Sisters’ lives and careers. I demonstrate that the Whitman Sisters’ performances can be viewed as contesting what Collins calls “the matrix of domination [which] refers to how these intersectional oppressions are actually organized.”⁸

With this viewpoint in mind, this chapter expands and deepens current explorations of the Whitman Sisters’ negotiations of intersectionality. Drawing on black feminist, queer, and gender theories, I develop readings of the Whitmans’ performance archives and demonstrate their contributions to the development of modern African American female and familial identities. I build an intersectional analysis of the Whitman Sisters’ manipulations of race, gender, and sexual stereotypes of African Americans in an effort to maintain respectability and achieve upward social mobility within the competitive vaudeville industry. Their success in these endeavors ultimately earned them top billing as “the royalty of Negro vaudeville.”

A Class Act

The Whitman Sisters challenged ideas about the loose morals of female performers and African Americans by holding themselves up as examples of morality and class within the theatre. First and foremost, the Whitman Sisters recognized the power of an

impression, and thus always strove to exude an air of decorum and respectability through a keen sense of fashion. As Nadine George-Graves writes, “they used style in order to indicate the higher social possibilities available to black women and to solidify their status.”⁹ By signaling status and dignity through material and physical manifestations of class, the Whitman Sisters commanded respect and attention from their company, theatre managers, and both black and white audiences. The end result: as the “royalty of Negro vaudeville,” the Whitman Sisters were the highest paid performers on the T.O.B.A. circuit.¹⁰

Second, by creating and maintaining a family environment in their performances and on the road, the Whitmans provided children and adult performers alike with a company to which they could belong without fear of compromising their reputations or personal morals. Mabel, the matriarch of the company, ensured proper behavior by insisting that unmarried men and women travel separately, that children behave appropriately or else be sent home, and by booking performances in churches as well as theatres. As Ernestine Lucas recalls, “[s]he was always very positive about the conduct of her people, and would not stand for low morals. People who didn’t agree with her way of acting responsibly and with dignity were fired.”¹¹ During many performances, Mabel would also address the audience, reminding or instructing them in a personal testimony of the sisters’ upbringing as the daughters of a prominent minister and consequently their lifelong commitment to their faith.

Third, Mabel Whitman herself, as the only black female vaudeville manager at the time, worked to break down professional barriers for women in the entertainment business and for her black performance troupe. By rejecting the Victorian notions which

relegated blacks and women to sub-human status, Mabel instead looked for opportunities for achievement for herself, her sisters, and their family business. George-Graves notes that Mabel employed a three tiered approach to success: “hiring the best performers by providing a family environment; desegregating theaters; and publicizing and fighting corruption in show business” and that she “took two seeming handicaps, her race and gender, and turned them to her advantage by becoming the stern and authoritative matriarch of the company.”¹² While this description could be read as a perpetuation of the “shrewish black female” stereotype, or a Mammy figure who is harsh towards her own family while catering to the needs of whites, evidence suggests that Mabel’s approach was respected rather than rejected, for her strong managerial style won her the admiration and trust of many young artists as well as parents who entrusted their child performers to the Whitman instead of many corrupt or white-managed touring shows.

Mabel Whitman’s high standards for her performers and her professionalism also earned her legitimacy in the eyes of booking agents and theatre managers. In 1931 she was celebrated in the *Baltimore Afro-American*:

Once in every generation comes a person whose magnetism, charm, force and personality make them outstanding in the careers they choose themselves, and such a personage is Mabel Whitman, manager, producer and co-owner, along with her other sisters of the famous Whitman Troupe.¹³

On the occasion when a manager attempted to cheat the Whitman company, Mabel would retaliate in a measured and professional way, always careful to retain a sense of class in

her business dealings. An example of the grace with which she handled such disputes is documented in a telling 1929 interview with the *Baltimore Afro-American* in which Mabel publicly decries the corruption rampant in the touring houses of early American vaudeville.

The trouble with this game is a set of unscrupulous owners and managers who seemingly have syndicated themselves together to stifle the progress along the lines of art and entertainment. They feel that any kind of show is good enough for a colored audience and their only desire is to have a comedian and a few half-naked girls on hand to keep the doors open.

They insult the intelligence and prey on Negro patrons. They sense that the people must have some place to go for amusement; instead of giving them the best talent possible, they palm off the worst as long as they can.

When the crowd gets fed up on that sort of diet, they try to work a good show and try to get it for the same money they pay an amateur company which was made up overnight. This is what a certain owner told me – and I'll name him when and if necessary – 'I have been losing money all year and I have to get out of the red on your engagement here. Therefore I won't pay you what you want. You have a family company. You don't need money because you all work and live together. Come in at my price or stay out.'

Well I stayed out. I am staying out and I never in my life will pay for a man who tells me I have to foot the losses he has suffered from bum shows. . . .

What does “Mabel Whitman” mean to men of that type? Does my name stand for anything with them? For no more than ‘Mabel Jack Rabbit?’

But there is another picture, a bright and cheerful one. All owners are not in that category. In this game there are men who appreciate your work and your worth. They try to give their patrons leading entertainment and you always work harder for such managers. Believe me, twenty years experience by Mae Whitman means something to them. . . . That’s why, in the course of a season, we play from two to eight weeks with Mr. Gibson and other high-class theatrical men.

And now do you know what is the matter with show business?¹⁴

This interview documents Mabel Whitman’s sophisticated understanding of the complicated nature of identity politics in American society and popular culture. She uses the public platform provided by this African American publication to identify a “matrix of domination” in show business aimed at the economic exploitation of women, all African Americans, and families, both as audiences and performers. She identifies male managers’ exploitation of female sexuality as a means for making money, noting that many believe a show with a “few half-naked girls” will satisfy audiences. Mabel acknowledges the fact that this assumption smacks of racist stereotypes of African Americans possessing base, sexual appetites. She finds offense with theatre owners who “insult the intelligence and prey on Negro patrons,” believing blacks have no interest in or intellectual capacity for talent or refined entertainment. She resists such sexual exploitation, white assumptions of black social depravity, and gender discrimination by declaring, “I never in my life will pay for a man who tells me I have to foot the losses he

has suffered.” She further thwarts corrupt theatre managers’ efforts to take advantage of her company’s family troupe status and her position as a matriarchal manager. When confronted with the argument “You have a family company. You don’t need money because you all work and live together,” Mabel simply yet effectively refuses to allow the company to perform.

Mabel Whitman demonstrates value and respect for female performers and refuses to exploit them sexually. She is dedicated to providing respectable performing opportunities for black artists and quality entertainment for black audiences and positions herself in opposition to anyone wanting to “stifle the progress along the lines of art and entertainment.” Finally she refuses to engage professionally or personally in interactions with those who do not respect the family-oriented atmosphere she maintains in her company. Her response to this complex web of exploitation demonstrates her awareness of multi-faceted prejudice against African Americans and women in performance. Through her no-nonsense approach and commitment to racial uplift Mabel Whitman tore down barriers to discrimination through a commitment to upward moral, religious, and economic class mobility. Her work allowed the Whitman Sisters and other African American artists to become part of Alain Locke’s vision of the New Negro in which African Americans were recognized as “an interesting and significant segment of the general American scene.”¹⁵

The Whitman Sisters’ approach to combating discrimination also reflected the content of their performances, and the complicated identities they constructed onstage. As the next two sections demonstrate, the Whitmans wove a complex commentary on intersectional identity throughout their careers. The Whitman Sisters used racial passing,

blackface, and gender drag to creatively address the issues Mabel articulates in the newspaper article above. In doing so their performance practices are a continuation of the advances made by the Hyers Sisters. The following examinations and theorizations of the Whitman Sisters' performances compare their manipulation of corporeal identity to that used by other contemporary sister acts and solo artists, both black and white, demonstrating how such practices can be used to promote the dismantling, subversion, or perpetuation of prejudicial social practices.

Troubling Gender, Staging Sexuality

The Whitman Sisters and other black sister acts and solo female performers capitalized on audience fascination with women in men's clothing, and their own masking of what Lynn Garafola in her study of sisterly portrayals of travesty roles in nineteenth century ballet describes as how the "incest taboo coded as sisterly devotion what might otherwise have been construed as love."¹⁶ The Whitmans must be understood against the backdrop of the conversation on nineteenth and early twentieth century gender impersonation in the theatre. Tracy C. Davis notes that as female performers became increasingly prevalent during the nineteenth century, male impersonation "unlike straight female roles . . . permitted an actress to do things . . . but instead of losing her identity . . . the actress's gender was highlighted."¹⁷ Laurence Senelick argues, "[i]n contrast to the ancient and ritualized sanctions of men portraying women on the stage, female adoption of male prerogatives has occurred historically in the theater as a novelty, a salacious turn."¹⁸ The Whitman Sisters used cross dressing in their performances to garner

audience attention but, significantly, they managed to neatly avoid exploiting their sexuality and so maintained their respectability.

These broad views of the history of gender impersonation also apply specifically to popular American performances. Female impersonation on minstrel and vaudeville stages was fairly prevalent. Annemarie Bean cites mid nineteenth-century “wench” and “prima donna” roles in “white minstrelsy, as the first theatrical offering of the middle-class, [which] reified the white male’s position as enabler of his own gender and cultural politics on the popular stage.”¹⁹ And in his “insider’s history” of vaudeville, Joe Laurie notes that

[i]t was in the early [18]90s that the male imps [impersonators] really started to give an honest impersonation. The gals with the fine shapes naturally showed off men’s clothes in a way that no man ever could. They looked like men would have loved to look, as to the fit of their clothes. . . . Sister acts . . . changed to male clothes [too] . . . they were nice dames, those ‘guys’!²⁰

While Laurie’s mostly white history (in his single chapter on blacks in vaudeville he ironically claims that he has “never known of a color line in vaude. Talent has no color”²¹) does not recognize the Whitman Sisters or other African Americans as part of the rise of the male impersonator routine in vaudeville, their work and its reception is documented elsewhere as impressive, titillating, and challenging in performance style and skill. What is in need of expansion in the small field of existing scholarship of male impersonation amongst African American performers are possible theoretical readings of

these performances, the ways they could have been read by the audience, and how we might interpret them now. I expand this literature through a reading of the Whitman Sister's performances of gender as part of a broader practice amongst female vaudevillians, as evidenced by the examples given below.

Popular Broadway star, Harlem Renaissance darling, and Whitman contemporary Florence Mills and her older sister Olivia also employed male impersonation in their early act, the Mills Sisters. As Mills scholar Bill Egan writes, the *Indianapolis Freeman* reviewed their performances noting that "'Olivia does male impersonations with a delightful, rompish freedom thus making scenes with her partner [Florence]. . . . Olivia succeeds nicely in her male impersonation,' which followed the tradition of Aida Overton Walker in her 'That's Why They Call Me Shine' routine."²² Annemarie Bean documents Walker's own success in male impersonation in her chapter "Black Minstrelsy and Double Inversion, Circa 1890" in *American Performance and Theater History: A Critical Reader* where she observes "African American male impersonators commented on their times and turned inside out the performance history of stereotypical characterizations of African American men and women on the popular stage."²³

Florence Mills (figure 3.2) later assumed the mantle of male impersonation herself during her performance in the 1922 Broadway hit *Plantation Revue*. Mills performed in full male drag in the number "Mandy Make Up Your Mind," in which she was the bridegroom to Mandy, the bride, played by fellow female cast member Alma Smith (figure 3.3). Mills is in male drag, what Bean would call a double inversion, a nod to the historic practices of (usually) white male minstrel and vaudeville performers performing a degrading female "wench" character at some point during their shows, yet

subverted here in a female to male gender transformation. Additionally, the number is romantic and comedic in tone, and studio photographs indicate that the masculine identity Mills constructed was that of a dashing, successful, and self-assured “New Negro,” not a negative, hyper-sexualized or emasculated minstrel stereotype (figure 3.4). Mills hints at queer fun in this number, and the possibility for a range of theatre goers to appreciate such a piece saying “It is the ideal tonic for the well-known tired business man and for the seldom spoken of tired business woman. There are no suffering ingénues and jilted lovers . . . Of course we have our bit of romance. . . . I think that our Mandy is as sweet a bride as ever strutted the path that leads to the altar.”²⁴

Mills’s performance deconstructs her own identity as a feminine, heterosexual female using the constructed nature of drag to point to the broader social construction of gender and identity that occurs on both an everyday, personal level and a larger, social and ideological level. Mills also constructs herself as highly feminine in this same production, yet resists racialized/gendered stereotypes that would mark her as a sexually promiscuous mulatto, or an asexual mammy figure. Rather, she asserts herself as a performer equal to any male counterpart in all aspects of performance – singing, dancing, acting, and gender impersonation – while maintaining the physical traits that mark her as sexually female, and strangely desirable (figure 3.5). Her looks were often described in the press and by other performers as odd. The *New Statesman* noted that “she is a fascinating creature to look at with the skinny legs and body of some athletic boys of thirteen or fourteen . . . Perhaps her chief charm is that she is neither man nor woman nor boy nor girl.”²⁵ Her ambiguity enabled her to perform a variety of numbers and characters with wide appeal. She thus appropriates her sexuality as a tool of

empowerment while refusing or minimizing gendered traits that would limit her abilities onstage. While this may have been an act of self-preservation rather than a political stance, a reading of Mills's efforts informed by feminism reveals that, she, like her contemporaries the Whitman Sisters, can be regarded as a woman who encouraged and advocated equal opportunities and treatment for female performers in a male dominated, racially charged star system and rejected parts that focused solely on physical exploitation or lewd sexuality.

In *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, theorist Judith Butler argues that “the performance of drag plays upon the distinction between the anatomy of the performer and the gender that is being performed. But we are actually in the presence of three contingent dimensions of significant corporeality: anatomical sex, gender identity, and gender performance.”²⁶ Like Florence Mills the Whitman Sisters also moved beyond the singular corporeal identity of race by also constructing complex intersectional identities in their performances through explorations of what Butler calls gender identity and gender performance. Borrowing from the tradition of female impersonators in minstrelsy which Robert Toll notes “gave minstrelsy a novelty to counter the variety show's diverse appeal and a feminine role to offset some of the attraction of the ‘girlie’ show without sacrificing minstrelsy's respectability,”²⁷ the Whitman Sisters too built a niche in their performances with gender impersonation while remaining respectable by upholding class decorum and moral conduct both on and off stage.

The most notable example of this is Alberta Whitman's regular performances in male drag as “Bert” Whitman. Her performances complicated notions of gender and

sexuality for Bert who, though biologically female, often dressed as a male in performances and was paired with her sister, the very feminine Alice Whitman, in provocative dance routines to songs with romantic suggestive titles such as “Why Can’t You Love Me That Way” and “I Don’t Want Your Kisses.”²⁸ Seen here as Bert (figure 3.6) Alberta performs the trappings of masculinity in contrast to the femininity embodied by Alice (discussed below). Bert plays the role of the masculine possessor, enveloping her companion in an embrace and immediately creating a narrative of romantic entanglement between the two performers. She simultaneously exudes a self-assured nonchalance by casually drawing her jacket aside for the viewer’s pleasure, displaying her stylish costume and the flattering way she wears it. She and her date direct their gaze to the camera, confidently aware of being seen and inviting the viewer into the intimacy of their embrace.

Bert embodies the kind of confidence, charisma, and physical style that mark her as a purveyor of what Joseph Roach examines in detail as “It” in his book of the same name. Moving towards a definition of It, Roach notes Hollywood trendsetter Elinor Glyn, who in 1927 described the allure of It as

To have ‘It,’ the fortunate possessor must have that strange magnetism which attracts both sexes. He or she must be entirely unselfconscious and full of self-confidence, indifferent to the effect he or she is producing, and uninfluenced by others. There must be physical attraction, but beauty is unnecessary. Conceit or self-consciousness destroys ‘It’ immediately.²⁹

Alberta Whitman fit the It bill. She was cool, confident, and capable of wowing audiences with her looks, skill, and self-assurance. And she was certainly attractive to many audience members, both male and female. Because gender impersonation was common in vaudeville, and because she was performing with her sister, who was not viewed as a real romantic possibility, Alberta's turns as Bert were not seen as vulgar, but rather were regarded as remarkable because of the Whitman Sisters' high standards and the quality of her performances. The *Indianapolis Freeman* reported, "the principle feature [of the Whitman revue was] Alberta Whitman's male impersonation, which was a thriller for this audience. She made some handsome gentleman out of doing the original strutter."³⁰ Bert was popular with audiences across gender lines. As cultural historian Delilah Jackson has noted, after performances men and women alike would wait at the stage door for a change to meet (Al)bert(a).³¹ The fact that she did not always perform as a man (figure 3.7) and did not attempt to pass as male off-stage was irrelevant. Alberta had It and Whitman Sister audiences wanted it!

Bert Whitman's performances as a male impersonator and as a skilled female dancer able to succeed in a male oriented genre (tap, or "hoofing") – in part because she performed as a man³² – were noted throughout vaudeville and across racial lines.

Recording interviews with the Whitman sisters, Jean and Marshall Stearns note

Alberta cut her hair short, dressed as a man, and became one of the best male impersonators. 'I did flash dancing,' says Bert, 'throwing my legs every way there was, and I never saw anybody do a strut until after I had already started it.' . . .

The most popular white male impersonator of the day was Vesta Tilley. 'Miss

Tilley was supposed to follow Bert on one bill,' says Essie with stern loyalty, 'but when she saw Sister's act, she ran out of the theater and wouldn't come back.

Sister Bert was the best in the business.'³³

The interview above illustrates the respect the Whitmans' talent garnered within the industry and across racial lines. While Vesta Tilley, who "played a dapper little man,"³⁴ would not have been performing simultaneously with Bert (for though black and white performers may have been on the same bill, the performances themselves were segregated), according to Essie Whitman, she was reluctant to be held in comparison to Bert as a dancer and impersonator.

Annemarie Bean reads Bert's performances as progressive and positive reconstructions of black masculinity, in response to negative representations created by white male performers. Bean argues that the Whitmans were focused on subverting "the black dandy in white minstrelsy [who] was a 'Dandy Jim from Carolina' (1843), more concerned with his ridiculous appearance than anything else." Expanding on this reading, I believe their reconstructions can also be viewed as a response to monstrous and demeaning white *female* minstrel depictions of black men and women, such as May Irwin's "The Bully Song" or the Duncan Sisters infamous Topsy and Eva act, discussed in chapter five. Bean posits that Bert Whitman's construction of black masculinity "gave a different spin to the dandy character when they made him into a Jazz Age sophisticate, resplendent in black topcoat, tails, twirling a cane and donning a top hat."³⁵ The Whitman Sisters representations of black masculinity onstage reflect a reality not represented in other depictions of black masculinity in minstrelsy or vaudeville.

May Irwin (1862-1938) was a popular white vaudeville and burlesque performer and one time sister act member during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Possessing a vivacious personality, curvaceous figure, and resounding voice, Irwin became a darling of theatre producers Tony Pastor and Augustin Daly as well as white audiences. Known for her comedic performances of “coon shouting,” boisterous songs based on African American influences and stereotypes, Irwin used blackface roles to catapult her to superstardom in the arena of musical comedy – a rare feat for white women during this time. While she employed blackface liberally during her performances, perhaps the most notable feature of Irwin’s act was her continual manipulation of gender norms. These performances were made more acceptable for a white woman through the distancing technique of blackface, the use of which doubled the social commentary of Irwin’s performances and kept her own identity safely apart from the perceived “threat” of those whom she satirized – African American men.

In her signature number, “The Bully Song,” Irwin sang as a tough, brawny African American man who is in search of a “new bully” who has just come to town and poses a threat to her/his status in the neighborhood.

Have yo’ heard a-bout dat bully dat’s just come to town?

He’s round among di niggers a layin’ their bodies down.

I’m a lookin’ for dat bully and he must be found.

I’m a Tennessee nigger, and I don’t allow,

No red-eyed river roustabout with me to raise a row.

I’m lookin for dat bully and I’ll make him bow.

...

I'se gwine down the street with my ax in my hand;
 I'm lookin' for dat bully, and I'll sweep him off dis land.
 I'm lookin' for dat bully, and he must be found
 I'll take 'long my razor, I'se gwine to carve him deep,
 And when I see date bully, I'll lay, him down to sleep.
 I'm lookin' for dat bully, and he must be found.

...

When I got through with bully, a doctor and a nurse
 Wan't no good to dat nigger, so they put him in a hearse:
 A cyclone couldn't have tor him up much worse.
 You don't hear 'bout dat nigger dat treated folks so free;
 Go down upon the levee, and his face you'll never see;
 Dere's only one boss bully, and dat one is me.

...

When you see me comin', hist your windows high;
 When you see me goin', hand your heads and cry;
 I'm lookin' for dat bully, and he must die.
 My madness keeps a risin', and I'se not gwine to get left,
 I'm getting' so bad dat I'm askeer'd of myself.
 I was lookin' for dat bully, now he's on the shelf.³⁶

She describes how she will eliminate the new bully through brute force using her “ax,” “razor,” “blade,” and “steel,” thereby finishing off the intruder so violently that “When I got through with bully, a doctor and a nurse/ Wan’t no good to dat nigger, so they put him in a hearse;/ A cyclone couldn’t have tore him up much worse.”³⁷ Clearly, the language of Irwin’s performance speaks to the white cultural anxiety surrounding the black male presence during this time, creating images of a grammatically inept (read: ignorant), weapon wielding maniac whose “madness keeps a risin,’” so bad, in fact, that the character confesses, “I’m askeer’d of myself,” and warns the audience, instructing that “When you see me comin’, hist your windows high.” In this and other songs such as “Crappy Dan de Spo’tin’ Man” in which Irwin sings as a gambling, fighting black man, Irwin’s performances “emphasize the physically threatening black male body, an image reinforced by Irwin’s corpulence onstage.”³⁸ The emphasis here however is a double caricature and a negative one: in her depiction Irwin victimizes black masculinity through her lyrics and undermines black women by appearing visually as a mammy (via blackface and women’s clothing). These performances undermined work by groups such as the Whitman Sisters whose performances are attempting to erase the damage being done by performers such as Irwin.

Curiously, Irwin’s performance of “The Bully Song” was constructed through physicality, language, dialect, and what Laurie Stras terms “aural passing,” a sort of vocal blackface, but stops short of a breeches performance, in that Irwin did not perform in drag costume but rather maintained her personal construction of femininity by wearing gowns onstage.³⁹ In this way, Irwin successfully portrayed both races and genders simultaneously, creating a damaging portrayal of violent, hypersexual black masculinity

while at the same time signaling through her maintenance of female Victorian dress code, her own identity as first and foremost a white *lady*. As the cover art for her sheet music seems to suggest (figure 3.8), in its cartoon depiction of a threatening African American male, the language of her performance is what works to represent the caricature of black masculinity, but not Irwin herself. This idea is further emphasized in examples of press photos of Irwin, which construct her as a white maternal figure in contrast to African American youths (figure 3.9). Irwin's overall decorum is meant to signal status, privilege, and propriety, while at the same time the inscription on the photographs read, "May Irwin & The Newest Bully," signifying that what we might at first observe as a maternal care for the child she is holding could instead be read as a perverse rearing of stereotypical perpetuation. According to M. Alison Kibler, Irwin was actually joined onstage by a black child when she sang the famous coon shout, "The Bully Song," which served to create a visual marker of instilling in a new generation of audiences, performers, and listeners the damaging images of black masculinity about which she sings. The underlying ideologies of her performance truly did span generations, for Irwin debuted "The Bully Song" in 1896, featured it as the centerpiece of her repertoire, and revived the song again in 1925, thirty years later, when she returned to vaudeville after a brief retirement from the stage.⁴⁰

When comparing the Whitman's performances of gender as subversive political expressions of resistance to prevailing racial and gendered stereotypes perpetuated by white performers such as May Irwin, I regard these performances with an understanding of Judith Butler's theory of the performativity of gender and how it might inform a reading of these performances. Butler problematizes the notion of an "original" identity

from which repetition stems, arguing that “gender identification is constituted by a *fantasy of a fantasy*, the transfiguration of an Other who is always already a ‘figure’ in that double sense, so gender parody reveals that the original identity after which gender fashions itself is an imitation without an origin” (emphasis mine).⁴¹ Drawing on Butler’s theoretical framework, I read Bert Whitman’s performances as a construction of black masculinity which reflected a *fantasized* and desired notion of black masculinity, a *heightened* representation of an already positive reality and one antithetical to those negative representations created by other performers, one which she hoped to glamorize through performance and subsequently encourage additional imitations and perceptions of throughout the broader culture. Like white performers who parodied a *negative* fantasy of black masculinity, Bert Whitman also engaged with a performance of race and gender, though hers was a *positive* one based on an “imitation without a [specific] origin.” Bert Whitman created a social commentary on gender, and specifically black masculinity, by performing a resistant drag based on what Butler calls the “parodic displacement”⁴² of other performers’ failures to accurately and favorably capture black masculinity in performance. Such a lack of positive representations and black leading men to perform them was reflective of the social stigma against black men in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As Robert Toll explains,

appealing black men were too much of a threat to whites and especially to the white men who fashioned minstrelsy. . . . Yellow men would not have been portrayed as queer lust objects, nor as heterosexual love interests, for white

women were not permitted to engage in interracial liaisons and maintain their social position as the paragon of purity and beauty.⁴³

As a result of these prejudices, positive representations of African American men by African American male performers were rare. Yet the Whitmans, by virtue of their status as women and as sisters, were able to create such uplifting depictions of black manhood by embodying black masculinity themselves. As women they were less sexually threatening to white men and women than were black men, and as sisters any misguided assumptions of black female hyper, hetero, sexuality were kept in check through the family-oriented theme of their company and show. In the persona of Bert, through their choice of a male-dominated profession, and by Mabel's management of the troupe, which was traditionally the role of white male producer/managers, the sisters were able to demonstrate the abilities of black men *and* women in ways that black men were not socially permitted at the time.

In doing so the Whitman Sisters – and especially Bert – seem to anticipate questions raised by Butler:

What performance where will compel a reconsideration of the place and stability of the masculine and the feminine? And what kind of gender performance will enact and reveal the performativity of gender itself in a way that destabilizes the naturalized categories of identity and desire.⁴⁴

Certainly Butler's queries are aimed at finding instances of private and public, personal and theatrical performances which demonstrate the "undoing" of a hegemonic, heteronormative concept of gender and sexuality. This study demonstrates that late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century popular American performances given by black and white women are a fruitful area of performance history to look to for examples of the types of gender troubling Butler seeks to unpack. This examination of the Whitmans' performances demonstrates just one of various possible theoretical readings of these performances and the need for further work on late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century minstrel and vaudeville performances by women in the United States.

As a complement to Bert, Alice Whitman's performances also highlighted the construction of gender and notions of appropriate female sexuality, for she often vacillated between constructions of feminine innocence and sensuality. As a young woman, Alice's stage presence was like that of a toy doll, sweet and delicate, young and virginal (figure 3.10). As she matured, her "fabulous figure" and her talent as a dancer helped Alice Whitman transform into a sexy, sophisticated woman (figure 3.11). Willie Bryant, who worked with the Whitman Sisters in the 1920s, described Alice as "the best girl tap-dancer in the country-bar none," earning her the billing "The Queen of Taps" on the Whitman Sisters tour. Alice acknowledged her sex appeal and ability to harness her physical strength and skill into her dancing. Marshall and Jean Stearns document a rare extant interview with Alice Whitman in which she explained,

'I'd make my exit with the Shim-Sham-Shimmy, mostly from the waist down- along with more squeals-wearing a shawl and a little flimsy thing around my

middle with a fringe and a bow on the back. If I ever lost that bow, they used to say, I'd sure catch cold.' Alice has no false modesty. 'I could swing a mean...'- and she whistled to indicate the part of her anatomy and the general effect – 'around.'⁴⁵

Alice's conception of black female sexuality counters notions of an asexual Mammy or a sexually available but tragically doomed mulatto. By fashioning her own sexuality as a self-possessed, physically empowered woman Alice avoided conforming to pre-established negative stereotypes. Alice created a self-regulated performance of a fantasy of female empowerment not seen in most of society. As Ernestine Lucas notes, because of their unusual independence the Whitmans "may even have been viewed with a combination of disdain and envy by the women who were stay-at-homes. Viewed then as unusual, in the light of current attitudes toward women's spirit of independence, they were decades ahead of their contemporaries."⁴⁶ Yet performances such as Alice's, which demonstrated talent and sexuality onstage, contrasted with her offstage roles as mother of child dancing phenomenon Albert "Pops" Whitman and wife of long time Whitman Sisters company member Aaron Palmer, presented new ideas about black womanhood to audiences.

The Whitman Sisters created gender performances onstage, worked to challenge negative notions of black masculinity and femininity, and claimed ownership and control of their sexuality through their performances. As a self-run company, the Whitmans were free to construct their own identities rather than have them imposed upon them by

regulating management. Their independence and success in business and performance positioned them as competitive performers in the booming genre of American vaudeville.

(E)racing Performances

Susan Gubar's *Racechange* theorizes the history of racial performances in the United States and the ongoing, contemporary manifestations of the racist and sexist ideologies that many of these performances have perpetuated and continue to manifest now, albeit in altered forms of performance. For Gubar, the term racechange is meant to encompass a variety of racial morphologies including but not limited to: white to black, a balancing on the tightrope of the color line, an experiencing of life lived on either side of that line, the imitation of race, and the performance of race both in everyday life and in performance settings such as the theatre. She specifically deals with minstrelsy, articulating its power to manifest inaccurate racial knowledge in the minds of whites, while simultaneously robbing blacks of the opportunity to articulate, control, and maintain their own representations and subjectivity. Gubar's analysis includes scripted performances such as various productions of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and representations of race on film. She also engages in the intersections of race and gender in representation, critiquing the ways in which blackness is both feminized and emasculated while simultaneously possessing a sexual power viewed as threatening to white male hegemony.

This theory helps point to the ways race is constructed and how performances of it have been and continue to be used for different purposes amongst blacks and whites. For example, Gubar articulates that, for whites, performances of racechange such as

minstrelsy have historically worked to replay the subordination of blacks by whites in the minds of white audiences, maintaining and making conscious to viewers the heritage of violence associated with this act. For blacks, such a replaying calls to mind the legacy of slavery and captivity that free blacks continue to carry forth from these historic practices. Considering these different yet related reasons for and results of racechange performance informs my exploration of how the Whitmans' performances may have attempted to address such ends.

The Whitman sisters were mixed-raced, light-skinned women. As a result, their experiences of race and the manner in which these experiences were manifested in their performances was a complex negotiation of inter- as well as intra- racial notions of color, identity, and subjectivity. Susan Gubar's concept of racechange enlightens my readings of the Whitman archive.

The term is meant to suggest the traversing of racial boundaries: racial imitation or impersonation, cross-racial mimicry or mutability, white posing as black, or black passing as white, pan-racial mutuality [. . .] Racechange provides artists in diverse media a way of thinking about racial parameters [. . .] representations of racechange test the boundaries between racially defined identities, functioning paradoxically to reinforce and to challenge the Manichean meanings Western societies give to color.⁴⁷

Gubar's theories of race and racial malleability are helpful in examining the Whitman sister's performances of race. By complicating notions of racial identity through the

representation of blackface minstrel figures, actively presenting a variety of African American performers in their troupe, and addressing the social construction of race within the context of passing, the Whitman Sisters employed various manifestations of racechange to create an entertaining yet subversive, and racially distinct vaudeville career.

In order to develop commercially successful performances that reflected early twentieth century popular culture, it would have been impossible for the sisters to ignore the stock characters they inherited from minstrelsy. Holdovers such as Mammies, Jezebels, Topsy, pickaninnies, Uncle Toms, and Sambos persisted in black and white vaudeville well into the twentieth century. The Whitmans incorporated stereotypes into their performances. Yet while they represented these caricatures of African American existence, they did so with a quietly subversive approach, slowly introducing alternative possibilities for black representation and simultaneously rubbing out, beginning to (e)race, their harsh and damaging predecessors. By using the term (e)race as a play on the word erase, I mean to suggest that the Whitmans attempted to eliminate, or erase, negative racial stereotypes while at the same time infusing these performances with a new or altered sense of race meant to uplift, honor, celebrate, and improve conceptions of blackness in American culture.

An example of the Whitman's alternative rendering of a minstrel character is Mabel's performance as Mammy. Scholar Nadine George-Graves cites that while Mabel performed in blackface in a "befoh dah wah" plantation setting, surrounding herself with dancing and singing "picks" à la many white female minstrel performers of the time such as Sophie Tucker, Eva Tanguay, and Nora Bayes, there were subtle but key differences to

the Whitman Mammy. Other Mammies might have sung popular minstrel tunes such as Stephen Foster's "Old Folks at Home:"

Way down upon de Swanee Ribber,
Far, far away,
Dere's wha my heart is turning ebber,
Dere's wha de old folks stay.
All up and down do whole creation
Sadly I roam,
Still longing for de old plantation,
And for de old folks at home.
...
All around de little farm I wandered
When I was young,
Den many happy days I squandered,
Many de songs I sung.
When I was playing wid my brudder
Happy was I;
Oh, take me to my kind old mudder!
Dere let me live and die.⁴⁸

The Whitmans however, would have chosen songs highlighting their religious tradition. Such repertoire would have included spirituals like as “Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child:”

Sometimes I feel
Like a motherless child
Sometimes I feel
Like a motherless Child
...
Sometimes I wish I could fly,
Like a bird up in the sky
Sometimes I wish I could fly,
Like a bird in the sky
Little closer to home
...
Motherless children
Have a real hard time
Motherless children
Have such a real hard time
So long so long so long

Nadine George-Graves begins to unpack the significance of the Whitmans' religious selections. As she explains, there is a clear distinction in the delivery of these two musical representations of the black experience.

The differences in tone and message in these two examples are apparent. Both songs are about being away from home and longing for a mother figure.

However, in the spiritual we see religious overtones in which home represents heaven. We move away from the happy darky longing for the good ol' plantation to the contemplative slave seeking salvation.⁴⁹

This highlighting of emotional, spiritual, and familial longing serves to humanize Mammy, working to resist the semiotic physical trappings of the staging which point back to her minstrel origins. As Saidiya V. Hartman notes, “[m]instrelsy’s plantation nostalgia returned Jim Crow to his happy home and affirmed the institution of slavery in happy scenes of the plantation and carry-me-back-to-the-old-plantation songs of ex-slaves.”⁵⁰ By working within this stereotype, the Whitmans challenged its misrepresentation of slave life. The Whitmans resisted presenting a false longing for the institution of slavery by singing songs made famous by white minstrels as a romanticized, comforting depiction of black nostalgia for a time when they were considered little more than helpless children dependent on the plantation home and paternalism of a master for security. This was an arrangement the Whitman Sisters would have been intimately familiar with and probably would have had no desire to replicate because of their own parents’ status as former slaves. Instead, Mabel Whitman’s performances of spirituals

and jubilee songs subversively delivered the “authentic” sounds of the negro spiritual popular at the time, while simultaneously performing a public mourning of the destruction of the black family unit caused by slavery.

The donning of blackface to portray Mammy – what I would call an example of intraracial racechange – further points to the Whitman Sisters’ personal embodiment of the abuses of slavery. Their own fair skin was the result of mixed-race bloodlines merged and encouraged during their parents’ and grandparents’ enslavement.⁵¹ Yet in order to represent the Mammy stereotype, Mabel blackened her skin, thereby (e)racing her personal corporeal reality of black womanhood in order to physically and performatively (via racechange) depict the fictional one. This act, which juxtaposed Mabel’s identity as performer with that of the Mammy stereotype as character, pointed to and highlighted the falsehoods inherent in minstrelsy’s representations of black life. As George-Grave notes, the performance of songs such as “Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child” by the Whitmans does indeed present the possibility of an emotional appeal of a slave seeking and anticipating salvation and reunion with a heavenly savior. Mabel’s performance of this and other spirituals, specifically as the character Mammy, could also point to the earthly loss of slaves’ humanity when children were separated from parents through slave sales, early death, and masters’ cruelty. This performance takes on an important double consciousness, simultaneously pointing towards the spiritual longing of the slave population, to the immediate destruction and loss of family and community amongst enslaved blacks, as well as to the psychically damaged and racist cultural inheritances of subsequent generations of “free” African Americans. The sorrow contained in the song, when expressed by the character Mammy, would have undercut the stereotypical

assumption that black women feel no attachment to their children, and that they care more for the white children they are charged with rearing. Instead, Mabel as Mammy could have created an opportunity for (e)racing this negative assumption of black motherhood, instead rewriting (righting) it with a depiction of a mourning mother, one devastated by the loss of her children and family, replacing the stereotype of the black female breeder with one of a universal, human mother.

The addition or substitution of religious songs and spirituals to the traditional minstrel repertoire also enabled the Whitmans to remain connected to their religious past, and to market their shows to black churches, which were typical performance and hosting venues for black acts in addition to theatres that allowed performances by black artists. These communities would not have welcomed performances based solely on secular songs and the sexually suggestive dancing of the jazz era. Yet by including religious selections performed, as in the case described above, within the context of the representation of black family life and the reinforcement of black community, the Whitmans successfully parlayed their status as a religious family and their actual biological connection as siblings into family-friendly entertainment. As Joe Laurie, Jr. notes, families in “vaude” “wanted to show off to the town people that they too were ‘family people.’”⁵² The Whitman’s acts were based on and bolstered by an understanding and performance of the importance of family values and collective community held dear by so many in the black communities in the South to whom they catered their shows.

Unfortunately, at the same time, they continued to send a message embedded in racism to all audience members not predisposed to “double coded” performances, or a multiplicity of readings. Double coding, as Henry Bial notes in *Acting Jewish*, is a means

by which a performance can communicate one message to one identity group in the audience, “while simultaneously communicating another, often contradictory message” to another group in the audience.⁵³ Mabel’s use of blackface as part of her “costume” for Mammy could also have been read by some audience members as implying and reinforcing intra-racial prejudices about skin tone, suggesting that her light skin precludes her from identification as a black performer capable of portraying a black figure onstage. The use of blackface by female performers however was not unique to the Whitman Sisters. As Henry T. Sampson notes, “[i]t was not uncommon for vaudeville booking agents to encourage very light-complexioned black actresses such as Carita Day, the Whitman sisters, and Belle Davis to ‘darken down.’”⁵⁴ Yet there were others (such as their predecessors, the Hyers Sisters, and contemporary Florence Mills) who avoided wearing blackface themselves in their variety and musical performances (though those with whom they performed may have used the makeup).

Also potentially damaging are the “pick” performers, “wild” children who, though they advanced the image of the troupe as a “family affair,” also perpetuated the notion of black youth as uncivilized creatures. The implications of these representations are multiplied when complicated by the fact that these performances were given not only in the United States, but also abroad, in a tour titled “Mabel and the Dixie Boys” which traveled throughout the U.S., Europe, and Australia. Such performances potentially spread and perpetuated homegrown, American stereotypes across the Western world and into regions where the double coded nature of these performances was possibly unrealized.⁵⁵

In addition to challenging and complicating Mammy, the Whitman Sisters avoided representations of the “tragic mulatto” figure made popular in late nineteenth century melodrama, whose perceived flaw was her black blood which tainted her white or near white beauty. By resisting these roles (which their own skin color would have made easy to portray) the Whitmans challenged constructions of beauty that upheld Eurocentric features as desirable. There is no documentation of the Whitmans being offered such roles, however had they pursued careers beyond the sister act, it is probable such opportunities would have been possible. What they forfeited by avoiding these roles was possible additional exposure to broader audiences interested in the titillation of and access to performative displays of African American beauty. Others, again, such as Florence Mills, Josephine Baker, Abbie Mitchell, Aida Overton Walker and scores of anonymous chorus girls whose names are lost to history, were able to parlay their light-skinned beauty and talent into successful careers as performers in black vaudeville and early Broadway musicals.

Instead, by creating their own opportunities on the touring vaudeville circuit and as early advocates for what would later be recognized as the ideology of the “black is beautiful” movement, the Whitman sisters deliberately employed women with a variety of skin tones in their chorus, creating what one time Whitman Sisters company performer Jeni LeGon described as a “rainbow of beautiful girls”⁵⁶ rather than the industry standard in Negro vaudeville of an all “high yellow” chorus line (figure 3.12).⁵⁷ The Whitmans made a conscious, documented effort to create a chorus for their production that reflected a variety of African American female body types, skin tones, and facial features. Read through the lens of black feminist thought, this decision points to a desire on the part of

the Whitmans to represent a full range of African American corporeality, reflective of the audiences which would ultimately see their shows. As a result, their cast mirrored more accurately the society in which it performed.

By intentionally presenting a spectrum of color representative of the black community, the Whitmans strategically placed themselves within that gradation, fully identifying as black to their audiences. This identity construct was important to the sisters. While they performed for both black and white audiences, and often fought to desegregate theatre seating at their shows, the Whitmans were most at home in the African American community. When asked their audience preference in a 1931 interview with the *Baltimore Afro-American*, Mabel answered:

‘I think beyond question that a colored audience is our favorite, for there we get full appreciation without grudge, for what we do and there is no such thing as a nasty little feeling that we are breaking in where we are not really wanted.

‘As a matter of fact,’ she continued, ‘you never have a real light colored star on the white stage. When we get too light as we are (humorously), they won’t really welcome you , but still it is a pleasure to know that you are able to qualify as a first class entertainer for that kind of audience; but, as for us, give us a colored audience any old day in the week.’⁵⁸

Their recognition of multiple viewers and their delicate position as light skinned black women whose color signified racial ambiguity helped drive the sisters to establish and assert their position as leaders in black performance and the black community. By doing

so, the sisters reassured black audiences of their racial pride and white audiences of their understanding of social restrictions based on constructions of difference. In the interview quoted above, Mabel recognizes cultural preoccupations with race, particularly in the white community, which may have fostered negative receptions of them by white audiences. By fully identifying and marketing themselves as African Americans, the Whitmans may have eased potential social anxieties surrounding miscegenation, which were heightened at the beginning of the twentieth century with the enactment of Jim Crow laws and the increasing popularity of the racist eugenics movement. Aimed at preserving the “purity” of the white race by eliminating mixed-race births, eugenics enthusiasts hoped to end miscegenation and force the extinction of the threatening race of mulattos.⁵⁹

While the sisters openly claimed and embraced their African American heritage, at the same time their performances included scenarios of racial “passing.” The very fair sisters donned blonde wigs to appear white and then proceeded to dance with black males (or male impersonators) onstage. Conversely they also donned blackface and black wigs, then revealed their natural color and were mistaken for white. Such practices developed a kind of triple coding, in which layers of identity collapsed upon one another, confusing viewers and challenging readings of their “true” identity. Essie Whitman recalls, “the audience was always puzzled and someone was sure to ask, ‘What are those white women doing up there?’ Then they would recognize us as the performers and laugh in amazement.”⁶⁰ This practice reflects what Michael Taussig terms a “mimetic vertigo,”⁶¹ or a tumbling of audience and performer through associations and disassociations of representation, and allowed for what George-Graves describes in her assessment of these

practices as “multiple spectatorships in which different audience members read different meanings into the act of passing [. . .] the Whitman Sisters nonetheless succeeded in undermining the notion of a fixed racial identity and forced their audiences to reckon with these constructions.”⁶²

The confusion of racial identity created by the use of wigs and makeup also points to the kind of envy, or what Eric Lott terms “love and theft” inherent in cultural mimicry that traverses racial lines. By literally highlighting their own mixed heritage, by simultaneously accenting and playing down certain physical traits upon which race is “read,” and by appropriating culturally prized elements of white feminine beauty, the Whitmans effectively created a complex representation of identity, thereby playfully critiquing the ways race and femininity are defined and identity determined. They also acknowledged the social value placed on white female beauty as well as its status as a commodity, that which could be possessed by anyone able to don a new hairdo. By challenging these determinations, the Whitmans reminded audiences that identity could be fluid, racial boundaries could be crossed, and though American culture was preoccupied with the black-white binary and they themselves identified as black, race need not be a fixed social component.

While this message could have been read as a threat to white culture, via the possibility of infiltration of white society by blacks “passing” as whites,⁶³ there is no indication that the sisters suffered any backlash for their critiques. Instead, accounts such as Essie’s above indicate that audiences delighted in the visual play of racial intermingling, which occurred within the safety of a fictitious space – the stage. The proscenium framed their performance as fantasy, an imagined rendering where anything

can happen sans consequences, and where cultural anxieties could be explored, challenged, and flirted with without necessarily disrupting rules of cultural propriety. While the Whitman Sisters' performances did not destroy segregation laws, at the very least they presented audiences with alternative representations of social interactions in which blacks and whites negotiated relationships and public space in a peaceful and respectful manner.

The Whitmans also ensured that the fictitious interracial mingling they represented onstage was then mirrored in the audience. Early in their careers they did so by insisting on desegregated audiences whenever possible, and advertising these accommodations in press coverage leading up to their performances. Such notices encouraged audience attendance by hyping the desegregated seating as exclusive: "special seats will be reserved for white people, and many of the best people of the city will be present"⁶⁴ and "a special row of seats hav[e] been reserved for the whites." These limited seats were then regarded as valuable when attendance at the sisters' concerts was subsequently reported: "there were a large number of white people drawn there by the fame of these vocalists, and they are enthusiastic in praise of the singing today."⁶⁵ While other acts certainly would have advertised the availability of seating for desegregated audiences, the Whitmans efforts to desegregate bodies in the theatre reinforced their efforts to desegregate minds as well, as evidenced by their performance practices.

The Whitman Sisters' performances effectively created a framework within which they worked to (e)race stereotypes and prejudice through their complicated performances of blackface, intra-racial variety, and passing, fooling audiences into a mimetic game of

“guess who,” in which the answer was seldom what it first appeared to be. The Whitman Sisters performances challenged the public’s initial view of them:

These three bright, pretty, mulatto girls are the daughters of the pastor of the A.M.E. Church of Atlanta, Georgia. They have wonderful voices, that of Essie being the lowest contralto on record. The sisters play banjos and sing coon songs with a smack of the original flavor. Their costuming is elegant; their manner graceful and their appearance striking in elegance as they are unusually handsome.⁶⁶

In this review published in *The Birmingham News* (1902), the reporter is struck by the beauty of the Whitmans, calling them “pretty,” “elegant,” “graceful,” “striking,” and “handsome.” Each of these compliments is given in awe of and in relation to the fact that these are “mulatto girls” performing in the mimetic minstrel tradition such quintessentially “black” arts as banjo playing and singing “coon songs.” But by undermining what Rainier Spencer (among others) argues is the social construction of race in our culture,⁶⁷ the Whitman Sisters challenged these reviews, asking audiences to consider the depths of identity rather than the corporeal manifestation of it.

Conclusion

The Whitmans used their performances to combat the three tiered matrix of oppression – economic, political, and ideological – as identified in Patricia Hill Collins’s *Black Feminist Thought*. Through their efforts to manage their own show, provide fair

wages to their troupe, and resist corrupt white male theatre owners who attempted to take advantage of an African American troupe run by a woman, the Whitmans combated economic oppression. Through their subversive performances of race both on and off stage, the Whitmans negotiated political and legal barriers to their success. Finally, their performances, which capitalized on the popularity of minstrel forms dominated by white men, often altered the form of the piece. They resisted the use of negative stereotypes or subverted them to point to the constructed nature of these damaging ideologies and provided an alternative, positive, or more accurate portrayal of black existence. While the Whitman Sisters may not have identified their efforts as “black feminism,” the theory can inform our understanding of the types of oppression that black women have experienced historically, helping to identify performance practices such as those of the Whitman Sisters that addressed these challenges in a creative and successful manner.

By presenting, complicating, and reimagining gender, sexuality, race, and class within their performances, the Whitman Sisters attempted, with varying degrees of success, to (e)race negative social perceptions held by both black and white audiences about African Americans. Sadly, their work itself has been largely erased from theatrical history, due in part to institutionalized racism which privileges the preservation of white performance and culture. Yet even white female performers have been granted more (albeit still limited) space in history. By constructing a space for dialogue about the repertoires and techniques of female minstrel/vaudeville performers, I acknowledge parts of this American performance tradition which are, to date, under-acknowledged in scholarly discourse about turn-of-the-century performance.

Double Take:

The Dolly Sisters and the Development of American Identities

Sisters are only sisters, but the Dolly Sisters are twins.¹

The Dollys have done for twin stars what Columbus did for America.

They discovered the fact.²

Introduction

Identical twins Rosika and Yansci Deustch were born October 25, 1892 in Budapest, Hungary to Margarethe and Julius Deutsch. As young children the sisters were exposed to the arts by their mother, a former dancer who retired from the stage when she married, and their grandmother, who believed cultural exposure was crucial to a well-rounded education but did not endorse a career in the theatre. In 1902 when the sisters were ten, their grandmother took them to see the American modern dancer Isadora Duncan at the Urania Theatre during one of her twenty sold out performances.³ The impact was enormous. Duncan's organic movements, bohemian sensuality, and diaphanous costumes captured the attention of the sisters and revealed to them the possibility of a life on the stage.

In 1905 the twins immigrated to the United States with their mother, reuniting with their father who made the journey to New York two years prior. The family, like many others during this period of intense immigration to the U.S., was in search of economic security and greater opportunities for personal happiness and financial success.

The family settled into the immigrant neighborhood of New York City's Lower East Side and began the process of assimilation into American society.⁴ Like millions of immigrants who flocked to the United States in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the Deutsch family experience, as Matthew Frye Jacobson notes of the broader European immigrant experience,

was decisively shaped by their entering an arena where Europeanness – that is to say, whiteness – was among the most important possessions one could lay claim to. It was their *whiteness*, not any kind of New World magnanimity, that opened the Golden Door. And yet, for those who arrived between 1840 and 1924, New World experience was also decisively stamped by their entering an arena where race was the prevailing idiom for discussing citizenship and the relative merits of a given people.⁵

The Deutsch family, like most immigrant families, was not wealthy upon arrival in the United States and as a result, their immediate concern was for their economic survival and well-being. Financial security was tied to employment, and employment was tied, legally in some parts of the country and culturally in most, to race.

David Roediger argues in *Working Towards Whiteness* that European immigrants learned quickly to “become white” in order to assimilate into mainstream American culture, and to secure favorable jobs reserved for English-speaking, “white” immigrants. Whiteness was relative and determined based, among other things, on immigrants' skin tone, ethnic background, geographic origin, and language. In order to avoid any

“proximity to oppression” new European immigrants learned to separate themselves from socially disenfranchised groups such as black Americans.⁶ The Deutsch family serves as an example of how assimilation, and in some cases fame and public adoration, was possible and achievable by Eastern European immigrants at the turn of the last century. As Richard Dyer explains,

A sense of being white, of belonging to a white race, only widely developed in the United States of America in the nineteenth century as part of the process of establishing U.S. identity. The appeal to a common whiteness addressed European settlers, on the one hand over and against the indigenous reds and imported blacks, and on the other over and above the particularities of the different European nations from which they had come. You might be British, you might even be Irish, Polish, or Greek, but you were also white, not red or black.⁷

“Becoming white” in the public eye was crucial to economic gain and economic gain was crucial to upward social mobility. The Deutsch family aimed to ultimately achieve both. The Deutsch family identified as white, non-Jewish, European immigrants and thus undoubtedly had an easier time securing work than most non-white immigrants (head-of-household Julius was a photographer turned interior decorator). They avoided the backbreaking, dangerous factory work demanded by the Industrial Revolution and performed by many immigrant workers. Nevertheless, financial security remained precarious for the family. Given their natural dancing ability, desire to be onstage,

duplicitous and striking good looks, and the family's financial necessity, Yansci and Rosika, managed by their mother, began a quest for a life in the theatre.⁸

The Deutsch sisters, later to become the Dolly Sisters, embarked on a path leading to professional careers as vaudeville entertainers in New York, London, and Paris. Their careers were punctuated by early Hollywood film roles, romantic entanglements, financial wealth, and a life-long pursuit of high class social acceptance. As immigrants, identical twins, and physically attractive but unconventionally beautiful women, the Deutsch sisters made their mark on Broadway and popular entertainment from the 1910s through the 1930s, demonstrating that immigrants and entertainers could break through the social g/class ceiling into the upper echelons of American high society. As the famous Cholly Knickerbocker society column "The Smart Set" once headlined, the "Glamorous Dolly Sisters Were Responsible for American Society Agreeing That, After All, Actors Could 'Belong.'"⁹

Informed by David Roediger's, Matthew Frye Jacobson's, and Richard Dyer's theories of whiteness, immigration, class, and identity and expanding on Gary Chapman's 2006 biography *The Delectable Dollies*, I mine archival sources and previous literature to chart an analysis of the Dolly Sisters' very public lives and career in vaudeville as a balancing act, a performance of what Roediger terms "inbetweenness," that is, their "willingness" and ability as "white" immigrants "to keep both similarity and difference at play."¹⁰ In the case of the Dolly Sisters, such "inbetweenness" describes their particular experience as immigrants and as identical twins. In fact, many European immigrants also experienced a particular kind of duality. They were both white and Other, both the same as and different from the dominant white society they strived to enter. As sisters, the

Dollies also belonged to the small but popular group of sister acts, family acts, and beautiful stage performers. Yet as identical twins, they were set apart and above “mere” sisters, or sister “acts.” By virtue of their biological duplication, the Dolly Sisters were considered genetically “more real,” closer, authentic, and unusual than the average female performer or audience member. This history and analysis of their work demonstrates how they embodied mirrored traits of sameness and difference in their performances, accentuating their identical appearances via choreography, costuming, and mirroring routines. The Dollies’ exploited and emphasized their glamorous, exotic, carbon-copy looks and demeanors, parlaying them into successful careers and society positions by commercializing their ethnic differences while simultaneously maintaining their cultural whiteness. Their successful entry into high-class society and their lavish performances of wealth and conspicuous consumption reinforced their whiteness. Economic success, aristocratic beaux and marriages, high profile divorces, and social acceptance were not something often achieved or afforded individuals of “other” races.

Their attraction was celebrated and exploited by the press, which consistently noted their appearances as remarkable and sanctioned them as doubly different because of their twinned nature and outsider immigrant status. Nevertheless they were endorsed as beautiful, white, and acceptable.

Compared to Lillian Russell-ish [blonde and buxom] beauties of the preceding era, the Dolly Sisters could not have been termed beautiful. But they were sleek, dark and exotic-looking. Their almond-shaped eyes and their oriental grace were a

novelty. Besides, they had the proverbial ‘it’ or ‘oomph,’ or ‘harumph,’ or ‘yum,’ or whatever you want to call it.¹¹

Literally capitalizing on their looks and creating public identities as both foreign and proudly American (Figure 4.1), the sisters took advantage of their “inbetweenness” and their double consciousness to encourage the public’s perception of them as a positive paradox: a delightfully different and exotically Other, yet fascinatingly genetically identical pair. As *Cosmopolitan*’s Henry Tyrrell noted in 1912, “Rosie and Jenny Dolly . . . are dark haired and gipsy eyed, and as pretty as their pictures . . . And they look so much alike that they have to dress differently in order to tell themselves apart.”¹² Their unusual, doubled appearance helped the Dollies maintain a broad appeal for audiences on both sides of the Atlantic.

Rising to fame in the 1910s, their ability to straddle ethnic, racial, and cultural lines during a period of great racial and labor unrest between native born, English-speaking white and black Americans and non-native immigrants was their ticket to fame and fortune. The Dolly Sisters are remarkable for their ability to maneuver the complicated racial and cultural system in place during their arrival in the United States by celebrating their concurrent difference and sameness. They represent the resilient nature of so many immigrants intent on finding fortune by adopting, mirroring, and expanding what it means to claim an “American” identity.

Early Career

As immigrants from Hungary, the Deutsch family was able to carve a niche into the façade of American identity whereby they were viewed as white while also maintaining their distinction as foreigners. Matthew Frye Jacobson notes that this was not an altogether uncommon experience for many European transplants to the United States. He argues that contemporary scholars must recognize that

American scholarship on immigration has generally conflated race and color, and so has transported a late-twentieth-century understanding of ‘difference’ into a period whose inhabitants recognized biologically based ‘races’ rather than culturally based ‘ethnicities.’ But in the interest of an accurate historical rendering of race in the structure of U.S. culture and in the experience of those immigrant groups now called ‘Caucasians,’ we must listen more carefully to the historical sources than to the conventions of our own era; we must admit of a system of ‘difference’ by which one might be both white *and* racially distinct from other whites.¹³

The Deutsch family’s origin in Hungary, and its geographical proximity north and east of the Caucasus Mountain range dividing Europe and the continent of Asia, designated them as originating from a geographically “white” region, though they may have been, as Jacobson notes, distinguished as “racially distinct from other whites.”

As “whites” the Deutsch sisters were able to more easily gain entry into the entertainment industry than they may have were they perceived to be non-white, or

“black.”¹⁴ Their mother secured a series of lessons for them at Claude Alviene’s dancing school, and was able to arrange an early performance opportunity for them in Boston in 1906. Their early career is marked by out-of-town engagements on vaudeville circuits. This was necessary to avoid penalty by the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (SPCC) or “Gerry Society” (nicknamed for its leader Eldridge T. Gerry), which banned child performers from professional stages in New York. As a result, the Deutsch sisters were prevented from performing in the city until they were fifteen years old.¹⁵ While this may have been seen by the twins and their mother as an early barrier to success, it undoubtedly provided them with an opportunity to further acclimate to American culture and tastes, improve their English, hone their performance skills, learn the profession, and make valuable contacts that would help them advance their careers.

One such contact who would prove helpful in obtaining early work and formative in shaping their professional and personal identities was Baron Hoffman, a manager and producer whose wife Gertrude Hoffman was a well known performer and choreographer. The Deutsch sisters toured a vaudeville circuit (outside of New York) with Gertrude Hoffman in 1906. She took a liking to the twins, and provided them with additional training as well as the nickname that eventually not only described their appearance, but identified them to the world. Believing the young twins looked like a set of dolls, she called them “the Dollies” which evolved into the stage name “the Dolly Sisters.” This new Americanized surname replaced their original and more foreign-sounding name Deutsch and was often combined with an Anglicizing of their first names from Yansci and Rosika to Jenny and Rosie in both their personal and professional lives.¹⁶ By

removing a seminal mark of origin from their identity, the Dolly Sisters encouraged perceptions of them that read them as white and American.

Throughout the 1910s the Dolly Sisters traveled in a multitude of vaudeville acts both in New York and around the country building their reputations as dancers, beauties, and professional performers. They debuted on Broadway in 1909 when they joined the cast of *The Midnight Sons*, a Lew Fields and Shubert brother's production. This was the beginning of many future collaborations with the Shuberts. The Dolly Sisters were successful in the show because it capitalized on the popularity of revues during the era. As Dolly biographer Gary Chapman notes, "the Dolly Sisters had arrived on Broadway . . . when traditional musical comedy was being challenged by revue, with dancing a vital ingredient. . . . the Dollies became successful because they were a novelty dancing act, with the allure of being identical twins."¹⁷ They often proclaimed, as they did to the *New York American*

"We are-" says Roszika Dolly-

"The first twins-" continues Yancsi Dolly.

"To appear as stars-" resumes Roszika Dolly

"Not only on Broadway-" chimes in Yancsi Dolly-

"But in the whole wide world," say the two Dollies applying their lipsticks simultaneously.¹⁸

The sisters were well aware of the attention their appearance garnered, and used it to their advantage in securing attention from both producers such as the Shuberts, as well as the public and the press.

One of their major early accomplishments was appearances in the *Ziegfeld Follies of 1911* at the Jardin de Paris/New York Theatre Roof Garden (which also toured through the beginning of 1912), the *Follies of 1913* at the New Amsterdam Theatre, NY, and Ziegfeld's *Midnight Frolic* of 1916 also at the New Amsterdam Theatre. Ziegfeld's storied productions of displays of glamour, female sexuality, and materialistic excess were an ideal venue for the Dollies. Surrounded by pageantry and elaborate sets and costumes, the twins' beauty, made excessive in its duplication, not only fit in but was celebrated as a natural occurrence of the kind of excess and pleasure being fabricated and enjoyed by the elite class during the 1910-20s. Their appearances in reviews continued, including the *Greenwich Village Follies* (Figure 4.2), in which they flaunted their beauty, lithe dancing bodies, and the fantasy of corporeal ac/excess for anyone able to purchase a ticket for their performances.

Dancing was crucial to the Dolly Sisters' early success and their survival in theatre throughout their careers. Dance and physicality served as a medium of universal communication for the Dolly Sisters. As immigrants and non-native English speakers, language was always a weak skill for the performers. In interviews their accents and the occasional misplaced word were delivered as charming, exotic traits and traces of their foreign past. But on the stage such language barriers posed a threat to their ability to accurately deliver lines, portray characters, and communicate with the audience. Critics

often cited this weakness in the Dolly Sisters' routine. The *Brooklyn Eagle's* review of *His Bridal Night* (1916), for example, states:

It is only when they talk that they strike a jarring note. One is reminded of the story of the man who married a plain girl because she had a beautiful voice. The next morning when she came down to the breakfast table he looked at her and exclaimed, fervently, "For heaven's sake, sing!" When the Dolly sisters speak, we feel like saying to them, "For heaven's sake, dance."¹⁹

These limitations were minimized or altogether eliminated when the sisters' performances were primarily or exclusively based on dance and emphasized their looks over their vocal talents.

In an interview with *Cosmopolitan* in 1912 Rosie elaborated on the sisters' approach to dancing. She echoes the improvisational, experimental approach taken by their early inspiration, Isadora Duncan and, by associating themselves with such a famed and legendary artist, claims a space for the sisters as professionals in the emerging arena of American modern and popular dance:

We are like chameleons, absorbing colour here and there from what we see that is really good and novel. . . . A dancer has got to feel her own impulse in what she does. That is the modern idea of dancing, don't you think? We are always looking for something new and we dance a great deal more away from the theatre than here on the stage.²⁰

Rosie described the sisters' knack for appropriating a variety of cultural influences and inspirations into their work in order to develop new routines. As ethnic outsiders whose own cultural contributions were highly sought after in the New York entertainment industry, the Dolly Sisters learned to blend styles and genres to create an inherently American form of dance and theatrical variety show.

Broadway and vaudeville impresario and dance master Ned Wayburn, a Dolly Sisters contemporary whose choreography was seen in major shows such as Ziegfeld's *Follies*, and who ran his own dance studio for aspiring dancers, encouraged the idea of dance as a universal art form and viable profession. In his self-published 1925 manual *The Art of Stage Dancing: The Story of a Beautiful and Profitable Profession, A Manual of Stagecraft*, under the heading "Universal Appreciation of the Dance," Wayburn noted the broad appeal of dance for all audience goers.

[E]veryone—men and women, young or mature, can enjoy the beauty, harmony, and exhilaration of a well conceived and well executed dance. There is something in the nature of us all that responds immediately to the message that the dancer conveys. Perfection of form, grace of movement, harmony of action with appropriate music, all combine to make up a spectacle that thrills and inspires. To slightly paraphrase Robert Browning: 'Others may reason and welcome, But seeing the dance, we know.'²¹

Movement became the universal language the Dolly Sisters employed to “talk” their way to stardom, wealth, and an American identity by contributing to the development of an American form of modern and popular dance. Wayburn acknowledged the contributions of immigrants such as the Dollies in the field of dance, and encouraged their participation and acceptance in the arts, especially “the melting pot of the dance.” He argued that

[a]gainst the narrow ideas that would reject many things of great value because they are of foreign origin, there is need for a wise and discriminating selection of the best that all regions of the earth have to offer in the domain of science, literature, music, painting, the dance, and other arts, and their combination with the results attained by American creative effort.

In no respect is there a more urgent need for the development of a truly American art spirit than in the wide field offered by artistic dancing, yet it would surely be a mistake to ignore all that has been learned and accomplished in the long experience of other peoples. A foolish prejudice against foreign dances should not be allowed to prevent the incorporation of their best features into what will ultimately be the distinctive American school. . . . As the various races from other lands have mingled their several qualities and gifts, and have produced the highest civilization on a broad scale that the world has ever seen, so will the creators of new and more beautiful dance forms utilize the characteristic dances of all nations in achieving what will be the 100 per cent American dance.²²

This embracing of international influences on the burgeoning field of early modern American dance was encouraged by popular performance producers such as Wayburn, who were certainly excited about the emerging art form, but mostly interested in the commercial benefits of new and “exotic” material for the multitude of shows being staged each season during the early twentieth century. The need for an open acceptance and understanding of world culture and dance was also promoted by the founders of American modern dance themselves, Ruth St. Denis and Ted Shawn, whose careers reflected a lifelong commitment to the study, appropriation, and performance of foreign, and especially South Asian, dance.

Though Americans often feared immigrant populations coming to U.S. shores, theatre goers simultaneously delighted in the cultural contributions they made to arts and entertainment, so much so that American-born artists often attempted to “pass” for foreign in order to attract attention as exotic imports. The sister act of famed opera star Rosa Ponselle and her older sister Carmela (born in Connecticut) did just that. The sisters launched their careers in vaudeville in 1915, like so many other sister acts, because of a family financial crisis.

[T]hey began passing themselves off as being ‘from Italy, native Italians who have sung all the leading soprano and alto roles and know grand opera.’ Carmela had interviewers believing that they had sung at La Scala and in Florence and Rome and were on their maiden tour of the States, longing for the warm climate of Naples, ‘where we were born.’ . . . Finally, at least two writers let it be known that both sisters ‘possessed perfect English accents’ and were probably

Americans. Others were not so sure. Variouslly called ‘Ponzilla,’ ‘Pontzilla,’ ‘Ponzella’ and other variants, they were also reviewed as ‘lovely Spanish girls’ and as having ‘features that are undeniably Jewish.’²³

Unlike the Ponselle sisters, the Dolly Sisters were not only representative of the kinds of international influences that infiltrated New York’s theatres during the early-twentieth century, they actually *were* the international influence, and made every effort to appear as such while maintaining their hard earned racial and social status.

In 1913 *Stage Quarterly* ran a photo of Rosie dressed in a gypsy-inspired costume with the caption “Miss Roszika Dolly Hungarian, but Popular in Yankeeland”²⁴ thus emphasizing the stage community’s and the public’s appetite for foreign talent (Figure 4.3). Likewise the Dolly Sisters’ performances in the 1912 Ziegfeld production *Winsome Widow* were described by *Cosmopolitan* magazine as a “mixed dancing specialty – a sort of terpsichorean Russian salad . . . in the main a pretty modification of the prevailing ragtime, embellished and refined with a dash of Hungarian paprika.” The linguistic turn in this press account demonstrates the parallel identities the Dollies cultivated onstage and off. They were both as American as ragtime, yet as exotic as Hungarian paprika. Their assimilation into American culture and their ability to add “spice” to that culture was at once welcomed and celebrated. The show was so “breathhtaking and a monster hit” that the upcoming *Follies* production was postponed to allow for an extended run.²⁵

Gaining their footing in New York’s entertainment industry, the sisters pursued every opportunity to promote their prowess as dancers and to gain attention from the

press. According to the *Daily Mirror*, during their run as featured dancers in the Shubert production of *The Merry Countess* (1912) they offered

free lessons in their art to fifty poor girls of New York city who have the requisite ability to become professional dancers. The Messrs. Shubert have agreed to let them have the stage of the Casino for three hours every Thursday morning, and hope that many experts may be developed through this experiment.²⁶

The press documented the twins' philanthropy, high profile suitors, and social excursions in addition to their glamorous performances. This exposure helped mold the Dolly Sisters' public persona as generous, productive, and contributing immigrant citizens who earned and were grateful for their own good fortune, as successful and desirable women, and as professional performers. By simultaneously reaching down to help those less fortunate, while reaching up to grasp the next rung of the social ladder, the sisters successfully distinguished themselves from those needing help, and associated themselves with those of exclusive social standing.

During their early careers the sisters made great efforts to cultivate a respectable image of themselves by underscoring the importance of family, and, while enjoying the company of wealthy men, ultimately marrying (initially at least) for love and not for money. Rosie and Jenny entered their first marriages in 1913 and 1914 respectively. Though married, Rosie to composer Jean Schwartz and Jenny to comedian and singer Harry Fox, the sisters maintained close living arrangements in adjoining apartments, but entered a period of solo performance. During their joint appearance in the Shubert

production of *The Merry Countess* (1912-13) the sisters announced that they would begin to pursue separate projects. Rosie stated in an interview “If we were ever to have distinct individualities, it was necessary for us to work separately . . . and while it was hard to bring ourselves to do it, it was necessary. From an artistic standpoint, our decision was wise.”²⁷ Rosie starred in *The Beggar Student* (1913), *The Whirl of the World* (1914), and a dance show (1913), the *Follies of 1913*, and *Hello Broadway* (1914) with dance partner Martin Brown. Jenny and Harry Fox starred in *The Honeymoon Express* (1913), followed by a six month vaudeville tour, another in 1914, and starred in *Maid in America* in 1915.

Hollywood and Early Film

In addition to pursuing marriages and separate stage work, the sisters also explored opportunities in the burgeoning silent film industry. Rosie traveled to Hollywood to appear in *The Lily and the Rose* (1915), directed by D.W. Griffith and co-starring Lillian Gish (Griffith’s star actress, also featured in his most well-known work, *Birth of a Nation*). The melodramatic film featured Gish as the fair and lovely ingénue whose new husband falls prey to the spell of a charming vampire named Rose (Rosie) who is an exotic dancer. “Lillian, blond and fragile, was the pure element in the leading man’s life, and Rosie, dark and sultry, the evil element.”²⁸ Griffith’s casting of Rosie as the exotic Other reinforces the racialized undertones of so much cultural work during this time period. Griffith would later work with another sister act, Rosetta and Vivian Duncan, on a motion picture of their long-running stage hit *Topsy and Eva* (1927), loosely based on Harriet Beecher Stowe’s famous *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. In that film, as in *The Lily and the*

Rose, Griffith fabricated racialized differences between the angelic, fair Eva (Vivian) and the blackfaced, evil trickster Topsy (Rosetta).

The Lily and the Rose provided Rosie an opportunity to work in another medium which broadened her awareness of her own performance habits and physical traits. In an interview with the *Dramatic Mirror* she revealed

'I'm not a bit like I thought I was,' says Miss Dolly in discussing her Triangle [production company] play. 'I do a lot of little things I didn't know I did at all. And there's something funny about my walk. I hop a little, and I was always so sure that I glided as the ladies in novels do. The difference between the speaking stage and the film drama as I see it is that in motion pictures you can't really act. You just have to be natural.'²⁹

Ironically, Griffith sent Rosie Dolly and Lillian Gish to the Denishawn School of Dance run by American modern dance pioneers Ruth St. Denis and husband Ted Shawn to learn not only choreography for the film, but also the technique of Delsarte, the choreographic physical language of gestures used by many performers in the late nineteenth century. Griffith believed the movements would translate well to the new performance medium of silent film. Such movements are highly stylized and would not have appeared natural. While naturalistic performance techniques may not have been what Rosie acquired under the direction of Ruth St. Denis, a refined flair for the exotic and Orientalism was certainly a possibility.³⁰

Jenny too explored the possibilities of film in *The Call of the Dance* which she filmed in 1915. Though the film does not survive today and was not a success when it premiered, she was praised by *Variety* as “the only thing worthwhile” about the movie.³¹ While the movie was not a success, the timing of the sisters’ separate but nearly simultaneous film premieres points to a kind of sibling rivalry and competitiveness between the twins that fueled their professional and personal lives.

In 1918 the twins teamed up to star in *The Million Dollar Dollies*, a feature film written especially for them by French director Leonce Perret. The fantastical plot involves the Dollies who, for the fee of one million dollars, agree to help a hypnotized maharajah fall in love with his intended bride. The Dollies succeed and, with their million dollars, plan to wed their own suitors. The film “evoked the right atmosphere of the mystery of the East . . . [and] was a vehicle to display their dancing and, of course, their amazing wardrobe, which allegedly comprised forty-eight different costumes created especially for them.”³² When the film premiered in London in 1920, coinciding with the Dolly Sisters’ appearance in a production called *Jigsaw* at the Hippodrome, it was heralded as “typically American in its dash and sparkle.”³³ *The Million Dollar Dollies* exemplified the ways the Dolly Sisters embodied the traits, aesthetics, and values of high modernism and American culture (as perceived by a French director) in the early twentieth century. The Dolly Sisters’ duplicity speaks to the mass production of the modern era in which they rose to fame – they were duplicated for mass consumption in the eyes of audiences both corporeally and in new media such as film. In the burgeoning consumer market in which they performed the Dollies represented the excess of success. They were attractive as commodities because they represented indulgence. They offered

more to consume because they were two bodies not one.

His Bridal Night

Rozika and Yancsi, who have danced their way from Hungary, where they made their debut in their own dining room at the age of eight, to the Republic here in New York, where they are featured in "His Bridal Night," fulfill the eugenic ideal of twins. They look so much alike that their husbands in or out of the play can scarcely tell them apart; they think alike, act alike, and they are devoted to each other.³⁴

In between their brief solo appearances on stage and screen, the Dolly Sisters reunited in New York in 1916 for a new Broadway vaudeville season. In addition to appearing in revues in which they were able to rely on their dancing ability and beauty to attract crowds and handsome salaries, the Dollies also began fielding stage work that specifically catered to their unique circumstance as not only sisters, but identical twins. In 1916 the sisters starred in the Broadway comedy *His Bridal Night*, produced by Roger Dillingham and written especially for them by Lawrence Riving, with script doctor Margaret Mayo contributing heavily to the final version of the play. The show was a great success and toured to acclaim in Washington D.C. following its Broadway run.

In this and so many of their works, the Dollies capture the attention of the audience with their mirrored performances – their simultaneous movements, speeches, and – perhaps most notably – their duplicated, ostentatious wardrobes. *His Bridal Night* was also the first big vehicle in which the Dollies began to consciously appropriate

costumes as a tool with which they could wield and attain social power as trendsetters. The Dolly Sisters became as famous for their clothes as they were for their performances. As *Theatre Magazine* noted in a 1917 article “Sister Teams in Vaudeville,”

Entertainers of the eminence of the Dolly Sisters are expected by their fashionable following to constantly produce novelties . . . Ultra costumes made of the Dollys’ return the real fashion show of the season and this combined with their terpsichorean skill made their performance in vaudeville one of surpassing charm and achievement.³⁵

The sisters’ long collaboration with the famous couturier Lady Duff Gordon (Lucile) was a featured element of *His Bridal Night*, a production for which Lucile produced dozens of identical costumes for the twins. In a *Theatre* interview conducted during the production the Dollies, busy in their dressing room where they “flattened their pretty noses against the mirror to see if their make-up and coiffures were identical,” were asked

‘Are your clothes all alike?’

‘Most of them. We order double of everything. Poor Lucille complains that she loses interest when she has to repeat herself so frequently. But sometimes one of us gets a pretty thing that the other covets, and then – ‘

‘The first one up is the one best dressed!’ broke in Yancsi with a laugh.³⁶

While the sisters had routinely accentuated their likeness by dressing identically before, beginning with their relationship with Lucile, their performed duplication took on a heightened sense of opulence and glamour. As public figures, they became icons to which women looked for guidance and inspiration in matters of fashion, behavior, and taste. Socialites flocked to the theatre to see the Dollies perform and to catch a glimpse of the sisters' cache of the latest couture fashions displayed in the production, lending them an air of trend-setting authority and real social power. According to biographer and historian Charles Higham, Wallis Warfield (the Duchess of Windsor) wore a wedding dress designed by Lucile in the same style as the Dollies' *His Bridal Night* costumes (Figure 4.4) in her own wedding to first husband Earl Spencer.³⁷

His Bridal Night featured a comedic case of mistaken identity containing what the *Brooklyn Eagle* noted as “much of the naughtiness of a clever French farce” with “the merit of being original.”³⁸ The extant three act play revolves around two identical twin sisters, Vi (Rosie) and Tiny (Jenny). Vi is getting married to a doting fiancé, Joe, but takes his affections for granted. Tiny, determined to teach her sister a lesson, leaves the wedding reception with Joe in place of her sister. Vi trails them in hot pursuit, along with a persistent but scorned lover, Lent, who eventually realizes he is actually in love with her available sister.

The second act humor is based on the risqué situation created when the young husband finds himself alone – and unaware – that he is with the wrong sister. The scene avoids scandal when the married sister arrives, and the remainder of the play involves Joe's and Lent's efforts at deciphering which twin is which. The twins, each determined to teach the other a lesson about meddling in the other's private affairs, willingly

maintain the mistaken identity charade until the very last scene of the play. Only in the final moments of the third act does Joe realize he actually did marry the sister that he loves, and Lent and Tiny are able to pursue their own romance. The curtain falls on the sisters eluding the lovers in a complicated foxtrot, dancing with each other rather than their intended mates, before the men “capture them for [the] finish of [the] dance.”³⁹

His Bridal Night was a significant work for the Dolly Sisters, presenting them with their first stage opportunity to act as well as dance in a non-musical play commissioned for them and featuring them as identical twins. While they had been showcased as headliners in previous revues and plays, this was the first that highlighted them as actresses as well as dancers. The show captured audiences’ fascination with the twins, and played on the public’s delighted confusion with their often mistaken identity. The *Brooklyn Eagle* reviewed the production noting “[t]he authors, by the way, have been clever in letting the audience know from the start which is the married sister, while the principals in the play are constantly guessing. This makes the audience feel superior and naturally adds to their enjoyment.”⁴⁰ Other reviews pointed out the mimetic device at work as the play mirrored the sisters’ own lives. The *Washington Times* ran complimentary and critical responses to the play’s mimetic likeness to the sisters’ personal given circumstances. While Florence Yoder initially noted that the Dollies were “wonderfully clever mimics and natural actresses,” a fellow critic was quick to remind readers that the Dollies were real life identical twins, “and that in their moments of greatest naturalness and ease they were simply living their everyday lives.”⁴¹

The Dolly Sisters’ performances were, in essence, a mirror through which the audience was invited to associate and see themselves. “The image of the mirror also

illustrates how human beings recognize and even create themselves through the images of others, who are, in their own turn, reflections of yet again still others.”⁴² The mirror metaphor is found throughout the sisters’ careers (Figure 4.5). They represent one another, themselves, and a paradigm of eccentric but glamorous beauty to which women could not only compare themselves but also look for an example and affirmation of societal standards of acceptance for white beauty, womanhood, and wealth. *The New York Dramatic Chronicle* noted the appeal of the Dollies’ duplicitous performance in *His Bridal Night* and their representation of the feminine ideal thusly,

Are they not together? Are they not realizing a long cherished ambition to dance in a real play? Is it not true that their vehicle calls upon them to wear ravishing costumes and many of them, and do they not just bow in adoration before beautiful clothes like any other well balanced being of feminine persuasion?⁴³

Conversely, the Dollies’ performances also served to reflect and reinforce masculine identity and social position. The Dollies literally embodied the mirror metaphor, reflecting themselves, the masculine opposite, and societal standards for their audiences.

London and Paris

All the World Loves the Dolly Sisters.

*The Dolly Sisters are the Most Popular Twins in All the World.*⁴⁴

Shows such as *His Bridal Night* propelled the Dolly Sisters into the international spotlight. In 1920 the twins premiered abroad in London at the Hippodrome in *Jigsaw*, which ran for over six months. Once again the Dollies found they were able to capitalize upon their status as foreigners, aliens in a strange land. This time, their outsider status was doubly foreign and appealing to audiences. The sisters were not only American, but also Hungarian. They reflected on their difference when returning to the States in 1922,

'Of course,' said Miss Roszika – or perhaps it was Miss Yancsi – 'we can't speak English through our noses the way they do it over there.' It was the Dolly Sisters speaking, back after two and a half years in London, looking as much like twins as ever. 'But outside of the fact that it is sometimes difficult to understand what the English people are talking about we love London.'⁴⁵

Though the British accents may have seemed foreign to the Americanized Dollies, who emphasized their American sensibilities both in England and when returning to the U.S. by distancing themselves from the Queen's English, they took full advantage of the social opportunities available to them abroad. Both sisters divorced their first husbands, and once free from marital obligations, began a rigorous social schedule. Once initial introductions were made, the sisters found themselves welcomed into the upper echelons of London society.

This was quite a contrast from the hard work and social diligence required to bridge the gap between performers and high society in the United States.

In New York actresses were still regarded as a separate class, and when society people invited actresses to functions they were expected to perform and were not invited just as guests. In contrast, actresses in London seemed to be viewed differently and had a higher social standing because the theatre was taken more seriously as a profession.

In London, the sisters were courted and their tastes for lavish jewels and parties subsidized by wealthy socialites, businessmen, and titled royalty, including the Prince of Wales (Edward VIII) and the Duke of Gloucester (Prince Henry). In England after the First World War, the Dollies represented the kind of modern, New Woman who was emerging in the United States. Free from emotional, financial, and familial entanglements, the Dollies represented the importation of all things American – “cocktails, nightclubs, jazz and cabaret.”⁴⁶ They epitomized American interwar success, and performed the materiality of their success, talent, and beauty both onstage and off.

After two brief returns to vaudeville in New York in 1922 the Dollies began a long reign as social fixtures and celebrated performers in France. The twins performed regularly in Paris theatres, nightclubs and cabarets (Figure 4.6), and vacationed in luxurious and exclusive locales including Biarritz, Corsica, Deauville, and the French Riviera. In this period the Dollies performed wealth and excess on stage as well as in casinos, where they leveraged their own mounting fortunes as well as the money of wealthy suitors and beaux, such as Jenny’s longtime companion and benefactor, Chicago and London department store magnate Gordon Selfridge. The sisters’ appearances at

casinos alone garnered attention. Socialite Thelma Lady Furness, recalling one of Jenny's typical arrivals at a casino in Cannes said

My eyes popped, I had never seen so many jewels on any one person in my life . . . every one of them was an emerald. The magnificent necklace she wore around her neck must have cost a king's ransom. Her bracelets reached almost to her elbows. The solitary ring she wore on her right hand must have been the size of a small ice cube.⁴⁷

Performing privilege was important to maintaining the Dollies' acquired social and racial status. As George Lipsitz notes, "Whiteness is invested in, like property, but it is also a means of accumulating property and keeping it from others."⁴⁸ Gambling, like dancing, became a show for the Dollies, an opportunity for the sisters to display themselves, their jewels, their beaus, and their cash as proof of their arrival and legitimacy in wealthy circles. Their success on the stage and at the casino tables was also a means by which to elevate themselves and demand respect beyond that afforded to their background as poor immigrants.

One legendary gambling win involved Jenny publicly humiliating Prince Esterhazy of Hungary with a stack of chips totaling around ten million francs. She reportedly announced to the crowd of onlookers,

'I'm glad I whipped the great Prince Esterhazy. My grandfather was a serf on his estate in Hungary and was lashed by his overseer.' According to Elsa Maxwell,

the society hostess who witnessed the entire event, this was democracy in action, since, although the woman was a commoner, she had been able to settle an old score with an aristocrat.⁴⁹

No longer fully identifying as Hungarian yet never burying her heritage, Jenny Dolly exerted her newly acquired power as a free, white, wealthy American woman against the imperial power of her former homeland. Richard Dyer explains “[a]s a product of enterprise and imperialism, whiteness is of course always already predicated on racial difference, interaction and domination.”⁵⁰ By distinguishing herself as racially different by virtue of her status as a white product of the American entertainment enterprise, Jenny successfully parlays this difference into the fiscal domination – and humiliation – of the imperialist forces that once subjugated her family, leading eventually to their departure from Hungary.

Throughout the 1920s and 1930s the Dollies made Paris their primary home, working in the city and vacationing in the myriad resort destinations on France’s coast. Each sister maintained multiple romantic and personal relationships with several men. Rosie remarried Sir Mortimer Davis Junior while Jenny maintained a long term partnership with Gordon Selfridge. In 1927 the sisters announced they would retire and began to pursue charitable, personal, and other professional goals. In 1930 Jenny adopted two Hungarian girls, Manzi and Klari, whom she encouraged the public to view as twins, though they were not blood relations. She also opened a high end lingerie boutique on the Champs-Élysées. Rosie divorced and married her third husband, Irving Netcher in 1932.

In 1933 Jenny sustained severe injuries in a near-fatal car accident. She underwent multiple medical and plastic surgeries to repair the injuries she sustained. While the sisters had retired from the stage, they had hopes of reuniting for a comeback, which Rosie was in Hollywood negotiating when Jenny's accident occurred. The accident sent Jenny into financial distress, forcing her to sell her legendary jewelry collection and return to the United States where she married Bernard Vinissky in 1935. Physically unable to perform and acutely self-conscious due to her altered looks as a result of the accident, Jenny suffered a deep depression and ultimately committed suicide in Los Angeles in 1941.

The Dolly Sisters

“The Dollys for years have held an odd hold on the New York show-going public. . . . As two dandy looking twins who cannot be told apart with class and who can dance if they want to, the Dolly Sisters are always worth the price of admission just to look at.”⁵¹

Shortly after Jenny's death Rosie sold the rights to their story to Twentieth Century Fox, whose biopic *The Dolly Sisters* starring Betty Grable (Jenny) and June Haver (Rosie) premiered in October 1945 (Figure 4.7). The film takes extreme liberties with the story of the sisters' lives and careers, most notably white-washing their ethnic background and the details of their lives. Rather than physically portraying the Dollies as they actually were, “dark-haired, with pageboy bobs, long green eyes and apricot skins,”⁵² the film instead presents them as blonde haired, blue eyed, fair skinned starlets

with no hint of a foreign accent, beyond one short scene in which it is feigned in an audition in order to make them seem like an unusual show commodity. In the immediate post World War II era, a Hollywood representation of the sisters' dark Eastern European features was eschewed in favor of actresses with more Aryan characteristics. Nationalism and displays of American identity, which demanded whiteness, were essential feel-good ingredients for Hollywood films, especially musicals. Hollywood effectively erased the Dolly Sisters' ethnic, foreign heritage in an effort to maintain racist, sexist standards of whiteness, beauty, appropriate womanhood, and American identity. The sisters were portrayed as fair featured as possible, and were played as naïve girls who relied on a gambling uncle to manage them, rather than the shrewd business women they actually were. Jenny's biggest struggle is depicted as whether to perform with her sister or sacrifice her career to remain a dutiful housewife to her first husband Harry Fox (John Payne), depicted as a WWI serviceman (which he was not). Rosie's romantic relationships, the sisters' excessive gambling, Jenny's adoptions, and her suicide are all ignored.

Despite its biographical shortcomings, the film is a vehicle for extraordinary set and costume design filmed with what was cutting edge Technicolor technology. True to the Dollies' original performances, the film featured lavish costumes and hairstyles meant to appeal to WWII era audiences, particularly women attending movies looking for an escape from the stress of the war that had just ended and a glimpse of a glamorous era gone by. The film featured

37 different costume changes [and] 35 different coiffures for the stars. The most elaborate style for Betty Grable is what is known as the French “anti-Nazi” hairdo which was originally created as defiant proof that Frenchwoman could still set styles, in spite of the fact that the Nazis were occupying Paris. Miss Grable is the first American screen star to have her hair dressed in this fashion.

The Dolly Sisters represents the era in which it was made far more accurately than the Dolly Sisters’ actual lives and careers. It is a sentimental musical featuring the Golden Age of Hollywood’s finest in a romanticized story featuring lavish production values.

According to the Pressbook Department’s information file on the Dollies and the film, “[t]he Technicolor musical cavalcade about the famous song-and-dance team of a generation ago required settings that range from the front porch of a boarding-house in Elmira, New York to a lavish home in Paris, amounting to a total of 79 different sets and the employment of 5000 players in its filming.” Of the incredible sets, one of the most spectacular is the

FOLIES BERGERE IN PARIS

Background for “Darktown Strutters’ Ball” number which is one of the most “Technicolorful” and most ambitious sets in the production with the first part being a fanciful Harlem Street scene which fades to disclose a 75-foot-long banjo lying at a slight angle so that the “neck” of the instrument is higher than the rest with the frets used as a stairway for the dances. Towering over the “banjo” is a 20-foot high figure of a Harlem trombone player Jazzbo, whose trombone goes

through the motions of playing even as Jazzbo's enormous foot taps in rhythm to the music.⁵³

This set serves as backdrop to what would now be considered a racist, sexist beauty pageant-like number. The song features chorus girls who parade around the set in mulatto blackface and costumes evoking Harlem nightlife, elements of jazz music, and overtly stereotypical representations of African Americans such as a pair of dancers dressed as twin pickaninnies.

Like so many films of its day, *The Dolly Sisters* uncomfortably represents Eastern European immigrant populations, African Americans, and African American culture via stereotype and difference instead of respect and authenticity. The contrast created between the white showgirls and their mulatto make up, and their make up and Grable's and Haver's personification of the Dollies served to reinforce the studio's insistence on the sisters' perceived and cultural whiteness. Yet what does such whitening accomplish? Julie Burchill in *Girls on Film* challenges such representations. "What does it say about racial purity that the best blondes have all been brunettes (Harlow, Monroe, Bardot)? I think it says that we are not as white as we think. I think it says that Pure is a Bore."⁵⁴ In conversation with this analysis bell hooks observes the potential cultural and psychological damage done when corporeal identity is denied in favor of a socially superior identity:

[I]t is the expressed desire of the non-blonde Other for those characteristics that are seen as the quintessential markers of racial aesthetic superiority that

perpetuate and uphold white supremacy. In this sense Madonna [and the Dolly Sisters] has much in common with masses of black women who suffer from internalized racism and are forever terrorized by a standard of beauty they feel they can never truly embody.⁵⁵

In the film and in their actual lives, the Dolly Sisters desired to be desired as beautiful, successful, women. Such social acceptance was contingent on whiteness. Both the Dolly Sisters and the film about them acknowledge that this was only achieved by striving towards an American “racial aesthetic superiority” and “standard of beauty” not inherent in their purely Hungarian identity. In negotiating this view, the sisters developed a double consciousness enabling them to negotiate an existence in the United States between whiteness and an identity as an immigrant Other.

The film is disappointing, even considering its historical context, for its flimsy narrative, but more importantly because of its refusal to fully acknowledge the contributions made to American theatre, dance, and film by immigrant populations, eschewed in favor of a white washing of the Dolly Sisters as an example of the immigrant experience in popular entertainment. As Matthew Frye Jacobson notes,

The saga of European immigration has long been held up as proof of the openness of American society, the benign and absorptive powers of American capitalism, and the robust health of American democracy. ‘Ethnic inclusion,’ ‘ethnic mobility,’ and ‘ethnic assimilation’ on the European model set the standard upon which ‘America,’ as an ideal, is presumed to *work*; they provide the normative

experience against which others are measured. But this pretty story suddenly fades once one recognizes how crucial Europeans' racial status as 'free white persons' was to their gaining entrance in the first place; how profoundly dependent their racial inclusion was upon the racial *exclusion* of others; how racially accented the native resistance was even to *their* inclusion for something over half a century; and how completely intertwined were the prospects of becoming American and becoming Caucasian.

Jacobson further argues, "[t]o miss the fluidity of race itself in this process of becoming Caucasian is to reify a monolithic whiteness, and, further, to cordon that whiteness off from other racial groupings along lines that are silently presumed to be more genuine."⁵⁶

The actual Dolly Sisters recognized there were gradations of whiteness in which they could operate, without altering or denying their corporeal identities as Hollywood insisted upon in its depiction of them. The sisters, while striving to achieve the benefits of social supremacy when accepted as white, never completely lost sight of their background, and never denied their heritage. They were always experiencing David Roediger's state of "inbetweenness," set apart from the culture in which they found themselves, able to successfully operate within it while maintaining a critical distance from it.

Conclusion

*There will probably be always something fascinating about twins going through exactly the same motions in unison, just as if they had been wound up to an identical degree from birth.*⁵⁷

In a 1914 interview with the *New Jersey Star* Rosie Dolly, framed as “speaking of the American public from a standpoint of a Hungarian,” though she had been in the United States and a citizen for nearly a decade, noted

‘It is difficult to say ‘American public,’ since there are five or six American publics, entirely different, one from the other. I have observed that the people of the West pride themselves upon having little in common with those of the East; and with what superiority a Southerner talks of a Northerner. Even today, you will meet American sons of French or Italian parents, people of the South who have in them the instincts of liberty or of irreverence. What they have adopted, first, along with the English language, is discipline, the love and respect of the family, the Protestant austerity. My sister and I both, soon found in this young and brutal country that it is one of the conditions of life, and in its customs, its fashions, and its art, all must be subordinated to it.’⁵⁸

Rosie articulates the essence of the immigrant’s inbetweenness. She recognizes the cultural differences between her new country and country of origin, while simultaneously

revealing the heterogeneity of the United States itself, the population's "love of the family" (a nod to one of the Dolly Sisters' secrets to success), and the conditions to which all living in it "must be subordinated."

The Dolly Sisters represent the kinds of identity performance demanded of immigrants not only by the entertainment industry, but also by American society at large at the turn of the last century. While their contemporaries the Whitman Sisters and the Duncan Sisters used their performances to negotiate, contest, and reinscribe the black-white binary of race relations in the United States, the Dolly Sisters used the spotlight of Broadway and international stages to shine a light on non-native immigrant individuals like themselves living in racial and cultural "inbetweenness." The polarized nature of American race relations made it impossible to be successful in a separate racial or ethnic category that was not part of either the black or white community. In order to succeed artistically and professionally, the Dolly Sisters identified as white, yet never denied their Eastern European origins. By promoting themselves as simultaneously white and exotic, the sisters were able to operate within the upper echelons of society and gained access to performance opportunities closed to most blacks. In so doing they were able to influence the cultural composition of American professional theatre and dance, and to export this new modern performance genre to European stages as a desirable American culture and commodity.

“Sisters Under the Skin”:

The Duncan Sisters and the Appropriation of Blackness¹

*[T]he white women of this country are about the worst enemies
with which the colored race has to contend.²*

Introduction

Written four years after her play *Rachel* (1916), African American playwright Angelina Weld Grimke’s comments in the epigraph continued to ring true. Grimke’s play focuses on the horrors of racism, and one young African American woman’s decision to reject motherhood and avoid exposing more children to the harmful effects of hatred and bigotry rampant in American society. Grimke’s play was intended to appeal “not primarily to the colored people, but to the whites,” finding common ground in what she believed to be the universal appeal and understanding of motherhood among women, both black and white. Grimke argued that if

the white women of this country could see, feel, understand just what effect their prejudice and the prejudice of their fathers, brothers, husbands, sons were having on the souls of the colored mothers everywhere, and upon the mothers that are to be, a great power to affect public opinion would be set free and the battle would be half won.³

White women themselves were also often the perpetrators of racism, prejudice, and malice towards blacks during this time. Like her own white aunts, the famed nineteenth century abolitionists the Grimke sisters,⁴ Angelina Weld Grimke was attempting in her own way to write down and live down racism and gender inequality through her literary works and life.

Unlike the extraordinary female artists and activists of the Grimke family, many public female figures during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were not advocates for racial social equality or even proponents of women's rights. Many female performers during the time not only used but capitalized on social prejudices towards race and stereotypes about gender in their performances, perpetuating long-held misconceptions about blacks, immigrant groups, and women, regardless of their racial identity. The Duncan Sisters act, a white sister act performing contemporaneously with the black Whitman Sisters and successful Harlem Renaissance writers such as Grimke, represent the kind of damaging stereotypical work by white performers that the Whitmans, Grimke, and the Hyers Sisters before them, attempted to negate. Rosetta and Vivian Duncan, two fair, blonde-haired sisters from California, developed a vaudeville act that exploited the culture's appetite for racial humor, access to female bodies, and nostalgia for good old-fashioned minstrelsy.

Developing their own version of a Tom show – a performance loosely based on the sensationally popular 1852 anti-slavery novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* by Harriet Beecher Stowe – the Duncans created for themselves both a sense of economic security as well as notoriety and (consciously or not) the reinforcement of their own privileged social status as white women. These racist, misogynist ideals that bolstered legalized social

segregation practices are, as Brenda Dixon Gottschild notes, reflected “ironically [since] the ‘Jim Crow’ that meant white male liberation on the minstrel stage later designated the ‘Jim Crow’ discrimination laws that successfully kept blacks in a state of de facto slavery.”⁵ Of course, this “state of defacto slavery” was apparent not only in everyday reality for blacks in the first half twentieth century, but also in the fictionalized, romanticized, and nostalgia laced representations of the “peculiar institution” depicted in performances of the period. The Duncan Sisters worked within this genre.

The Duncan Sisters could be viewed as an ultimate (though perhaps not the most famous) example of sister acts in popular performance: two average girls with performance talents and complimentary looks who matured into women in the public eye while managing to parlay their sororal sweetness into a lifelong career. Theirs is a familiar story, echoed in similar strains in the careers of their white predecessors the Elinore Sisters, who worked as a comic pair specializing in ethnic humor in the 1890s and 1910s. They were also preceded by Lulu and Mabel Nichols, early twentieth-century chorus girls who developed a blackface sister act. Correlations can also be drawn between the Duncans and their contemporaries such as conjoined twins Daisy and Violet Hilton, and the famous identical twins and Hungarian immigrants Rosika and Yansci Dolly. Unlike the Hilton, Dolly, and Whitman sisters, all of whom have been the subject of book length projects, or the Hyers sisters, for whom some scholarly historical analysis exists, the Duncans have been largely ignored by performance historians, mentioned in passing in the context of larger studies of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, or briefly chronicled in encyclopedias or histories of vaudeville and popular culture. Yet the Duncans’ performance practices and material provide a fascinating example of how Eurocentric

ideals about race and gender have been perpetuated consciously and unconsciously by white women in American popular performance and used to leverage social status and power within our racist and sexist society.

While this chapter's epigraph acknowledges the negative consequences of prejudice amongst white women, this study of the Duncan Sisters does not intend to vilify them individually, for they certainly were not alone or unaffected by their perpetuating performances and acceptance of what, from our postmodern perspective, is highly offensive, racist material. Rather by examining their work within the context of this project, in contrast with African American sister acts and another contemporaneous "white" sister act, I aim to demonstrate how their representations of race and gender – including blackface performance – reflect and contrast those of other women performing along the color line. Of specific interest in the Duncan Sisters' career is the way they use their performances to guard against public criticism of their private lives. By drawing public attention to the performance of stereotypes that were not part of their own identities, such as blackness, the Duncans were able to create private spaces wherein their own identities were shielded from critique. This was especially so for Rosetta, whose blackface performances acted as a foil for her own socially unacceptable lesbianism. At a time of tremendous social distinction and preoccupation with race, the practice of female performers and specifically sister acts, such as the Duncans – so predicated on the visual spectacle of familial identity and race – were performances based on actual or feigned biological ties. These acts served to reinforce the perception highlighted by Richard Dyer that "[i]f race is always about bodies, it is also always about the reproduction of those bodies."⁶ In that sense, all sister acts underscore these links – connected via a

performance of genetics, heteronormativity, and racial identity. Indeed by performing together, “the black and white Duncans (sisters under the skin)”⁷ mirrored and reinforced each other’s identity. They reflected and rejected the Other that they simultaneously appropriated and rejected as, ultimately, what they were not.

Beginning their careers in the 1910s, the Duncan Sisters developed their act as well as musical composition talents into the performance routine that would ultimately shape their career and legacy. Rosetta and Vivian became Topsy and Eva, two characters so closely associated in American fiction and culture that they might as well have been sisters, in *Topsy and Eva* (1923). I examine archival material including the playscript, critical press about the show and its multiple revivals, playbills, and production and publicity photos to develop a history of the sisters’ nearly forty year career. In doing so I explore questions such as what made the Duncan Sisters’ performances so popular? How did they appropriate and recontextualize *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* throughout their career? What can their popularity tell us about race relations and the role of women (both white and black) in society at this particular moment?

My reading of the Duncan archive is informed by Brenda Dixon Gottschild’s and Eric Lott’s understandings of appropriation and love and theft between black and white cultures in America, as well as E. Patrick Johnson’s concepts of appropriating blackness. I examine the Duncan Sisters’ representations of race, gender, and sexuality as performances based on social and economic survival. I identify their appropriation and production of blackness in their shows as well as their performance’s representation of the contested relationships between black and white women in the United States. These analyses will write the history of a largely forgotten but highly influential female comic

pair while also uncovering and acknowledging previously unattended ways that white women have historically contributed to the marginalization and denigration of black women in the United States.

The Duncan Sisters' deliberate yin-and-yang mirroring of white and black womanhood through their life-long portrayals of Topsy and Eva developed and perpetuated concepts of white female innocence and black female savagery, stereotypes that continue to influence public perceptions of women. As bell hooks argues, the "socially constructed image of innocent white womanhood relies on the continued production of the racist/sexist sexual myth that black women are not innocent and never can be."⁸ These damaging stereotypes and assumptions make understandings of individuals and relationships between individual women and activist groups on both sides of the color line difficult while also allowing for exploration (and exploitation) of the Other in performance. Brenda Dixon Gottschild notes that "[b]lackface presented a paradoxical freedom for the white performer."⁹ Indeed, Rosetta Duncan's development and success as a comic in a predominantly male field was certainly, in part, due to her use of the blackface mask, which enabled her the freedom to take performance risks without being "herself." At the same time, as we have seen with the contemporaneous Whitman Sisters, similar mainstream opportunities were not as readily available to black female performers, who were relegated to segregated and second-tier performance venues. As vaudeville scholar M. Alison Kibler notes, "[i]n contrast to white women who had the privilege of playing with blackness and with less physically inhibited, more sexual selves, black women struggled to be taken seriously, in many cases trying to break into the white ranks of leading ladies and highbrow artists."¹⁰ Such awareness is crucial to recognizing

the role of popular performance in articulating the historic and continued tensions between black and white communities.

Early Career

Rosetta (1897-1959) and Vivian Duncan (1899-1986),¹¹ born in Los Angeles, began their careers in California in the early 1910s as part of a children's revue. Though already at the threshold of adolescence, the sisters, specializing in children's roles, developed a kid act, playing young girls and using high-pitched "baby" voices (another sort of aural passing). This "infantile routine," as I will call it, served them well throughout their careers, and was the source of much of the comedy in their early hit *Tip Top* (1920). According to a 1956 *San Francisco News* interview with the sisters, like other sister acts they entered show business for economic reasons. Recalling their early years, they "started out on 'amateur nights,' Rosetta said. "We needed the money. Older sister, Evelyn, was playing at the Alcazar at the time in 'Johnny Get your Gun.'"¹² By several accounts Evelyn was the impetus to her more famous sisters' discovery.¹³ While show business was part of their family life beginning with their father, a real estate agent and sometime violinist and their older sister (with whom they did not perform), Rosetta and Vivian knew that their best opportunity for independence and financial security was to make it big as performers.

Beginning their careers at the time of the First World War, performing through the Great Depression, and beyond the stressful years of World War II, the sisters were always cognizant of the fragility of success and the fluidity of finances. In addition to their infantile routine and their infamous *Topsy and Eva* act, the Duncans were also

known for their economic ups and downs. According to the same 1956 interview, “[t]hey’ve had a million dollars and lost it,”¹⁴ and *Variety* reported in Rosetta’s 1959 obituary that “[i]n 1931, the sisters filed a voluntary bankruptcy petition, Vivian later blaming their losses on ‘goldmines with no gold, worthless stock, the fickleness of Wall Street and signatures on too many dotted lines.’”¹⁵

After a few years of local variety shows in San Francisco, and after studying with “Mme. Ella Beach Yaw, known as the California nightingale,” the Duncans developed the routine that would make them famous.

‘One day in Hollywood, a producer said we ought to do a comedy act in blackface.’ That was all the encouragement the Duncan Sisters needed. ‘Let’s do *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and call it *Topsy and Eva*,’ Vivian shouted. They did. It made theater history. They opened the show at the Wilkes-Alcazar here. It played 16 weeks. They moved to Los Angeles for four weeks. Then on to Chicago for a year. Finally a long Broadway run. Then London and South Africa.¹⁶

The Duncan Sisters realized they had found their cash cow. They developed the work that became their signature piece until their careers ended upon Rosetta’s death in 1959. In addition to their biggest hit, the Duncan Sisters made their Broadway debut in *Doing Our Bit* in 1917, followed with their infantile routine in *Tip Top* (1920), performed in New York’s vaudeville seasons from 1923-1931, including several seasons at the Palace Theatre, and were featured in performances with Florenz Ziegfeld’s *Midnight Frolic* of 1929. Though a feature length biopic about them was discussed but ultimately never

produced (unlike the Dolly Sisters), they were at the forefront of the development of Hollywood cinema, performing in films including the silent feature *Topsy and Eva* in 1927 (directed by Del Lord with additional scenes by D.W. Griffith) which they toured with, performing live before screenings, and parlaying its release into a second life for *Topsy and Eva*. They were also featured in *It's a Great Life* (1929), an early sound musical with short Technicolor sequences.

In addition to their stage success and early film efforts, the Duncan Sisters were also accomplished musicians, composers, and recording artists. During the 1920s the sisters deployed the kind of synergistic marketing methods that ensured the success of many live performance artists combating the challenges of the emerging fields of radio and later television. Because the Duncan Sisters incorporated music into their live shows, they had ready material for the burgeoning field of record sales and the still popular market for sheet music. Throughout the twenties and occasionally in the 1930s and 1940s the sisters recorded hits first made popular in their live acts. Songs such as “Rememb’ring” (their signature hit, performed in *Topsy and Eva*), “Side by Side,” “In Sweet Onion Time,” “I Never Had a Mammy,” “Mean Cicero Blues,” and “Baby Sister Blues” capitalized on not only their performed and actual sibling relationship(s) but also their fame as artists known for their use of African American performance practices and musical materials. The sisters believed (or at least reported) their claim on the originality of the work they unapologetically appropriated from black culture. As Rosetta proclaimed in an interview with the *World Telegraph*, “We introduced blues songs.”¹⁷ Such blatant appropriation is indicative of how, as Brenda Dixon Gottschild notes, “denial and appropriation serve the purpose of [white] economic gain.”¹⁸ Rather than

crediting the African American roots of the jazzy tunes and harmonizing blues that the Duncan Sisters worked into their shows, Rosetta instead attempts to own the music's origination, demonstrating disregard for the culture and individuals actually responsible for the sounds that helped make her and Vivian famous and affluent.

The Duncans were not the first sister act to develop a routine as a comic pair, nor were they the first to use ethnic humor, appropriate racial humor, or to challenge gender norms. In *Rank Ladies* (1999), M. Alison Kibler provides a chapter length study of the white Elinore sisters, Kate and May, who played the (masculine) comedian and the (feminine) straight role respectively in an Irish-American ethnic routine based on stereotypes of uncultured immigrants, class tensions, and gendered caricatures. And the Nichols sisters (white), once anonymous chorus girls, were applauded in the 1910s for their blackface sister act. Because minstrelsy was still associated so strongly with men, the Nichols were often accused of being men themselves. They were heralded as “ambitious risk takers for giving up their beauty and vanity” and social/sexual status as white women in exchange for the opportunity to headline a specialty act.¹⁹ Like the Duncans, the Nichols and Elinore sisters were unique in their moment for the element of clowning they incorporated into their acts, a physical and topical comedy not anticipated from women in the early part of the twentieth century. In addition to paving the way for the Duncans' use of race and humor onstage, these groups also provide earlier examples of what vaudeville and film historian Henry Jenkins terms “anarchistic comedy.”²⁰ Popular in the 1920s and 1930s, the heyday of the Duncan Sisters rise to fame, anarchistic comedy features a clown-like character who

offers the audience an escape from the restraint and control associated with civilization. This identification with the clown corresponds to what sociologists have characterized as a release from the emotional constraints of mass society . . . Whereas the clown's outbursts address a desire for spontaneity and freedom, the audience's feelings toward the clown remain equivocal because clowns are usually outsiders of some kind – representatives of the 'underculture.' . . . viewers may identify with the clowns – seeking vicarious escape – but they may also distance themselves from these grotesque characters.²¹

Seizing on the popularity of anarchistic comedy, the Duncan Sisters expanded upon the work of earlier sister acts such as the Nichols and Elinore sisters, combining their infantile routine with blackface clowning to create their own brand of anarchistic comedy. Their particular spin on gender, race, and sexuality, packaged as a rollicking night of physical, musical, and comedic theatrical entertainment, was different enough to make them a part of theatre history by becoming one of the longest running sister acts and Tom Shows in the history of the American stage.

Tip Top

In 1920 the Duncans were featured in the musical extravaganza *Tip Top* starring Fred Stone, produced by Charles Dillingham and staged by R.H. Burnside at the Globe Theatre (now the Lunt-Fontanne). The adult Duncans appeared as young twins – the Terrible Twins – Bad (Vivian) and Worse (Rosetta), the meddlesome younger siblings of the ingénue character Alice, who is involved in an forbidden relationship with a young

male clerk, Dick, in her over-protective father's store. The Terrible Twins provide the anarchistic comedy to *Tip Top*, wreaking havoc on their sister by spying on her meetings with her beau and reporting their interactions to their father. Their scripted performance relies heavily on mimicry and physical slapstick such as pratfalls and shooting spitballs. Examining the original script, it is clear that much room was likely allowed for improvised clowning and sight gags during performance.²² *New York Times* reviewer Alexander Woollcott noted "the two Duncan Sisters, especially the astonishing gamine in whom a comic spirit dwells" were "what counts in 'Tip Top' . . . its comedians."²³

Tip Top, while a cohesive musical comedy (albeit with a very loose plot), is representative of the sisters' other early turns on vaudeville and Broadway stages. Throughout the teens and twenties the sisters performed in an array of shows including musicals, variety acts, and benefit galas. Their routines were always comedic, usually relied on some variation of their infantile routine, and always garnered praise as a promising ("such stars of tomorrow as the Duncan Sisters")²⁴ and unusual act due to their youth and novelty as two women in comedy ("[t]he Duncan sisters, heading the feminine minority contingent, clowned their way to a generous share of the honors")²⁵, a traditionally male-oriented genre. In this sense, the Duncans were risk-takers and entrepreneurs, carving a niche for themselves in a market that had little female competition, and where comparison to male contemporaries was difficult due to their difference.

Yet unlike their African American contemporaries the Whitman Sisters, whose routines celebrated their womanhood, fierce independence, and autonomy as business, artistic, and community leaders, the Duncans' infantile routine does not celebrate

womanhood, but rather smothers it in fabricated prepubescent innocence. The Whitmans always performed as adults, never as children or child-like characters. They performed their sexuality, independence, and identity while retaining their moral respectability. In contrast, the Duncans' characterizations (figure 5.1) strip them of any mature sexual appeal, while simultaneously exposing them (both in ridiculously short, bloomer-baring costumes and in characterization) as vulnerable objects for the audience's voyeuristic consumption. As one reviewer noted, "the Duncan sisters have an ingratiating way with them – a knowing expression, a suggestion of naughtiness beneath innocence that nicely escapes being vulgar."²⁶ This infantilization continued throughout their careers, to the delight of many audiences, and the distasteful observation of at least one London critic who noted

[t]here are obviously many people in the world who find the grotesque little-girl sophistication of the Duncan sisters more amusing and less vulgar than I do. They may be left to make the fortune of the venture at the Gaiety, but I find it hard to believe that what is in essence a turn at the music halls can be very successfully prolonged into a full-length entertainment.²⁷

This review pinpoints the perversely pedophilic undertones of the Duncans' routines, in which exposure under the guise of performed infantilization enabled audiences access to and consumption of their young adult bodies, displayed innocently, "attired in the cunningest of school girl dresses"²⁸ without the moral stigma attached to highly sexualized leg or skin shows.

The Chicago Daily News also picked up on the juxtaposition of order to disorder, and childhood to maturity in the Duncans' offerings, noting that the sisters:

do their usual amount of child-like clowning and Vivian can hardly be tied down to the infant class with her present stretch and muscle of line and weariness of voice. She's a pretty young woman, however and works smilingly and vivaciously with her more versatile sister, Rose.²⁹

The Duncans barely pull off propriety in their infantile routine in the eyes of this critic, who notes the twisted pleasure of watching attractive young women publicly cavorting as children, still described in 1943 (twenty years later) as “blonde angel[s] in the brief dress and ruffled panties.”³⁰ Performing mischievous childhood innocence as “naughty little girls” gained them the “ebullient babes”³¹ status they achieved during their careers.

Their infantile performances and anarchistic brand of comedy operate within cultural confluences of women and children, furthering the ideology that women are child-like and frivolous, rather than mature and adult. In figure 5.1 the early-twenty-something-year-old sisters are dressed in similar costumes, sporting oversized girlish bows in their similarly styled blonde coifs. They each support opposite ends of a flower basket, gazing sweetly over its handle at the camera. They are the perfect picture of childlike innocence and sweetness, which belies the mischievous characters they actually play in *Tip Top*. While not nearly the hit or star vehicle that *Topsy and Eva* became a few years later, *Tip Top* is a formative production for the Duncans, the first full-length major musical comedy in which their infantile routine and trouble-making comedy was not only developed but

sustained. This character study became the basis in part of the Duncan's long-lived, infamous Topsy and Eva characters.

Premiering just two months after women gained the right to vote in the August 1920 adoption of the Nineteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution, the Duncans' *Tip Top* performances reflected persistent misogynist social views that appraised women as socially inferior and lacking. But ironically it was this same frivolity that allowed for their comedic presence and outrageous, anarchistic antics onstage. If they had been perceived as high class prima donnas of the "legitimate" stage or mature women and *bona fide* sex objects they would never have successfully "induc[ed] Eddie Cantor to participate briefly in their antics and otherwise h[o]ld high carnival."³² And Rosetta would not have not only gotten away with, but received praise for her singing travesty in which she ended the number by "hurling an assortment of vegetables, including celery, beets, carrots and even a cabbage at the audience."³³

The infantile routine created a space and permission for the Duncans to behave badly, to step outside of (and possibly critique) the social expectations for women, and to operate in a demanding and competitive genre. Cultivating audiences' and critics' expectations of them as the exception to female propriety paved the way for their sensational use of not only anarchistic comedy and their infantile routine, but also the added element of blackface in *Topsy and Eva*. These methods proved, as the Colonial Theatre Program for the 1925 Boston run of the production declared, to be "unlike those employed by any other entertainers of their sex, and the dissimilarity serves to raise them the further in esteem because there is always present the spirit of childish hoydenism that is the soul of humor and captivating in the extreme."³⁴

Topsy and Eva

- T** *is for Topsy, impish and wild;*
 Only sweet Eva can tame this poor child.
- O's** *for Ophelia, a spinster unblest;*
 An angel to Eva, to Topsy, a pest.
- P** *is for Platform, where Tom was on sale*
 And also where Eva saved Topsy from jail.
- S** *is for Shelby, a gallant young blade,*
 Whom Topsy and Eva helped win a fair maid.
- Y** *is for Yore, the old cabin days,*
 In Topsy and Eva, the brightest of plays.
- E** *is for Eva, who pined to get back*
 Topsy her playmate so ragged and black.
- V** *is for Vivian, whose 'Eva's' the pal,*
 For Rosetta's 'Topsy', the 'wickedest gal.'
- A's** *for Amusement, which mounts to a shriek*
 In Topsy and Eva arriving next week.³⁵

First serialized in the antislavery paper *The National Era* and subsequently published as a novel in 1852, Harriet Beecher Stowe's abolitionist text *Uncle Tom's Cabin* rocked the nation with its sentimental call for white Christian charity towards enslaved blacks. Stowe hoped her story would incite sympathy and a feeling of common

humanity on the part of whites towards blacks, and would lead ultimately to the end of the atrocities of slavery. While her intentions may have been honorable, Stowe's representations of African Americans were firmly established in the racist stereotypes made popular by the minstrel stage beginning in the 1830s. Easily recognizable (yet unrealistic) stereotypical characters such as the loving Mammy/Auntie, wild pickaninny, and long-suffering Christian Uncle Tom, along with sensational aspects of melodrama made the novel wildly popular and easily adaptable to the stage. "Tom shows" sprung up almost overnight and, because copyright laws were non-existent, touring productions were mounted quickly and toured widely.³⁶ Amidst a growing national debate surrounding the issue of slavery, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* provided audiences with a Northerner's view of the "peculiar institution" and an evening of spectacular, melodramatic entertainment.

One of the most popular books of the nineteenth century closely trailing sales of the *Bible*, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* influenced readers' and viewers' perceptions of slavery and race relations for decades to come. As Stowe scholar Charles Johnson notes in the introduction to a recent reprinting of the novel,

One hundred and fifty[-seven] years after its publication, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* can still serve us, though not in the way that Stowe and her admirers intended. It invites us to discuss whether a white author can successfully portray a black person *in his own terms*, instead of through the distorting, funhouse mirror of white, Eurocentric ideas about people of color.³⁷

The Duncan Sisters' work in *Topsy and Eva*, certainly reflected and expanded what Johnson terms Stowe's "funhouse mirror of white, Eurocentric ideas about people of color." While their performance career does not allow us to affirmatively answer Johnson's inquiry (and I do not argue that this was their intention), it serves as another example of the kinds of "vivid characters now deeply inscribed in America's racial iconography"³⁸ still in need of historically grounded theoretical interrogation.

As young performers struggling to build and maintain the momentum of their earlier successes in vaudeville in the 1910s, when presented with the idea of a performance including blackface, the Duncan Sisters adapted the most familiar work in popular culture to suit their talents (especially their anarchistic infantile routine) and feature their relationship as sisters. By refocusing *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, recentering the story on the relationship between the impish young black female slave Topsy, and her angelic, young white female mistress Eva, the Duncan Sisters carved a niche for themselves, ensuring that each sister was needed in order to balance the show and complete the cast. Catherine Chisholm Cushing was commissioned to adapt the story to a play script specifically for the sisters. Vivian and Rosetta wrote and composed the musical selections for the piece. As *The Chicago Daily News* reviewer noted, *Topsy and Eva* was an unexpected departure from the original, melodramatic story: "Mrs. Cushing, who can be depended upon to scramble any known plot beyond recognition, has done more to Harriet Beecher Stowe than the fifteenth amendment did to the cotton industry."³⁹ While music such as spirituals had long been included in Tom shows, *Topsy and Eva* became the first musical comedy adaptation of the all-American *Uncle Tom's*

Cabin myth, ushering the story onto the twentieth century stage via the theatre's most popular new performance genre.⁴⁰

Seventy years after *Uncle Tom's Cabin* first gripped the American psyche, *Topsy and Eva* opened at the Alcazar Theatre in San Francisco in July 1923 to a standing room only crowd. *The San Francisco Examiner* describes the key difference between this and other Tom shows thusly

In the offstage auction, old Tom was sold down the river. Then Topsy was offered. Fifty dollars? Five? A dime? A cent? At last she went to Little Eva for nothing. Only angelic Little Eva would take her. Little Eva came on the stage, followed by Topsy, and the comedy part of the play was begun.

Seldom is such a tumult of applause heard in any theater as that with which the two girls were greeted. And the applause was deserved.

Vivian is an interesting Little Eva, but not the conventional one of Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel. No sickly, saintly, going-right-to-heaven sort of Little Eva . . . instead a healthy, happy, romping, somewhat mischievous girl, not trying to 'save' Topsy, but to become like her.

As Topsy, Rosetta shows much acting ability. Her makeup has been judiciously thought out. She makes the most of every bit of opportunity, with comedy work that always seems spontaneous and to which there is no letup while she is on the stage.

While much stage business in the show remains centered on the sale of the Shelby plantation and its beloved slave population, Topsy and Eva are the center of the show. Every moment they spend on stage is full of pranks, songs, dancing, and physical comedy. *The Examiner's* critic predicts with certainty that this is a "production New York will like."⁴¹

After its San Francisco premiere the show moved to Chicago, debuting as a holiday special, in December 1923 and running for forty-seven weeks at the Selwyn Theatre. This allowed for additional development of the show, such as Rosetta's heavy improvisation, and improvements in the already promising production. In addition to a cast that remained largely the same from the San Francisco production and included many beautiful chorus girls, the Chicago cast eventually included a troupe of pickaninnies performed by the London Palace Dancers "especially contracted for the Duncan Sisters in 'Topsy and Eva' direct from the Palace Music Hall, London, England."⁴² Interestingly, this is the second time the Duncans performed with the London Palace Dancers, the first being in *Tip Top* three years earlier. Such additions improved the professional status of the production, increased the element of spectacle, and provided the popular variety stars with the additional cultural cache associated with a cast including international performers.

Reviewing the show *The Chicago Daily News* affirms "[j]ust the girls in 'Topsy and Eva,' the chorus girls alone, ought to ensure the Selwyn a howling success for they eclipse the whole parade of beauty, making the brand new year glitter with lovely women challenging each other from the four corners of the loop shows."⁴³ Beyond highlighting the appeal of beautiful chorus women, reviews of the show in Chicago weren't altogether

glowing. Frederick Donaghey provided an overview of the piece beginning, “you do not need to know anything about ‘Uncle Tom’s Cabin’ as a foundation for your study of ‘Topsy and Eva.’ Indeed a fond intimacy with Mrs. Stowe’s tale or the old play therefrom [sic] would be a cultural handicap,” in a sour review titled “Anyway, the Duncans are Still in Tune And That’s the Good News of ‘Topsy and Eva.’”⁴⁴ Amy Leslie echoes this sentiment noting “[i]t was rather dreadful.”⁴⁵

Despite uncertainty from Chicago critics, *Topsy and Eva* and the Duncan Sisters remained popular with theatre goers. The show moved to New York in 1924, where the elements of jazz, rhythm, and blues, traits of the new modern era, merged with the sisters’ infantile routine and Rosetta’s sensational blackface. The combination was immediately noted by reviewers. Genevieve Forbes of *Liberty* observed

Vivian Duncan, cast for the role of Eva, is still the pink and white little girl with the yellow and gold little curls. But she doesn’t drip sugary sweetness. Instead, she knows the latest ragtime and she steps the newest steps. Rosetta, as Topsy, is still the little black imp who ‘just grewed,’ but she’s ‘growed’ a lot beyond that Topsy of abolition days. She struts about to the most modern of jazz tunes’ and she cracks 1924 wheezes against an 1852 background.⁴⁶

Unlike previous Tom shows predicated entirely on the replication and nostalgia of the “old plantation home” and the sound of “authentic Negro spirituals,” *Topsy and Eva* was attuned to the tastes of the modern jazz-age audience, and was developed and executed accordingly. Additional reviews of the New York production are mixed. While *The New*

York Times describes the show as “a reasonably discouraging musical play,” *The New York World* heralds it as “a show of marked and agreeable excellence” and the *New York Herald Tribune* generously reports the “musical comedy version of ‘Uncle Tom’s Cabin’ is made excellent entertainment, almost entirely by the effort of the Duncan Sisters.”⁴⁷

Topsy and Eva continued its run in New York and subsequently began to tour in New England, the mid-West, and back to the West coast. I have found no record of the show touring farther south than Washington D.C. This is notable given the content of the show. During this same time the Whitman Sisters company was touring throughout the South, performing in black theatres and to desegregated audiences whenever possible. As noted previously, the Whitman’s performances attempted to capitalize on and simultaneously subvert the same kinds of negative black stereotypes being perpetuated by the Duncan Sisters. From Boston, “it may be recorded at once that last evening’s audience expressed hearty enjoyment of everything in the performance with which the sisters in black and white were directly concerned”; to Denver, “a sweet and beautiful play, . . . ‘Topsy and Eva’ will be long remembered by those who see it”; to Philadelphia, “The Duncan Sisters, in ‘Topsy and Eva’ . . . got of to a flying start”⁴⁸; the Duncans garnered praise and admiration from critics and audiences. When considered as contemporaries, the Duncans and Whitmans demonstrate the popularity of a range of performances of blackness and black stereotypes, both negatively and subversively presented, across the country that was bisected by the racial color line.

What becomes apparent in reading and comparing reviews of the show and photos of the Duncans in character is the striking contrast between Rosetta’s Topsy and Vivian’s Eva (figure 5.2). Rosetta is universally acknowledged as the main attraction in the show

due to her physical clowning, improvisational humor, and the sheer novelty of her status as a white woman in blackface, a technique almost exclusively practiced by male comedians. As M. Alison Kibler notes of Kate Elinore, not only did Rosetta Duncan “play the male comic role in relation to her sister’s straight role, but also she portrayed stock characters associated with female impersonation,” as “picks” and “funny ol’ gals” were most often originally portrayed by male minstrels wearing mismatched clothing and oversized shoes, designating the character as both a clown and less-than female.⁴⁹ Rosetta adopted these performance practices for Topsy, creating a drag clown in blackface (figure 5.3). Like Kate Elinore, Rosetta Duncan is continuously compared to top contemporary male blackface artists. In 1925 *The Sunday Advertiser* notes

When it comes to blackface art, the palm of accomplishment goes not, as you might suggest in the first three guesses, to Al Jolson, but to little Rosetta Duncan, co-star with her sister, Vivian in ‘Topsy and Eva’ . . . Not that Rosetta is a better comedian than Al. Maybe she is, and then again maybe she isn’t. But when it comes to applying the liquid burnt cork, she outdoes Jolson in every known direction.⁵⁰

Similarly in 1926 *The Evening Bulletin* heralds not only her blackface artistry, but also her comic abilities

Rosetta Duncan’s Topsy is as impish as any audience could desire. She gets the laugh without the slightest seeming effort, and wisecracks and gags of the ancient

vintage, when shot across the footlights by Rosetta, are gobbled up as the brain children of 1926. Last night she sang ‘Mammy’ songs in the style of Al Jolson, dropped her galoshes much after the fashion of Eddie Cantor and his overshoes . . . Surely nothing more could be asked of a comedienne.⁵¹

And in 1933, ten years after the original premiere of *Topsy and Eva* and six years after its release as a feature film, *The Chicago Tribune* responds to one of what would become numerous revivals of the stage show by praising Rosetta’s ability to always contemporize Topsy’s antics, continuing to compare her skill and performance to current male vaudevillians

Rosetta’s fantastic interpretation of the role of Topsy displays modern comic improvements. With her gift for sly roguishness she has built up the part with wisecracks and grotesque by-play. This is a Topsy developed to meet current taste by the [Ole] Olsen and [Chic] Johnson method. It is a rich specimen of ingenious drollery, without any suggestion that the show is a revival.⁵²

Rosetta’s performance may have been so appealing because of its mixture of wildly unleashed behavior and tender affinity for the past. As M. Alison Kibler notes, “through racial dialect and blackface, white women gained comic license and adopted an uninhibited physical style, as men in the minstrel show had, and white women’s racial masks also invoked a sentimental vision of the past, similar to the minstrel show’s nostalgia.”⁵³ In a social era rife with seismic cultural shifts (racial anxieties, women’s

right to vote, World War I, and the stock market crash of 1929), such comic abandon served as a release for viewers, while a longing for a “simpler time” eased (white) audiences’ anxieties about the uncertainty of the current moment.

Rosetta’s own affinity for her signature blackface role has never been critically analyzed. I put forth the possibility that the character Topsy became a deflection tactic, a literal mask and figurative shield Rosetta used in part to protect *herself* from social criticism. Instead of performing as a demure, fair, and classically beautiful white woman, perpetuating the notion of doll-like perfection (reflected in her sister Vivian’s performances), Rosetta instead performed and perfected a grotesque – or queer – mask of a more savage femininity, enabling her to break the social barriers of white female heteronormative propriety that stifled her own identity. As vaudeville scholar Anthony Slide has noted, “Rosetta was a lesbian, a familiar sight at gay hangouts in Hollywood” and suffered “frequent bouts with alcoholism brought on, in part, by the effort of trying to hide her lesbianism.”⁵⁴

While there were many homosexual public figures in the first half of the twentieth century, widespread or official public acknowledgement of this fact was rare and often a career damaging revelation. As a result, Rosetta was not identified as homosexual or romantically attached in performances, press accounts, or interviews, but rather vaguely listed as “never married,”⁵⁵ (which certainly could be read as code for homosexual) while Vivian’s heterosexual identity, two marriages, and daughter Evelyn were always present and accounted for. Kibler notes that Duncan predecessor Kate Elinore was constantly suspected of being a man, and capitalized on the public’s suspicions by seizing it as a social pass allowing “unladylike” behavior. Like Rosetta Duncan, she “drew on a

tradition in Western culture in which the instability associated with women was also a source of rebelliousness in public displays and protests.”⁵⁶ Rosetta’s reputation as a physical and blackface comedian, especially in a male dominated arena, points to one of many ways this sister likewise resisted gendered trends within the performance industry and rejected heteronormative social expectations for her private off-stage identity that included lesbianism.

Rosetta used the blackface mask to secure a freedom for herself not sanctioned for highly feminine performers such as her sister, Vivian. Gottschild notes, the “mask of blackness permitted whites to say things in another voice, to move with a surrogate body, to be released from normal restraints by means of a socially sanctioned form of ritualized abuse.”⁵⁷ Rosetta deflected criticism of her own life by developing an alter-ego who absorbed social contempt for inappropriate white female behavior. Public perception of Topsy as “impish” and as a “harum-scarum little witch,” and of Rosetta as “the less beautiful sister”⁵⁸ all allowed for her onstage antics and perception as a less-than-human, less-than-womanly, less-than-white creature. As such and within the mask of Topsy, Rosetta gained license to perform as she pleased, to the perverse delight of audiences everywhere who were able to experience a vicarious release from social constraints by watching Rosetta/Topsy spread anarchic good cheer from one end of Shelby Plantation to the other.

Kibler has noted that many feminist critics and historians have failed to acknowledge in their celebrations of rebellious women that “female comic performers may articulate their rebellions against gender constraints through other subordinations.”⁵⁹ Instead, we must recognize that comic critiques developed by disempowered groups

cannot only, as Robert C. Allen argues, be examined “in terms of its resistance to the power of more dominant groups. It is . . . tempting to view resistant forms of cultural production as unproblematically and unambiguously progressive – as if there were a solidarity among the discourses of subordination.” In reality, “‘resistant’ practices might well be polyvalent, not only directed against those conceived of as ‘above,’ but constructing yet another object of subordination.”⁶⁰ The Duncan Sisters weave a web of interconnected resistance and subordination, acting out against oppressive social and professional standards for women while doing so in a way that maintains, exacerbates, and perpetuates the subordination of blacks and especially black women to white womanhood.

By debasing black womanhood through blackface performance, Rosetta may have been (un)consciously playing up her privileged race and gender status as a white woman, while detracting attention from her less-accepted and socially marginalized sexuality. Blackface signaled absurdity to audiences. Blackface created a space for clowning, physical humor, and grotesque spectacle, all ways (white) women were not expected or respectably permitted to behave publicly. Blackface pointed to white culture’s deep seated fears about the anarchistic effect that miscegenation and blacks could have on white society, especially its most vulnerable members as embodied by the Duncan Sisters: white women and children. Because Rosetta was never able to be fully herself in public, blackface became an extension of the freedom the Duncans found in their infantile routine, and an outlet for behaving in anarchistic, sensational, scandalous, “queer” ways while simultaneously maintaining personal propriety. As the Topsy and Eva act continued from the 1920s until Rosetta’s death in 1959, Rosetta in effect became

the embodiment of the black(faced) Auntie (figure 5.4), trapped and infantilized in a performance of childhood, expected and assumed to be asexual, when the reality was actually very different. As one early press report of an upcoming tour performance astutely observed, “Blacking up for more than two years has had a psychological effect on Rosetta, and it has grown into a regular idea.”⁶¹ The performance of blackness and difference was not simply something that was put on externally, but became an internalized part of the Duncan identity.

In this way, Rosetta’s performed stereotype may have served to cover up or *erace* her personal life and private homosexuality, obscuring it through a perverse enactment of sexually repulsive blackness. As E. Patrick Johnson writes, “[w]hen white Americans essentialize blackness . . . they often do so in ways that maintain ‘whiteness’ as the master trope of purity, supremacy, and entitlement, as [an] ubiquitous, fixed, unifying signifier that seems invisible.”⁶² By publicly denigrating black female lives and claiming the privilege of whiteness, Rosetta may have been protecting and nurturing a private space for her own socially marginalized existence. An observed glimpse of this possibility is offered by audience member, prolific literary scholar, and unlikely but ardent Duncan Sisters admirer and acquaintance Edward Wagenknecht, who notes in his memoirs,

I became better acquainted with the sisters when they came to Seattle, where I was then living, in 1928, to play the Pantages circuit. . . . although Rosetta was never other than charming to me, she had the habit of disappearing into her dressing room between the grueling four-a-day schedule they were playing and

leaving her sister to entertain their visitors. It was obvious that Rosetta was a temperamental young lady whose spirits alternated between the heights and the depths, but this is no wonder, for her energy on the stage (and I suspect off it, when she was really interested) was tremendous, and no girl's physique could have entered the strain, which must have been even more psychic than physical, without cooling-off periods in between.⁶³

Viewed in this light, from a backstage versus onstage or front-of-house perspective, Rosetta's performance is a "grueling" effort at earning a precious few moments of "down time" in the privacy of her dressing room, away from the expectations of fellow performers, managers, or the public. Ultimately, her personal life ceased to exist in the shadow of the darker character she performed, and the social strictures her performances both critiqued and enforced.

Attempting to distinguish the Duncans' privilege as white and female, Rosetta's performance can also be read as a defense of whiteness. Along with her sister, Rosetta embodied and performed what George Lipsitz describes as a "possessive investment in whiteness," or how "white Americans are encouraged to invest in whiteness, to remain true to an identity that provides them with resources, power, and opportunity."⁶⁴ The Duncan Sisters' Topsy and Eva routine was not just about blackness, or whiteness, but also about protecting power, privilege, and an exclusive way of life. In a 1959 remembrance of the sisters' career, *Variety* defended the Duncans' work, which was ongoing until the time of Rosetta's death.

Memory does not suggest that there was anything invidious racially in Rosetta Duncan's Topsy, though in that more innocent long-ago before Adolph Hitler brought racial 'Stereotypes' in worldwide bad odor, there was not the same quickness to take notice which prevails currently. True, Topsy was 'quaint' and her mischief had a self-conscious strain of inferiority of the sort nowadays chided.⁶⁵

Ironically the Duncans' performances, based on the most famous American abolitionist text in history, represented the kind of (perhaps unconscious or unintentional) evil and prejudice Angelina Weld Grimke was attempting to address in her comments referenced at the beginning of this chapter. Under the guise of abolition and musical comedy, at first glance the Duncans might have seemed harmless in the racist, segregated culture in which they performed. But the Duncan Sisters make no effort to understand, truthfully represent, or engage with black women, though their career was based on (mis)representations of the black experience. Unlike the Hyers Sisters before them, who integrated their 1880s cast of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in an effort to begin developing realistic representations of black Americans, forge ties with white performers, and develop a performance novelty that would garner economic gain, the Duncans made no attempt to either integrate their cast, realistically represent black life, or to otherwise engage with blacks in their version of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. They performed opposite other white actors, who also used blackface and stereotypes in their representations of other black slave characters in *Topsy and Eva*. Sadly, their performances were ultimately damaging to not only blacks and specifically black women, who are grossly misrepresented to the

public, but also to the Duncans themselves, whose own identities were manipulated to avoid critique of their non-conformity to the social ideals for white womanhood.

In contrast to Rosetta's onstage clowning and non-normative private life, Vivian too internalized her onstage role and maintained a consummate image of white female propriety onstage and off. She was ever the angelic foil to Rosetta's demonic Topsy, underscoring and perpetuating cultural associations of whiteness with purity and good, and blackness with filth and evil. Vivian was known as the beauty of the pair, and always mentioned as the lesser performer in reviews, "the white shadow of the tarry Topsy" who "aided and abetted" Rosetta's turn as "a born comedian."⁶⁶ While her work was not always universally acknowledged as crucial to the sisters' routine, Edward Wagenknecht observes

she always did much less, but what she was, was tremendously important. Even very great actors sometimes do their best work when they seem to be doing nothing, for it is cruelly difficult to do nothing on the stage, and it is even more difficult to make nothing into something. Certainly Rosetta's dynamism gained much from having Vivian's lovely restfulness as a background.⁶⁷

Vivian's ability to act as a peaceful backdrop to Rosetta's wild performances only bolstered their partnership, reinforcing the yin-and-yang nature of their characterizations, and underscoring the palatable social tension between mass culture and outsiders fueling the chaos of their anarchistic comedy.

She also served as another reflection of white society as a whole, and its preoccupation with and appropriation of black culture and behavior. Vivian's Eva was a "healthy, happy, romping, somewhat mischievous girl, not trying to 'save' Topsy, but to become like her."⁶⁸ Indeed, after Eva convinces her father St. Clare to let her "keep" Topsy, what she "bought for nothing with [her] own money," Topsy instructs the smitten Eva

Topsy: Follow me, Missy...whatebbah *ah* dooze, *yo* dooze...den we'll be twinses.

Eva: Oh, Topsy. I'd rather be *your twin* than anything in the world.

Topsy: Den heah's whah yo' rea-ma-lize yo' life's ambishun!⁶⁹

Topsy represents the freedom lacking from white womanhood, and is desirable to Eva as what she is unable to be in her present social position. As Gottschild observes, "European [American] culture ends up doing the very thing it detests and characterizes as Other. It becomes blackenized even though the process may involve a transformation and finessing from the nude, raw Africanist model into one covered in silk and lace."⁷⁰ By acquiring – or appropriating – Topsy, Eva is able to "own" blackness by owning Topsy and absorbing her example. Her transformation is tolerated, for though she learns to "ack rough" her veneer remains that of sweet white childhood innocence and purity.

Topsy: Why, MISSY, Ah didn't know yo' could ack rough!

Eva: Can I, Topsy? Oh, Topsy, I'd rather act rough like you than anything in the world!

Topsy: No! (funny little movement of the hand)

Eva: YES! (mimics Topsy's business)

Topsy: (delighted) Why, yo' li'l debbil! Den right heah's whah Ah stahts yo' on a swif' decline!⁷¹

In this exchange Rosetta and Vivian as Topsy and Eva demonstrate the explicit appropriation and feared anarchistic influences enacted in culture and in their own performances. While they fail to acknowledge its reality explicitly, instead preferring to treat white and black relationships as the content of light musical comedy, they represent the unavoidable, intertwined nature of white and black existence in America, and how, as Gottschild notes,

European Americans have taken on the look, sound, phrasing, and body language of their African American mentors. . . . [A]ppropriation is commonplace in popular culture. One route is outright theft. A less blatant path is the circuitous, unconscious process in which the Africanist aesthetic is picked up from the air we breathe.⁷²

Appropriation is a cornerstone of both Rosetta's and Vivian's performances in *Topsy and Eva*, as Vivian's Eva attempts to "try on" blackness by imitating a black character who is actually being played by another white woman imitating a black child in a performance

genre established by white men imitating black men and women. Of course, this “merry-go-round of appropriation”⁷³ spins both ways, and while Eva’s appropriation of Topsy’s wild nature is celebrated in the performance of the sisters by audiences, and patronizingly tolerated by the white adult characters in the show, Topsy’s attempts at the appropriation of whiteness are resisted, mocked, and viewed as threatening. For example, after Eva’s pious Aunt Ophelia discovers Topsy has been stealing (i.e. appropriating) many of her fine garments and accessories, she declares Topsy in need of a beating, rather than recognizing the neglect that would lead a young, orphaned slave to pursue material representations of wealth.

Ophelia’s frustration with Topsy’s behavior, her disdain for Eva’s insistence on behaving like Topsy, Eva’s desire to own and consume Topsy as plaything, and the representation of these characters by white women all point to bell hooks’ declaration that “[t]he thing about envy is that it is always ready to destroy, erase, take-over, and consume the desired object.”⁷⁴ *Topsy and Eva* appropriates blackness while simultaneously rubbing out black female subjectivity. As Eric Lott notes, in the nineteenth century minstrelsy was a tool white men used to enforce the policing of black female bodies via a “masculinist enforcement of white male power over the black men to whom the women were supposed to have ‘belonged.’”⁷⁵ The Duncans’ manipulation of the residual nostalgia associated with minstrelsy, blackface, and *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* became a means to not only access white audiences’ emotional need to remember a “simpler time” but also a way to usurp the once exclusively white male power over black female bodies, while working through the social anxieties of a new era.

Lott observed in nineteenth-century minstrelsy, “using the plantation to gloss northern home and workplace relations, the minstrel show witlessly though constantly and uniquely focused attention on the great conflicts of national life at midcentury.”⁷⁶ In the early twentieth century, blackface and plantation nostalgia lingered on in performance and was appropriated by white women such as the Nichols Sisters and Rosetta and Vivian Duncan as a way to continue policing black female bodies. As white women, the Duncans asserted their power and privilege by assuming the role of regulating black bodies from men (Rosetta Duncan was hailed as the lineage of famous blackface performers Al Jolson and Eddie Cantor). They gained social status and economic worth by removing actual black female bodies from the stage picture, manipulating images of black womanhood onstage and on film (a medium almost entirely banned to blacks in its early development), and commodifying blackness through corporeal representations and the appropriation of old black stereotypes (minstrelsy and *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*) and new black cultural products (blues and jazz).

Conclusion

Rosetta and Vivian Duncans’ “adoption of childlike wildness through racial masquerades”⁷⁷ proved to be the secret to their longevity in variety acts. The sisters began their careers with their anarchic but innocent infantile routine in the era of World War I. They fervently advertised, and perhaps believed in, a positive message in *Topsy and Eva*. The *New York Herald Tribune* reported that

In World War II, still blond, a trifle plumper but with the same lusty voices, ukuleles, hair ribbons and rompers that were their stock in trade, the Duncan Sisters were on hand with a company of fifty, doing a revival of “Topsy and Eva,” selling war bonds and entertaining service men at camps and hospitals. They preferred this to their own commercial successes at the time, Rosetta said, because of their “great debt” to the servicemen of 1918 who had applauded them to success.⁷⁸

The sisters recognized the audience responsible for much of their success, and invested in the commercial opportunity to publicly thank them with self-promotional charity entertainment. Vivian explained to another news source that she and Rosetta

want to help Americans keep their spirits high at this time, and our show is based on American freedom . . . Harriet Beecher Stowe’s novel was a plea for American racial tolerance and freedom from bondage – and we feel it will always have a message for Americans . . . We want to do our utmost to entertain in wartime.⁷⁹

From World War I to II and beyond, the Duncan Sisters insisted on the respectability of their show which was founded on portrayals of disrespected and marginalized caricatures. While my examination of archival materials cites the mixed reception of the Duncan’s work, they may have ultimately remained popular and viable entertainers because, as Edward Wagenknecht notes, “the Duncan Sisters suggested a fresh wholesomeness which was not the quality most frequently encountered in the musical comedy stars of

their time, but they also had a good deal of tart commentary on hypocrisy and pretension, much of which was no less effective for being implicit rather than explicit.”⁸⁰

Performing as partners and sisters, the Duncans created a biological mirror for audiences, reinforcing their similarities and minimizing their differences by performing sameness and difference simultaneously. Because Topsy and Eva were opposites, Rosetta and Vivian appeared to be more alike than perhaps they actually were. Rosetta was assumed to be appropriately feminine in contrast to her onstage clowning and status as a premiere comedienne in a male dominated field, and appropriately heterosexual due to her association with the highly feminine and heterosexual Vivian. The layers of makeup needed to create the image of Topsy pointed not only to Rosetta’s own whiteness, but also stood as a direct opposite to Vivian’s fair complexion onstage (which was also aided by heavy stage makeup).⁸¹ Later, when Vivian’s young, blonde daughter Evelyn (named for the sisters’ older sibling) was incorporated into the show, the Duncans reinforced the biological “truth” of race and sexuality through the literal physical reproduction of their corporeal privilege, naming Evelyn after a family member, and pointing to her white lineage, as Vivian routinely emphasized, “[m]y daughter Evelyn looks just like her father,” her first husband the Swedish actor Niles Asther.⁸² Despite their differences and their similarities, traits that drive many sibling relationships to alienation, “[t]he Duncan stage partnership was not a rivalry; both sisters were necessary to the effect that was created, and neither could have done without the other.”⁸³ While audiences’ tastes evolved over the decades of their career, the Duncans managed to maintain their act, performing into the 1950s (figure 5.5), stopping only because of Rosetta’s death due to a car accident. Their sororal relationship made their career possible.

Conclusion

Somewhere in Webster's it is recorded, firstly, that a 'sister is a female who has the same parents as another person' and, secondly, she is 'a woman closely allied to, or associated with, another person, as in faith, social relations, etc.' And somewhere in the theatrical dictionary it is promulgated that a sister team is composed of two women closely allied to, or associated with each other by partnership arrangement for the purpose of stage exploitation and profit. That they should be born of the same parents is a matter of lesser importance and would be the occasion of greater surprise. (emphasis mine)¹

Nellie Revell's 1917 *Theatre Magazine* article on sister acts pinpoints the most fundamental reason for the proliferation of female teams in popular performance at the turn of the last century: profit. Many of the acts were biologically related and were thus connected on levels deeper than their pocketbooks. But as part of the entertainment industry their relationship became their job, and the sisters were fundamentally focused on financial security. The sister acts examined in this project reflect many differences in circumstances, identity, and audience appeal, yet they are all connected by a desire to develop their social and economic worth as individuals and artists by way of their relationships with their sisters. They parlayed one of the most important relationships in their lives into an act: a heightened performance of their private lives, a demonstration of their DNA. They were a commodity to be consumed by a modern culture demanding entertainment that met a need for duplication, deviation, and distraction. These qualities removed theatre goers from the stress of everyday life and transported them temporarily

into a world of fantasy, fun, and frivolity. Sister acts capitalized on this desire, providing pleasure-seeking audiences with light fare presented with high skill, often glamorous production values, and a sense that the carefree, silly, or successful scenes they presented were attainable for audiences too.

Sister acts were a viable livelihood for women who sought a career and an opportunity to perform. Employment for women outside of the home was a difficult prospect in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. A life in the theatre offered the promise of public admiration, glamour, and the possibility of financial success. The realities were often much humbler, but these prospects attracted women in search of the American Dream and independence from husbands, fathers, and male managers. While women in sister acts were dependent on one another in business dealings and on stage, they were often able to decide the terms under which and the material they performed, thus dictating the course of their own careers and opportunities. Karen Sotiropoulos notes, “black performers saw opportunity on the vaudeville stage because the venue itself challenged traditional lines of respectability, offering newer, sanitized theatrical spaces suitable for middle-class as well as working-class audiences.” The same could be said for female performers on either side of the color line. The performing world became a “sphere for struggle,”² an environment bracketed apart from the larger culture by the stage proscenium. It was an ideal space for performances by black and white sister acts that negotiated ideas about social propriety and identity.

In their historical heyday, sister acts were heralded as some of the finest entertainers in the field. Nellie Revell observes of the sister teams of 1917 that “the summer crop has been exceptionally bountiful and ranks in importance in its own

particular sphere of influence with the nation's corn product in the larger field of endeavor." The "harvest" of sister acts was not only plentiful, but also a staple of popular entertainment, highly sought after by audiences, fellow artists, and producers. Sister acts were embraced by audiences in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as women who were representative of the modern moment. While not necessarily politically connected, they were indicative of larger social movements towards greater personal and professional independence for women. They were also attractive to both men and women as ideals of femininity to desire and achieve. The Dolly Sisters, for example, were the embodiment of their stage name: life-size dolls, or models, of high society glamour and sophistication. "Ultra costumes made of the Dollys' return the real fashion show of the season and this combined with their terpsichorean skill made their performance in vaudeville one of surpassing charm and achievement."³ They mirrored one another, and reflected the pinnacle of femininity, vivaciousness, and success that upper crust women emulated and to which middle and working class women aspired.

Through periods of tremendous social change including Reconstruction, the legalization of Jim Crow segregation, World War I, the suffragist movement, the Jazz Age, Prohibition, the Great Depression, and World War II, sister acts remained popular. They merged the private realm (family) with the public sphere (theatre) without compromising their own respectability. They were sustained by a public hungry for new entertainment, the reassurance of propriety, and the allure of female performers. Sister acts delivered on these demands and offered audiences quality entertainment, socially engaged work, and an opportunity to see themselves reflected in the performance.

The draw to an independent life in the theatre was evident for each of the sister acts in this project. The Hyers Sisters, as teenagers, broke ties with their father/manager after he married a much younger woman who posed a threat to the sisters' act. The Whitman Sisters' act was long managed by the eldest sister, Mabel. She was the first African American female manager in vaudeville, and her no-nonsense approach to business dealings and the day-to-day operations of her company won the Whitman family business the respect and admiration of everyone with whom they worked. The Dolly Sisters were well known for their shrewd business dealings and their personal and professional loyalty to one another and those that treated them fairly in the business. Their financial success and social charisma enabled them to break the glass ceiling that long barred performers from high society. The Duncans, while less adept at business dealings, nevertheless called the shots for much of their careers. These sisters, all of whom began their careers in theatre at the behest, encouragement, or in support of their families, were able to parlay their bond as sisters into a commodity that afforded them not only financial security, but also professional and artistic reputations, and personal independence.

“Shady Ladies” explores new terrain in the field of performance history by constructing and analyzing the overlapping careers of African American and European American sister acts from the 1860s to the 1950s. Building on their ties as sisters and figures in popular entertainment, these acts were all uniquely positioned to appropriate performance practices including blackface, racial passing, and gender drag into their shows. As bell hooks observes “mass culture is the contemporary location that both publicly declares and perpetuates the idea that there is pleasure to be found in the

acknowledgement and enjoyment of racial [and other types of] difference.”⁴ Each sister act examined here adopted characteristics of an Other, whether racial, gendered, sexual, or national, and used these traits to critique the social norms to which we are all expected to conform, while playfully parlaying the popularity of their identity acts into their own upward commercial and social mobility and respectability. These techniques allowed the sisters to challenge not only how the paying public viewed their personal identities, but also how identity is created, negotiated, and “read” in everyday life. These practices offered theatre goers an opportunity to engage with the Other, experiencing difference and, in doing so, emerging from the theatre a changed person, and yet still respectable, since the Otherness was an act safely predicated by sisters and confined to the parameters of the stage.

Each sister act embodied difference as a means to both attract audiences, protect and explore personal identity, and encourage social progress. The Hyers and Whitmans traversed gender lines to promote positive images of black male masculinity and blacks in romantic relationships. The Whitmans also usurped the color line by passing as white in order to secure work, desegregating audiences whenever possible, and performing elaborate passing and revealing routines which challenged audiences to question not only the identities of the performers onstage, but the meaning of identity in culture at large. The Dollies manipulated the color line, embodying an “inbetweenness” wherein they were viewed as both white and culturally Other while capitalizing on their sexuality and fantasies of romantic entanglements with identical twins. The Duncans appropriated negative racial stereotypes into their act in order to perform as comedians, a genre closed to most women in the early 1900s. Their infantilization routine enabled them to reinforce

social norms regarding white female propriety while encouraging audiences not to take them too seriously. At the same time, their stereotypical racial performances in *Topsy and Eva* not only perpetuated negative views about black and white women but also served as a guard against criticism of their personal sexual identities: Rosetta's lesbianism and Vivian's troubled marriages.

These sister acts used popular performance techniques to deliver mass entertainment to vast audiences. Yet in retrospect they achieved much more than the high class status to which they all aspired. Each of these sister acts encouraged cultural conversations regarding identity in the modern American moment. Each group addressed issues particular to their own personal identities while at the same time reflecting, contesting, or subverting societal expectations regarding race, class, gender, and sexuality. Performing was a means by which these women could claim a piece of the economic and familial dream of financial security and belong to the national cultural fabric and family. The success of these groups was a partial realization of the American Dream for individuals who by virtue of their race, gender, sexuality, or immigrant status were outsiders looking in on American promise and prosperity.

Though the cognizant recognition of the practice of sister acts has faded, interest in female family teams can still be seen in today's popular culture. The efforts of historical sister acts to shatter glass ceilings, break class barriers, and deconstruct racial and gender norms are apparent in contemporary sister sets such as Venus and Serena Williams. The Williams sisters have attracted international acclaim, fame, and fortune for their performances on and off the world's tennis courts. Excelling in a sport historically dominated by white athletes, the African American Williams sisters have demonstrated

with skill and grace that race, gender, and even age are not factors that can determine athletic ability and success in their field. Biographer Jacqueline Edmondson notes

As they played tough tennis, they conveyed to the public that it was acceptable for women to be strong, to have muscles, and to compete. Venus and Serena marched onto the court and into the public eye with their hair bound in beads that spoke of their ethnic pride, with braces on their teeth that belied their youth, and with much grit to withstand challenges concerning these young black women in what had been a traditionally white-washed sport.⁵

The Williams sisters have successfully parlayed their tennis careers and a strong commitment to education into a multi-million dollar enterprise comprised of product endorsements (figure 6.1), fashion and sports clothing lines, celebrity appearances, and charity work – a far cry from their humble beginnings in the ghettos of southern California. Like preceding sister acts, they have negotiated society's race and gender barriers and have funneled their talent and sororal connection into economic success, professional careers, and personal independence. They represent how sister acts continue to command a stage, capturing the public's attention as exceptional performers, sibling rivals, and women of inherent sameness, strength, and self-possession.

In a 2009 National Public Radio interview titled "Forgotten Music Found in the Archive," Bob George, Director of the Archive of Contemporary Music reflected on the importance of historical memory, research and preservation for artists.

There are the successful dead and they're kind of at peace because they have monuments and tributes and statues and buildings and foundations and things to keep their memory going. But there are so many other people who are just as good and just as important who make culture just vibrate and they're just not remembered. And they sort of walk the earth and they tug at you all the time, tug at your memory.⁶

“Shady Ladies: Sister Acts, Popular Performance, and the Subversion of American Identity” represents a commitment to writing the histories of forgotten individuals and groups into the larger history of American theatre and popular performance. It is a tribute to women whose stories have been overlooked or ignored due to decades of racism and sexism in the archive and our culture as a whole. The women highlighted in this study contributed to and often created the cultural vibrations of their historical moment. Yet there remain countless additional sister acts and other forgotten performers whose lives and artistry deserve our attention and recognition. The rich reverberations of their work can still be seen and heard today, if we know how to look and listen.

Notes

Chapter One

¹ Irving Berlin, "Sisters," *White Christmas*. Dir. Michael Curtiz. Perf. Vera Allen, Rosemary Clooney, Bing Crosby, Danny Kaye. Paramount Picture, 1954.

² See Joe Laurie, Jr., Meet the Family, *Vaudeville: From the Honky-Tonks to the Palace* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1967) 143-152.

³ Mary Ann O'Farrell "Sister Acts," *Women's Studies Quarterly*, 34.3/4, Envy (Fall-Winter, 2006), 154-173.

⁴ Irving Berlin, "Sisters," *White Christmas*.

⁵ O'Farrell 157.

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Chapter Two

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- ²² Eileen Southern, *The Music of Black Americans: A History* (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., Inc., 1971) 257.
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Chapter Three

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²⁶ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1999) 175.

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- ³⁶ "The Bully Song" 25 October 1007 <http://ucblibraries.colorado.edu/cgi-bin/sheetmusic.pl?RagBully_2&Rag&4>.
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- ⁴⁵ Stearns 88-89.
- ⁴⁶ Lucas 444.
- ⁴⁷ Susan Gubar, *Racechanges: White Skin, Black Face in American Culture* (New York: Oxford U P, 1997) 5-6.
- ⁴⁸ Stephen Foster, "Old Folks At Home" *NetState*, 20 April 2007 <http://www.netstate.com/states/symb/song/fl_swanee_river.htm>.
- ⁴⁹ George-Graves 25, 42, 60.
- ⁵⁰ Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford U P, 1997) 29.
- ⁵¹ George-Graves 22. Reverend Whitman was himself a poet, publishing volumes of poetry, and was known as the "Poet Laureate of the Negro Race." Lucas also notes the racial anxiety manifested because of this possible blood connection to Walt Whitman: "In New York one time a man on the street accused them of taking the name Whitman from Walt Whitman. He said "You have no right to it. Stop using it!" He got a thorough tongue lashing for his remark, I can assure you" (424).
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- ⁵³ Henry Bial, *Acting Jewish: Negotiating Ethnicity on the American Stage and Screen*. (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 2005) 3.
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- ⁵⁵ George-Graves 25-26.
- ⁵⁶ Rusty Frank, *Tap! The World's Greatest Tap Dance Stars and Their Stories 1900-1955* (New York: Da Capo P, 1994) 122.
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- ⁶⁰ Stearns 86.
- ⁶¹ Michael T. Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity: A Particular History of the Senses* (New York: Routledge, 1993) 237.
- ⁶² George-Graves 67.
- ⁶³ The sisters often passed as white on stage and off, in order to gain access to theatres, transportation, or lodging and avoid being cheated by producers who would have paid them less if they knew their manager, Mabel, was a black woman. This subversive "act" can be read as indicative of the social construction of race. See George-Graves 68-70 and Sampson, *The Ghost Walks* 198.
- ⁶⁴ "Whitman Sisters Will Appear in Concert at the Auditorium Tonight." *The Age-Herald* [Birmingham] 28 May 1900: 5. 14 August 2009 <www.newsbank.com>..
- ⁶⁵ "The Whitman Sisters" *The Columbus Daily Enquirer-Sun* 12 February 1903: 3. 14 August 2009 <www.newsbank.com>.

⁶⁶ Untitled review, *The Birmingham News*, 22 Feb. 1902. Sampson. *Blacks in Blackface: A Source Book on Early Black Musical Shows* (Metuchen: Scarecrow P, 1980) 103.

⁶⁷ Rainier Spencer, *Race and Mixed-Race: A Personal Tour, As We Are Now: Mixblood Essays on Race and Identity* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1997) 127-139.

Chapter Four

¹ "Dolly Sisters" *The New York Dramatic Chronicle* 28 Aug. 1916. File: Dolly Sisters, Robinson Locke Collection, NAFR+ser. 3, vol. 371. NYLPA, BRTC.

² "His Bridal Night Stars Dolly Sisters" *Brooklyn Eagle* Aug. 1916. File: Dolly Sisters, Robinson Locke Collection, NAFR+ser. 3, vol. 371. NYLPA, BRTC.

³ Gary Chapman, *The Delectable Dollies: The Dolly Sisters, Icons of the Jazz Age* (England: Thrupp, 2006) 10.

⁴ Susan Bloch and co., "The Dolly Sisters: A Perspective" File: The Dolly Sisters (Janszicka and Roszika Deustch) clippings. NYLPA, BRTC.

⁵ Matthew Frye Jacobsen, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge: Harvard U P, 1998) 8-9.

⁶ David Roediger, *Working Toward Whiteness: How America's Immigrants Became White, The Strange Journey from Ellis Island to the Suburbs* (New York: Basic Books, 2005) 32.

⁷ Richard Dyer, *White* (New York: Routledge, 1997) 19.

⁸ Chapman, 12.

⁹ Cholly Knickerbocker, "The Smart Set: Cholly Knickerbocker Observes: Glamorous Dolly Sisters Were Responsible for American Society Agreeing That, After All, Actors Could 'Belong'" *New York Journal-American* "date unknown, after 1941. File: The Dolly Sisters (Janszicka and Roszika Deustch) clippings. NYLPA, BRTC.

¹⁰ Roediger 12.

¹¹ Knickerbocker.

¹² Henry Tyrell, "The Delectable Dollies" *Cosmopolitan* Sept. 1912. File: The Dolly Sisters (Janszicka and Roszika Deustch) clippings. NYLPA, BRTC.

¹³ Jacobson 6.

¹⁴ As Roediger notes in *Working Towards Whiteness*, European immigrants from other geographical regions, such as Southern Italy were read as black and as a result were denied privileges and labor opportunities reserved for whites.

¹⁵ Chapman 12.

¹⁶ 14. Despite this change, the press often referred to the sisters with multiple variations of their original Hungarian names. This was done most often in articles and interviews emphasizing their foreign backgrounds and their difference. For the sake of continuity I will refer to the sisters individually by their Americanized names, unless directly quoting from an archival source.

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¹⁸ "Dolly Sisters Feature new "frolic": Ziegfeld's New Revue Opens Atop of New Amsterdam More Gorgeous Than Ever – Wonderful Programme of Novelties" *New York American* date unknown 1913. File: Dolly Sisters, Robinson Locke Collection, NAFR+ser. 3, vol. 371. NYLPA, BRTC.

¹⁹ "His Bridal Night Stars Dolly Sisters" *Brooklyn Eagle* 1916.

²⁰ Tyrell.

²¹ Ned Wayburn, *The Art of Stage Dancing: The Story of a Beautiful and Profitable Profession, A Manual of Stagecraft* (New York: Ned Wayburn Studio of Stage Dancing, Inc., 1925) 299. *Project Gutenberg* 12 Jan. 2010

< <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/27367/27367-h/27367-h.htm>>.

²² 301, 12 Jan.2010 < <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/27367/27367-h/27367-h.htm>>.

²³ Mary Jane Phillips-Matz, "Sisters Act" *Opera News*, 61.8 (January 11, 1997): 18-23. Thanks to Jenna Kubly for bringing this sister act to my attention.

²⁴ "Miss Roszika Dolly Hungarian but Popular in Yankeeland" *Stage Quarterly* Dec. 1913. File: Dolly, Roszika, 1892-1970 clippings. NYLPA, BRTC.

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- ²⁶ “Dolly Sisters Teach Poor to Dance, *Daily Mirror* 2 Oct. 1912. File: Dolly Sisters, Robinson Locke Collection, NAFR+ser. 3, vol. 371. NYLPA, BRTC.
- ²⁷ Unidentified, undated clipping from the Schubert Archive, quoted in Chapman 35.
- ²⁸ Chapman 56.
- ²⁹ “You Just Have to be Natural” *Dramatic Mirror* 11 Oct. 1915. File: Dolly, Roszika, 1892-1970 (25 Oct.) (1 Feb.). NYLPA, BRTC.
- ³⁰ For further reading and documentation of Denishawn’s orientalism see Suzanne Shelton, *Divine Dancer: A Biography of Ruth S. Denis* (New York: Doubleday and Co., Inc., 1981) and Ted Shawn and Gray Poole, *One Thousand and One Night Stands* (New York: Da Capo P, 1960). For documentation of Denishawn’s instruction of Rosie Dolly and other young stars in early Hollywood see Chapman (above) and File: Ted Shawn Papers (S)*MGZMD 133, Box 28, Folder 5. NYLPA, BRTC. Thanks to Norton Owen for directing me to this archival source.
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- ³² Chapman 75.
- ³³ *Bioscope*, 27 May 1920, quoted in Chapman 75.
- ³⁴ “Dolly Sisters” *The New York Dramatic Chronicle* 28 Aug. 1916.
- ³⁵ Nellie Revell “Sister Teams in Vaudeville” *Theatre Magazine* Sept. 1917). File: Dolly Sisters, Robinson Locke Collection, NAFR+ser. 3, vol. 371. NYLPA, BRTC.
- ³⁶ “A Dual Interview with Two Stars” *Theatre* Oct. 1916 File: *His Bridal Night*, NAFR + Ser. 2, Vol. 127 p. 168-169. NYLPA, BRTC.
- ³⁷ Noted in Charles Higham, *The Duchess of Windsor: The Secret Life* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1988), referenced in Chapman 65.
- ³⁸ “*His Bridal Night* Stars Dolly Sisters” *Brooklyn Eagle* 1916.
- ³⁹ Lawrence Rising and Margaret Mayo, *His Bridal Night*. File: Dolly Sisters, Call Number: 5587. NYLPA, BRTC.
- ⁴⁰ “*His Bridal Night* Stars Dolly Sisters” *Brooklyn Eagle* 1916.
- ⁴¹ Florence Yoder, *Washington Times* 13 May 1916 and *Washington Times* 11 May 1916. Quoted in Chapman 64.
- ⁴² “Mirror” *Encyclopedia of Contemporary Literary Theory*, ed. Irena R. Makaryk. (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1993) 593.
- ⁴³ “Dolly Sisters” *The New York Dramatic Chronicle* 28 Aug. 1916.
- ⁴⁴ Program flyer, c. 1916-17. File: The Dolly Sisters (Janszicka and Roszika Deustch) clippings. NYLPA, BRTC.
- ⁴⁵ Karl K. Kitchen “Life in London as the Dolly Sisters Saw It” *Herald*, 19 Feb. 1922. File: The Dolly Sisters (Janszicka and Roszika Deustch) clippings. NYLPA, BRTC.
- ⁴⁶ Chapman 96, 81.
- ⁴⁷ Gloria Vanderbilt and Thelma Lady Furness, *Double Exposure: A Twin Autobiography* (London, 1959), quoted in Chapman 185.
- ⁴⁸ George Lipsitz, *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: How White People Profit from Identity Politics* (Philadelphia: Temple U P, 1998) viii.
- ⁴⁹ Chapman 185.
- ⁵⁰ Dyer 13.
- ⁵¹ Sime, *Variety* 10 March 1922, quoted in Chapman 106-017.
- ⁵² Jane Corby “*The Dolly Sisters*, New Roxy Film, Juggles the Facts About the Dancers” *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* 18 Nov. 1945. File: Dolly Sisters – Drama. NYLPA, BRTC.
- ⁵³ “Facts on the ‘Dolly Sisters’” 31 May 1945 File: *The Dolly Sisters* (cinema 1945) clippings. NYLPA, BRTC.
- ⁵⁴ Julie Burchill *Girls on Film*, quoted in bell hooks *Black Looks* (Boston: South End P, 1992) 158.
- ⁵⁵ Hooks, *Black Looks* 158-159.
- ⁵⁶ Jacobson 12, 6-7.
- ⁵⁷ “Dolly Sisters At Palace” *NY Sun* 21 Feb. 1922. File: File: The Dolly Sisters (Janszicka and Roszika Deustch) clippings. NYLPA, BRTC.
- ⁵⁸ “Roszika Dolly on Maude Adams” *New Jersey Star* 21 Oct. File: Dolly Sisters, Robinson Locke Collection, NAFR+ser. 3, vol. 371. NYLPA, BRTC.

Chapter Five

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- ² Angelina W. Grimke, "'Rachel' The Play of the Month," *The Competitor* v.1, (Jan. 1920) 52.
- ³ 51, 52
- ⁴ Grimke is named for her aunt, Angelina Grimke Weld, who, with her sister Sarah Grimke, was a noted nineteenth-century abolitionist and early proponent for women's rights. The two women, born and raised in South Carolina, left the south to escape oppressive social conditions and enable their activism. This "sister act" "performed" as activists long before it was socially acceptable for women to do so, laying the groundwork for future abolitionist works and advocating for women's rights.
- ⁵ Brenda Dixon Gottschild, *Digging the Africanist Presence in American Performance: Dance and Other Contexts* (Westport: Greenwood P, 1996) 98.
- ⁶ Richard Dyer, *White* (London: Routledge, 1997) 25.
- ⁷ "'Topsy and Eva': 'Uncle Tom's Cabin' Set to Music at the Sam Harris" *New York Sun* 24 Dec. 1924.
- ⁸ bell hooks *Black Looks* (Boston: South End P, 1992) 157.
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