Sweet Mamas, Creole Queens, and Class Acts:

African American Women and

Popular Performance in the Early Twentieth Century

Books reviewed:

Angela Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1998.

Nadine George-Graves, *The Royalty of Negro Vaudeville: The Whitman Sisters and the Negotiation of Race, Gender, and Class in African American Theater, 1900-1940.* New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000.

Jayna Brown, *Babylon Girls: Black Women Performers and the Shaping of the Modern.* Durham: Duke University Press, 2008.

> In 1908, [actress] Ada Overton Walker acknowledged how difficult it was for women to develop their artistic talents. She expressed frustration over the ways that, for black women, "the greatest of all gifts is negated or suppressed" and at the ways that "intelligent women were not allowed to follow their artistic

> yearnings." To be historically remembered as an artist, not just as someone's wife…or as the interesting exception to the rule…seems an even more remarkable feat.[1]

Black women performers in the early twentieth century offer an important point of entry into understanding a variety of cultural and social issues such as urbanization, modernization, migration, racial identity, and changing gender roles. These three books on African American women blues singers, vaudeville and variety show performers examine these topics and many others, while situating female performers within the historiographies of numerous fields, such as African American history, working-class history, women's history and the histories of music, theater and dance. While each author brings her own theoretical lens to her project, and the subjects range from the well known – such as Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Bessie Smith, Josephine Baker, and Ada Overton Walker – to the lesser known Whitman Sisters and the often nameless chorus girls of the early black musicals, one similar question arises: are these ordinary women or extraordinary women? While social history has tended to focus on "everyday" subjects and cultural history often examines artistic representation and reception, none of the authors here are trained historians themselves. Rather, all three books use interdisciplinary methods in order to illuminate the importance of their subjects' cultural production, as well as their impact on African American and white audiences and communities.

Angela Davis approaches the blues women of the 1920s as black working-class subjects, despite the fact that Bessie Smith went on to become the first "superstar" in

[1] Jayna Brown, *Babylon Girls: Black Women Performers and the Shaping of the Modern.* Durham: Duke University Press, 2008, p 279.

African American popular culture (p. 141). She makes a concerted effort to connect Rainey and Smith to the black feminist movement that emerged in the 1970s. She prefaces this statement by noting that while they would not have identified as such in their own era, she sees their emerging consciousness – created through the new freedoms and disappointments experienced during the Great Migration – as a legacy that modern feminists ought to claim. Through such connections, Davis helps fashion a history of black feminist thought that exists outside of the white feminist "wave" model.[2] She acknowledges that the blues women have been discussed in many prior works, but most of them have emerged from music scholars, and have not sought to analyze the blues women's role in the formation of black modern identity, nor their historical importance as documenters of the hopes and fears of black women in a post-slavery, Jim Crow era.

Travel and movement play a large role in all three of the works here. Davis devotes a chapter to a discussion of songs about travel and trains, and connects this new form of transportation to gender, freedom, and the Great Migration. She sees the ability to travel, whether to search for a better job, or merely for adventure because one now can, as one of the most important new sources of agency to arise out of Reconstruction. The second new development she returns to often is sexual agency and the right to choose one's own sexual partner, which was not always a possibility for women under slavery. The sexual subjectivity created by the blues women might be their most important legacy; before their songs of desire, heartache and even same-sex desire, it was rare to hear any female artist, black or white, divulge their sexual needs. Despite the fact that the middle and upper classes found such subjects disreputable for women to embrace, the blues women

[2] See Kimberly Springer, "Third Wave Black Feminism?" in *Signs*, Vol. 27, No. 4 (Summer, 2002), pp. 1059-1082, for a critique of the normative wave analogy in the feminist movement.

were very popular and sold millions of records. Discussions of class and respectability come up in both Davis and George-Graves' book, but due to the latter's subjects' position, they are addressed in a different fashion.

Nadine George-Grave's short study of "negro vaudeville" stars The Whitman Sister has a less complex aim than the other two books; this is a "retrieval" history that the author hopes will be the first of other works to come on this troupe, led by four sisters - Mabel, Essie, Alberta, and Alice - who survived life on the road for over forty years. After coming across several pages dedicated to the Whitman Sisters in the book *Jazz Dance* by Marshall and Jean Stearns, George-Graves set out to find everything she could about this troupe, which was very popular with black audiences, despite the fact that they also occasionally performed for white audiences, and were able to pass as white.

As the Whitman Sisters were not, like the blues singers, associated with the working class, but with the black middle-class, George-Graves in interested in situating them amongst discourses on respectability and racial uplift. She wonders why such a popular troupe, who were such "positive role models" for both black and white audiences, became so hidden by history. She sees her job as one of "an archaeologist, attempting to break silences by excavating material that have been buried and presumed lost in order to fill in gaps and tell forgotten stories (p. xvi)." The Whitman Sisters' acts combined sentimental ballads, cross-dressing, and blackface numbers into one performance bill, and the sisters not only appealed to different tastes but also "commented on certain assumptions about race, gender and class, which individual audience members picked up on to varying degrees (p. 7)." In her book, Davis wonders what the blues women might have to teach us about black women's lives that middle-class women such as Ida B.

Wells and Anna Julia Cooper cannot. Given this, it's curious that the Whitman Sisters, who were raised by a preacher father and often performed in churches, while eschewing any overt references to sexuality in their performances, did not garner any of the long-lasting fame that Rainey and Smith did. This is most likely due to the different forms their work took, as blues recordings were easier to document and archive than vaudeville performances. While black middle-class reformers like Cooper sought to regulate the rough and tumble, sexually adventurous lives of working-class women as documented by the blues singers, all these years later, the blues women's representations of black womanhood have nonetheless stood the test of time, while "class acts" like the Whitman Sisters have been mostly buried until now.

Similar to George-Graves, Jayna Brown's new book is also a theatrical history, but a much more theoretically sophisticated one. While George-Graves does use feminist and performance theory to examine the ways the Whitman Sisters subverted gender and racial norms, a subject I shall return to, Brown's project is much more multi-valenced. The only work of the three which is influenced by the recent transnational turn in history, Brown looks at the movement of various black female performers, from Ethel Williams to Florence Mills to Ida Forsyne, amongst many others. She considers their movement not just as they toured the country, came north for work, and performed overseas, but she also examines their literal movements performed on stage, theorizing the uses of and changes in black vernacular dances by blacks as well as whites. She draws parallels between African Americans' subordinate status at home and colonial subjects abroad, and also examines the fluidity of racial identity on stage, as black women took part in and subverted notions of Orientalism by playing Asian on stage (as one of many examples).

A large part of Brown's project is to insert black women performers into the American story of urbanization and modernization in the early twentieth century. She prefers to focus on lesser-known women, along with the often-unknown women of black chorus lines. Her frustration with Josephine Baker's status as the most recognized black female icon of the 1920s is made apparent; at one point she notes that she has chosen not to read Baker as *the* distillation of black creativity from this period but as just another artist within the transnational stage community (p. 240), while earlier on she points out that Baker was one of many women who got their start in black chorus lines. Brown clearly had Davis's book in mind when she mentions that, "revisionist feminist histories, seeking redress for the masculinist blues man trope of black migration, have successfully restored women blues singers as key representative of black constituencies." Brown seeks to accomplish a similar goal with the many performing black women from the variety stage, who also represented migrating black people and "resituating black communities (p. 245)."

Davis begins her project by discussing why the white, middle-class feminine ideal of domesticity did not resonate with working-class black women such as Rainey and Smith. Given that domestic work in white homes was the primary occupation of black women in this era due to racial and gender discrimination, the very notion of the domestic sphere had different resonances for black women. Davis positions her subjects as proto-feminists by contrasting the depictions of love and relationships in their songs to the heteronormative social ideal, in which "women were supposed to seek fulfillment through marriage, with husband as providers and their children as evidence of their worth as human beings (p. 11)." Contrasting with these notions, Bessie Smith sings in "Young

Women's Blues," "No time to marry, no time to settle down/I'm a young woman and ain't done runnin' 'round (p. 17)." Davis discusses how the lack of allusions to marriage in these songs highlights the sexual agency of the blues women, and also points to the fact that "conventional marriage as the defining goal of a woman's life contradicted the realities of post-emancipation black life (p. 18)."

Davis sees the blues women as an important site for examining the conflicts in life for black women in this era. While they were supposed to meet "universal" norms of feminine roles, they carried the burden of racial oppression and discrimination that limited their choices and did not offer the stability needed to meet these domestic norms. Men and women were often apart due to travel for work and to seek out work, which is one of the reasons Davis doesn't see marriage as a realistic goal for black women at this time. This is discussed in the chapter on representations of travel in women's blues song, which illuminates how long-distance travel was a new opportunity for blacks with the post-emancipation advent of the locomotive train. Davis does an impressive job of tying the issues raised in the blues songs to the historical events of Rainey and Smith's time. Their ability to connect the personal to the social explains not only why they were so popular, but also offers another forum besides literature and traditional public speaking through which black women expounded on current events and their lives.

The themes of domesticity and travel are also central to George-Graves' analysis of the Whitman Sisters. The several chapters that make up her book document the history of the troupe, describe their actual performances using surviving primary records, and then analyze the ways the women played with race and gender on stage. She also discusses their "elite" class status and unfailing interest in maintaining their respectability. The

sisters' concern with respectability and their reputation are threads that run throughout the story, beginning with their childhood upbringing by their A.M.E. minister father. He taught them to sing and dance when they were young girls in the 1890s, and they began their performance careers in his church (p. 13). Even after their father died and the oldest sister Mabel began serving as their manager, they continued to perform in black churches throughout the South and North, which was rare for an act associated with vaudeville.

George-Graves offers a few theories for why black women associated not with the "high" arts of drama or tragedy, but with the popular, or "low" arts of musical comedy and vernacular dance, were accepted into such settings.[3] First, their position as preacher's daughters was one they sought to hold onto throughout their performing lives, and they used their church affiliation to connect with the black elite in their constant travels. Second, while they were performers and did not live in the domestic sphere, the fact that they were a family act meant that they brought the private sphere with them into the public. By not leaving their families behind (although only the youngest sister, Alice, had a child of her own) but bringing them along on the road at all times, they were able to garner a sense of respectable womanhood (p. 87). Lastly, the Whitman Sisters helped popularize "pickaninny acts" – or "pick acts" for short – which were acts involving highly talented singing and dancing black children. William "Bojangles" Robinson, who went on to star in many films alongside the white child actor Shirley Temple, got his start in show business as a tap dancer in a pick act with the Whitman Sisters (p. 23). The sisters would tell their audiences about the abandoned children they found on the road

[3] For more on the distinction between high and low forms of popular culture see Lawrence Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990.

and "adopted," and while this was rarely the case, such fabrications lent an extra air of maternalism to the women, which then added to their respectability.

Unlike the blues singers, the Whitman Sisters shied away from sexuality; in their dancing they took up popular moves like the shimmy, but always avoided pelvic thrusting, and their costumes were well made, elegant, and never too revealing. Since they were light skinned, some of them took to wearing blackface when performing romantic numbers with black men, to avoid making unintended, controversial references to sexual relations between white women and black men (pp. 64-65). By taking such precautions, while performing with children as well as in churches, they sought to make their show entertaining, yet wholesome and family-friendly. George-Graves situates their attempts at respectability as strategies to counter the conventional stereotypes of black women as immoral and lascivious, and she also untangles the contradiction of how these black women performers in vaudeville were nonetheless able to maintain a moral and reputable public image.[4]

Jayna Brown begins her project with two chapters that discuss the use of "pick acts" and the character Topsy from *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in variety shows. Interestingly, she chooses to use the term "variety" exclusively instead of vaudeville, since the latter was quite segregated. It wasn't until 1909 that the Theater Owners Bookers Association (or TOBA – nicknamed "tough on black asses") began, which offered black performers a chance to perform on a specific circuit for black audiences. Before that, it was rare for

[4] For a discussion of the recent literature on African American women and the politics of respectability, see Paisley Harris, "Gatekeeping and Remaking: The Politics of Respectability in African American Women's History and Black Feminism," *Journal of Women's History,* vol. 15, no. 1 (2003) pp. 212-220.

performers such as the Whitman Sisters to perform for white audiences on a racially mixed bill. While the TOBA circuit is often associated with tent shows in small Southern towns, Brown tells a primarily urban and transnational story. While many of the performers she examines were originally from the South, they migrated north to succeed – or at least make a living outside of domestic drudgery – on the stage. However, northern audiences were compelled by stories of northern slavery and plantation life, and these minstrel-type themes populated early shows, which were usually produced and directed by white men, until *The Creole Show* in 1890.

Brown does not tell a chronological history, but often moves back and forth in time to situate her performers amongst historical trajectories that began many years before the performances she is primarily focused on took place. She theorizes that the pick acts were so popular not only in the U.S., but also in Europe, because the "pickaninny" was no longer a slave, but was now reformulated as a colonial subject. These young performers therefore represented the "child-like" races of Africa, over whom Britain ruled with a supposedly stabilizing and nurturing hand. Brown sees these black acts as "giving body to remembrance" of past eras while distracting their European audiences from the reality of colonial rule (p. 30-31). Like Davis, Brown has a knack for situating her subjects not merely within performance history but analyzing why their performances resonated with specific audiences due to greater national and transnational events and their discourses.

Audience is a particularly rich lens through which to understand the impact of the performers in these three works, although this means something different for the blues singers than it does for the actresses and dancers. While the sound recordings of Rainey and Smith have helped to secure their legacy and are easily accessible today through CDs

and mp3 downloading, there are no known recordings of their live performances.[5] Both Rainey and Smith started their careers on the variety stages of the TOBA circuit, but there is very little information in Davis's book regarding this leg of their careers. She instead chooses to focus on their lyrics and what their female listeners might have thought of their songs. She theorizes that the recordings served the function of creating both an individual subjectivity for the performers, as well as a collective subjectivity for African American women. She notes that when Rainey's song "Trust No Man" starts out with the line, "I want all you women to listen to me," an imaginary community of women is summoned as the audience (p 57). Through listening to this recording, a woman could therefore not only connect to Rainey, and feel as though she is obtaining advice from her, but also imagine herself as part of a larger community of black women. Through such arguments, Davis builds on her overall thesis that the blues women helped establish what many would today call a feminist consciousness in the early twentieth century. However, she also avoids creating a hagiographic work by acknowledging that much of the advice dispensed by the blues women on how to handle relationships with men accepted notions of male supremacy without overtly challenging them, but was nonetheless still oppositional and rejected female sexual passivity (p. 54).

For George-Graves, questions of audience reception are connected to the multi-layered performances of gender and race that the Whitman Sisters created. These women experimented with racial identity onstage by coming out in blonde, Gibson Girl-styled wigs for some acts, which created the illusion of the sudden appearance of a chorus of

[5] Bessie Smith did appear in one film, *St. Louis Blues* (1929), but as Davis writes, it "deserves criticism not only for its exploitation of racist stereotypes, but for its violation of the spirit of the blues (p. 61)."

white girls in the midst of a black show.[6] The Whitman Sisters' troupe expanded over the years to include dozens of performers, men and women, young and old - but still exclusively African American, so these particular acts must have raised questions for the audience. George-Graves prefaces this discussion with the question: how do we know a black woman when we seen one? She then utilizes feminist theory to discuss how identity is not fixed, but made manifest through power relations, and is performative (p. 53).

Another way the Whitman Sisters played with notions of stable identity was through the inclusion of sister Alberta's popular male impersonation act. Dressed as a dapper gentleman, "Bert" came on stage and danced with her sister Alice. Male/female dance teams were quite popular at the time, and cross-dressing for both men and women was very common in black and white vaudeville as well.[7] George-Graves argues that through these racial and gender performances, the Whitman Sisters provided a platform for audiences to "work out their anxieties about race and gender. The laughter at the realization was possibly a relief of tension and a return to certainty (p. 66)." Furthermore, any concerns over the queer implications of male impersonation were assuaged through the sisterly pairing of Bert and Alice, which minimized the threat of impropriety while conveying the innocence of the masquerade.

Just as George-Graves thinks that popular performances "signify" on multiple levels to different audiences at the same time, Brown is interested in how black women's performances were multi-signifying practices of dissemblance; she also notes that black

[6] The Gibson Girl was a popular turn-of-the-century caricature of idealized white feminine beauty, created by illustrator Charles Gibson. Her significance is discussed in Lois Banner, *American Beauty*. Chicago: University of Chicago, 1984.
[7] For more on African American male impersonators in the early twentieth century, see Eric Garber, "Gladys Bentley: The Bulldagger Who Sang the Blues," *OUTLook:* no. 1 (Spring 1988) pp. 52-61.

artists - used to a culture of surveillance - always assumed a white audience (p. 6).[8] The chapters following her discussion of pick acts look at how African American women performing burlesque in all-black productions such as *The Creole Show* and *Darktown Follies* performed a range of colonial subjects. Brown examines how the very subject of the Creole woman brought to the forefront issues of miscegenation and the fetishization and sexual commodification of "the mulatta." *The Creole Show* parodied this popular American and English discourse of racialized female sensuality (p. 95). Throughout her book, Brown seeks to link the legacy of African American women's sexual subjugation under slavery to the eroticization of colonized female subjects. One connecting thread here is that Josephine Baker inherited the title of "the Black Venus" from Saartje Baartman, the infamous "Hottentot Venus" who was displayed throughout Europe at the turn-of-the-nineteenth century, due to her supposedly massive buttocks and genitalia. Brown also examines Baker to address the ways that romanticized notions of primitivism and the exotic played a large part in both white and black visions of modernity in the 1920s (p. 228).

The emergence of Harlem as the black cultural capital of the U.S., and the burgeoning arts community that created the Harlem Renaissance, are subjects that arise in all three works as a point of contention. George-Graves notes that while the artists associated with the Harlem Renaissance explored the "folk culture" of African Americans to a degree,

[8] Two classic texts on theories of signification and "the culture of dissemblance," respectively, are Henry Louis Gates Jr. *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1988 and Darlene Clark Hine, "Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women in the Middle West: Preliminary Thoughts on the Culture of Dissemblance." *Signs* vol. 14, no. 4 (1989), pp. 915-20.

they largely ignored the existence of black vaudeville.[9] Langston Hughes appears in both Davis and Brown's work as the sole writer associated with the Harlem Renaissance who was interested in exploring the rich material of female blues artists and blues culture, but most of the artistic elite in Harlem distanced themselves from the "low" arts of blues, variety and vaudeville. These disreputable entertainments were not part of their project of racial uplift, which was exemplified by key literary figures like Alain Locke. Davis, however, sees both the rise of the female blues singers and the Harlem Renaissance as cultural movements that sought to accomplish the same goals – the cultural articulation of black identities and consciousness (p. 144).

George-Graves points out that most black actors were barred from performing in the dramas and tragedies of "legitimate" theater; therefore, there were few opportunities for black performers to create art – as opposed to "entertainment" – on a par with the poetry and literature that was lauded in 1920s Harlem. She notes that the Whitman Sisters attempted to distinguish themselves from the lower classes even as they worked to uplift them (p. 86). So too did the Harlem Renaissance artists attempt to distance themselves from blacks who created more popular forms of culture, especially those associated with the South and not the urban North. Despite their southern roots, not only did the female blues singers garner a more urban reputation that the rural, southern male blues artists, but Rainey and Smith are also associated with the commercialization of the blues, since blues women were the first Americans to record the blues (Davis, p. 152). Hence the

[9] Further, there has still been no monograph written on the history of TOBA, the black vaudeville circuit, which is odd, given the interest in blackface minstrelsy, vaudeville and burlesque by theater and cultural historians.

male blues singers, with their southern country roots and lesser ties to the northern music industry, are considered to some blues scholars as more "authentic."

All three authors attempt to insert their performing subjects and their resistance to limiting norms of femininity, black identity and authenticity, into the larger history of African American culture. Davis compares the sexual agency expressed by the blues women to the middle-class club women's movement: while the latter defended sexual purity and moral integrity, they denied sexual agency (p. 44). However, the blues women were not ashamed to vocalize their sexual desires – as Bessie Smith sang in "Baby Doll," " I wanna be somebody's baby doll so I can get my lovin' all the time (p. 24)." While the club women's values were informed by white Victorian "true womanhood" ideology, they were just as influenced by the legacies of racial science and slavery that deemed black women as animalistic and hypersexual. Nonetheless, the working-class blues women did not apparently feel the same burden of representation; they chose not dissemblance, but voiced their sexual appetites – even when they strayed from heterosexual norms.[10]

Furthermore, Davis politicizes the blues women not just in relation to sexuality and relationships, but also in terms of social protest against institutional inequalities that effect black women. She critiques white male music scholars who dismiss the blues women for being primarily apolitical. Quite the contrary, Davis sees "the blues" themselves as an everyday acknowledgement of the totalizing effects of intersecting oppressions. She writes, "blues as aesthetic form and practice must be understood as a means of testifying to and registering the lack of real, objectively attainable possibilities

[10] See for example, Ma Rainey's "Prove It on Me Blues." The CD reissue of *AC/DC BLUES* (Stash Records, 1977) contains dozens of 1920s-30s blues songs dealing with same-sex desire.

of social transformation (p. 106).” She analyzes songs that confront social inequalities such as Smith’s “Poor Man’s Blues,” and argues that such songs planted seeds of social protest and consciousness in black listeners that would awaken in later decades. Davis also brings the life and work of Billie Holiday into her last two chapters, including an examination of the song “Strange Fruit,” the title of which was an allusion to lynched black men hanging from trees. Davis argues that through this song, Holiday firmly established the place of protest in the black popular music tradition (p. 184). These are some of the ways Davis demonstrates that the cultural production of the blues women contributed to changes in black consciousness in the early twentieth century.

One of the ways George-Graves reveals the important place of the Whitman Sisters in not only black performance history but black women’s history is through a discussion of the tactics used by Mabel Whitman as a businesswoman who was in charge of the troupe’s finances. After their father and then their mother died while the sisters were still relatively young, oldest sister Mabel took on the position of troupe manager. It was quite rare in the burgeoning entertainment industry for a black woman, much less a black man, to be charge of the marketing, booking, and finances for performers; this was usually a job done by exploitative white men, who promoted troupes using racist stereotypes and underpaid hard working performers. From the 1890s to the 1930s, Mabel ran the troupe, and the sisters never had to turn to outside of their family for help with booking or costumes, which were made by younger sister Alice. Therefore, the Whitman Sisters played a large role in determining how they were represented.

Mabel also complained to theater owners about the segregated seating in theaters, and helped some Southern towns desegregate their theaters, or at least provide more sections

for black audience members. She also used her ability to pass as white to help secure superior accommodations on the road. Coupled with the previously mentioned gendered and racialized performances that may have led their audiences to question assumptions about the supposedly fixed nature of identities, George-Graves reveals the multiple ways the Whitman Sisters resisted and played with the societal limitations placed on black women in this era. However, the question of ordinary versus extraordinary women that I began with is raised again here – if Mabel was a rare example of a black woman in charge of a black vaudeville troupe, what can we learn about other black female performers who weren't so lucky? How should we situate such isolated incidences, or should we use their very existence as a reason to search for more so-called exceptions? By focusing her whole study on just one troupe, George-Graves may have missed an opportunity to put her subjects into further dialogue with their contemporaries.

Unlike George-Graves, Brown's study occasionally feels as though it's trying to accomplish too much at once**.** For example, the ambitious goal of chapter three is a focus on black burlesque shows "in relation to U.S. imperialism and the versions of popular Orientalism it produced, in relation to working-class black female public presence and the 'woman question,' and in relation to the ironies of black citizenship, black migration north, and the segregationist policies instituted at the turn of the century (p. 93)." While her main focus is how black women variety performers were integral to the creation of urban modernity in the U.S. as well as Europe, each chapter takes on subjects in different performance genres, but also utilizes various methodologies. For example, chapters on female minstrelsy and social dances - such as the cakewalk and the shimmy - examine how white women and men engaged with black expressive techniques and gestural

language; hers is the only book of the three to give specific attention to white reception to black cultural forms. Indeed, in her chapters on black women performers in Europe, this becomes even more of the focus. Yet the ways that African Americans were received in Europe are important to study in order to understand the differing legacies of slavery and colonialism. However, as she notes, "to focus solely on white uses of race is to reproduce what I am critical of here, which is a politics of power and access often underplayed in studies of white investments in black culture. (p. 4)."

Brown seeks to distance black women from notions of "timelessness" that keep them from being viewed as active historical agents in the process of establishing urban modernity (p. 191). To counter this notion, she holds up the figure of the black chorus girl. Chorus lines became well known in the spectacles of female flesh and song of huge productions like the Ziegfeld Follies, but white producer Florenz Ziegfeld wouldn't hire women of color for his productions. Nevertheless, black musicals included large numbers of talented female dancers. While chorus lines featured identical costumes, synchronized choreography, and movements inspired by an era of factories, black social dances were "expressive forms by which people sought to adjust their physical sense of being to a new and often oppressive terrain: industrialization, segregation, [and] shifting class relations (p. 158)." Brown presents chorus lines as repressing the individuality and spontaneous improvisation found in many black vernacular dances, and refers to the rebellious chorus girls Esther Williams and Josephine Baker – who often performed their own attention getting moves at the end of the chorus line - as performing "choreographies of female resistance (p. 163)." This concept is central to Brown's project – the ways in which black female performers resisted the limited, racist discourses that were the legacies of slavery

and colonization, and created their own urbane subjectivities. Brown's work positions journeying black women performers "not as exceptions but as critical moderns subjects, citizens of the world (p. 10)."

Together, these three books offer new insights into the expressive worlds black women carved out in the early twentieth century. Through their cultural productions enjoyed by both black and white audiences, these performers contributed to the shaping of American culture during an era of rapid change. The authors do not shy away from the complexity and flexibility of their subjects and identities, while demonstrating how black women performers actively played with and challenged discourses on race, class, gender and sexuality. Northern and southern, urban and rural, national and transitional, black female popular performers were able to make a living outside of domestic drudgery where they could fashion new modern identities and subjectivities that would influence generations of women to come. George-Graves demonstrates well how buried some of these histories have become, and Brown refers to her work as a form of creative mourning (p. 279). Hopefully, as new scholars continue to build on these works and discover more about black female performers of the past, there will be less lamenting and more excavating and celebrating of the ordinary, extraordinary creative achievements of black women.