

history writ large. Weaving political, theatrical, personal, and social threads together throughout the study helps Quinn to summarize and evaluate rapidly the arguments of Congressman Martin Dies and other naysayers. In her persuasive conclusion, Quinn supplies excerpts of fierce and racially pointed congressional attacks as final evidence that the threat of racial equality and the fear of a push for civil rights in the South were core motivations to end the life of the FTP.

Quinn's study also provides concise biographies of Hallie Flanagan, national director of the FTP; and Harry Hopkins, director of the WPA. Through the personal histories and motivations of the two most prominent public faces of the project, Quinn depicts a nuanced struggle between these two dynamos, their goals for the project, and their battles to overcome the nation's political realities. Quinn also delves into the personal histories of Orson Welles, John Houseman, FDR, and Congressman Dies; though not so intimate as her chapters on "Hallie" and "Harry," these miniature portraits help to illuminate the project's history and context while lending additional support to Quinn's conclusions. Flanagan remains the linchpin of Quinn's narrative, however, as the almost daily personal letters from Hallie to her husband provide descriptions of many events from Flanagan's unique perspective in her own candid words. Additionally, excerpts from Flanagan's letters to Hopkins and other officials contrast a private Hallie, an individual doggedly pursuing her dream, with Flanagan's public performance as a skilled diplomat keeping the ill-fated project afloat for as long as she could.

Furious Improvisation is not meant to be an exhaustive history of the Federal Theatre Project's work. Rather than include information on all of the FTP's many productions, Quinn focuses on more risqué events and their inherent political ramifications. Thus, she frequently devotes more space to describing *One-Third of a Nation* or the *Swing Mikado* in terms of their social or political resonance rather than theatrical aesthetics or close textual analysis. Susan Quinn's study is a well-organized, well-written narrative of a theatre project at the mercy of the nation it serves. As such, *Furious Improvisation* is a welcome addition to Federal Theatre Project scholarship, not only for theatre historians but also for students of cultural studies and American history.



Babylon Girls: Black Women Performing and the Shaping of the Modern. By Jayna Brown. Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 2008; pp. 360. \$89.95 cloth, \$24.95 paper.

The Scene of Harlem Cabaret: Race, Sexuality, Performance. By Shane Vogel. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2009; pp. 278. \$60 cloth, \$22 paper.

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Reviewed by Sandra L. Richards, Northwestern University

Sight and the disciplined performance of bodies—theatre if you will—are critical to racial regimes. In two well-researched, wonderfully illustrated, and savvy books, Jayna Brown and Shane Vogel advance the interrelated fields of black performance studies, (African) American theatre history, and popular culture through their focus on how black performers and their audiences negotiated racial technologies from the late 1890s through the 1940s. In *Babylon Girls* Brown examines black women who used minstrel, variety, and musical stages in the United States and Europe to fashion themselves as modern subjects. In *The Scene of Harlem Cabaret*, Vogel studies “everynight life,” as staged by clubgoing New Yorkers and Harlem Renaissance writers, uncovering a critique of bourgeois uplift discourses and the emergence of new forms of sociality. Brown finds that her subjects were required to “glance in many directions” (6) in order to achieve some measure of success, whereas Vogel’s sought to navigate the “tightness” of cabaret spaces and social prohibitions in the hopes of experiencing the “looseness” of public intimacy (88). These images serve as apt metaphors for the authors’ methodological approaches, for they ably work in an interdisciplinary manner that brings together literary studies, geography, social history, dance history, black feminism, and queer theory. Though their research effects a historical recuperation of sorts, these scholars are too theoretically smart to opt for a politically efficacious, totalizing narrative. Attentive to nuance, they identify performances whereby their subjects repeatedly wiggled, danced, and moved toward imaginative possibilities beyond the theatre of the racial order.

Brown focuses on four genres of popular performance: the picaninny shows of the 1890s that toured the United States and Europe, reinforcing the image of black people as childlike; the variety shows, inaugurated by *The Creole Show* (1890), that linked racialized sexual oppression at home to eroticized imperialism; musicals like *Darktown Follies* (1913) that anticipated Harlem’s status as a cultural capital from which white and black performers would draw; and the Broadway musical “invasion” (2), initiated by *Shuffle Along* (1921), that allowed another cohort of talented women like Florence Mills, Josephine Baker, and Valaida Snow to develop successful careers abroad. Challenging masculinist historiographies of popular American performance and black travel, Brown effectively argues for vernacular performance as a gendered site of modernist self-fashioning and expands understandings of black transnationalism beyond England and France to include Eastern Europe and the Pacific. Key to her case studies is the concept of racial absorption, wherein whites imagined themselves as experiencing the same emotions as blacks onstage. Yet as Brown demonstrates, counter to those contemporary theorists who argue that such racial mimicry holds out egalitarian possibilities, white Americans insisted on social distance; though they might experience a revitalizing energy in dancing the Charleston, for example, they still expected dance halls, theatres, public parks, or residential areas to be segregated.

Brown’s chapter on Topsy offers an important corrective to the masculinist historiography of American popular culture. As the most beloved character of the “Tom” show adaptations of Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, Topsy was always

moving in defiance of all logic and social norms. This blackface role was developed exclusively by and for white women, enabling them to enjoy, like their male counterparts, a certain license while reiterating racial difference. Even middle class, early modern dancers like Ruth St. Denis succumbed to Topsy's energy and "'went native,' darkening their skin" (69). When black women took up the role after the Civil War, the range of meanings necessarily changed. "Glancing in many directions" at a range of spectators onstage, offstage, and backstage, black actresses reiterated the violence and terror of slavery, made comical for many white viewers. But possibly they were also experiencing in this irrepressible figure and conveying to black female onlookers an assertion of their bodies as resilient and imaginative, characteristics that contested dominant constructions.

Brown turns to urban geography and early twentieth-century concepts of physical culture to explain the paradox of the cakewalk's appeal to various Americans separated by race and class. Though associated with the plantation South, the dance's ragtime music and staging of athleticism, composure, and opulence seemed to capture the energy that many associated with the rapidly changing urban environment. It announced the enviable artistry and growing presence of black people in cities that restricted their movements and employment opportunities, and its mastery signaled that white elites and the middle class that emulated them had developed well-toned bodies through purposeful leisure activities. But for the black professional class intent on a politics of respectability, the dance's physicality and theatrical display were distasteful, and black performers' parodies of their class pretensions were unwelcome.

Women's bodies are typically made to carry symbolic social freight, and Brown traces the changing significance of black women's bodies onstage in three further chapters. Given the juxtaposition of domestic and foreign locales in turn-of-the-century shows like *The Creole Show*, *The Octoroons*, and *Oriental America*, the light-skinned chorines made visible the links between sexual subjugation under slavery and Jim Crow, on the one hand, and the eroticization of colonial women, lands, and pleasure zones in American cities on the other. Also on display were the artificiality of racial categories and the contingent quality of American citizenship as performers like Stella Wiley successfully used makeup and costuming to portray a variety of working-class, white (or near-white) ethnics.

Once associated with a glamorous mobility—to the cities, Europe, and the rest of the world—these women were later seen as signs of black inauthenticity and racial contamination when Americans began searching for the safety of folk roots after the Great Depression. The three women who are the subjects of Brown's final case study traced differing trajectories of black transnationalism that nonetheless underscore the contingent nature of national belonging for black peoples. The star of *Shuffle Along*, Florence Mills toured Britain and France, but her "outspoken race loyalty" (240) endeared her to Harlem, thus counteracting anxieties about the negative consequences of cosmopolitanism and commercialism. Though Josephine Baker represented various constituencies

during her decades-long residency abroad, Brown focuses on Baker's role as an unofficial emissary of French universalist discourses, purchased in her two "homes" by disregard for the violence of colonialism. Jazz trumpeter, conductor, and musical arranger Valaida Snow departed from the better-known narratives of black success in Europe by winning over jazz enthusiasts in Austria, Scandinavia, and Denmark; furthermore, international and Harlem media proffered conflicting tropes about women and/or blackness in their efforts to explain her 1941–2 detention by the Danish. The ambiguity surrounding Snow allows Brown to comment on the necessary incompleteness of the historical record and on scholarly investments in seeking to shine a spotlight on those confined to the stage wings and archival footnotes.

While Brown offers a history that is unfamiliar to many, Shane Vogel reviews a scene made familiar through such Harlem Renaissance novels as Claude McKay's *Home to Harlem*, Nella Larsen's *Passing*, and Carl Van Vechten's *Nigger Heaven* and through W. E. B. Du Bois's fulminations about needing to bathe after reading such works that depicted Harlem as a site of nonstop laughter, dance, sexual depravity, and crime. Whereas much critical scholarship repeats the contemporaneous division between hard working, respectable Harlemites and pleasure-seeking blacks and slumming whites, Vogel proposes a more nuanced interpretation that understands the "everynight life" of large segregated cabarets like the Cotton Club that catered to a whites-only clientele, or of smaller, overcrowded saloons, joints, and clubs, where black patrons predominated, as fostering new subjectivities. He does so by first reviewing the positivism of social science, with its fixed categorizations and spatialization of poverty and morality, that Harlem Renaissance advocates like Du Bois and Charles S. Johnson both replicated and challenged with their own sociological studies and support for the arts. As Vogel notes, 1926 was a particularly critical year, for Van Vechten's *Nigger Heaven* and the Broadway hit *Lulu Belle* cemented Harlem's lurid reputation, and a generation of younger black writers—Zora Neale Hurston, Langston Hughes, Claude McKay, Nella Larsen, and Wallace Thurman—emerged, offering representations that seemed to confirm the worst about Harlem. Resisting the binarisms offered by social science and uplift ideology, Vogel reads the Harlem Renaissance "queerly" (17). He locates instead a dialogical continuum of physical as well as psychic tightness and looseness that characterized cabaret spaces, producing exploitation, degradation, racism, and artistic innovation along with possibilities for public intimacy that escaped positivist desires.

Vogel frames his analysis of literary works with smart reviews of cabaret's roots in German and American popular cultures, examinations of the performance implications of such spaces in which the performer's reality is coeval with that of spectators, and discussions of competing maps and temporalities of day versus night. But curiously, his analysis of the literary texts—Hughes's poems or Larsen's club scene, for example—is underwhelming in contrast to the impressive weight of the frame. The most compelling chapters offer a rereading of Du Bois's flamboyant dismissal of McKay's *Home to Harlem* and a consideration of Lena Horne's early cabaret career. In the Du Bois–McKay

chapter, Vogel identifies a nonracial utopian strain in the 1897 Du Bois essay on “The Problem of Amusement” that suggests a link to McKay’s characters with whose yearnings for a new subjectivity the elder man declared himself fascinated. Much separated the two men, but the points of convergence are noteworthy.

The Lena Horne chapter should prove especially useful to those who are familiar only with her performances in the 1970s and 1980s, when her style had changed to register greater vulnerability. Vogel’s comparison of Horne’s early, impersonal persona to Brechtian *gestus* may appear surprising, but it is appropriate given American cabaret’s roots in German performance practices that Brecht also studied. Yet those familiar with black feminist theory may anticipate an explanation closer to home that Vogel does not consider. That is, Horne’s technical brilliance yet icy reserve can also be interpreted as an instance of what Darlene Clark Hine calls “the culture of dissemblance.” As a “high-yaller” or light-skinned black woman who had chosen to spectacularize herself by performing in whites-only places, Horne was challenged to develop a strategy to limit the access that the intimacy of the cabaret space, epidermal evidence of miscegenation, and sign of blackness all seemed to guarantee.

Vogel’s book is significant in linking Harlem Renaissance artists to ordinary black folk, thereby expanding the arena of its impact. Whereas uplift proponents sought to separate working-class black people from suspect sporting-life folk, the clubs, dives, and holes-in-the-wall that these groups frequented offered what Paul Gilroy has termed a “politics of transfiguration” in which new affiliations within a racial community and between that group and its “erstwhile oppressors” (Gilroy in Vogel, 28) were beginning to emerge. From this perspective, it is clear that the queer Harlem Renaissance that Vogel proposes—as distinct from a gay and lesbian one—is an unfinished project of tremendous consequences.



Women Writers of the Provincetown Players: A Collection of Short Works.

Edited by Judith E. Barlow. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2009; pp. 361. \$75 cloth, \$29.95 paper.

From Winning the Vote to Directing on Broadway: The Emergence of Women on the New York Stage, 1880–1927. By Pamela Cobrin. Newark: University of Delaware Press (Cranbury, NJ: AUP), 2009; pp. 243. \$54.50 cloth.

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Reviewed by Cheryl Black, University of Missouri

Two recent works add to our understanding of the relationship between gender and theatre during the First Wave feminist era. Judith E. Barlow’s *Women Writers of the Provincetown Players: A Collection of Short Works* is the most comprehensive collection to date of Provincetown plays by women (excepting collections devoted exclusively to Susan Glaspell). Of the thirty-five plays