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Jeanne Klein

The Cake Walk Photo Girl and Other Footnotes in African American Musical Theatre

On 22 August 1897, the *American Woman's Home Journal* published seven photographs of "The Cake Walk as It Is Done by Genuine Negroes" in which "Williams and Walker Show How the Real Thing Is Done before the Journal Camera."[1] In this series, the African American stars Bert Williams, George Walker, Belle Davis, and Stella Wiley perform their popular cake walk act with situational humor in medias res before an unknown photographer in a nondescript space.[2] Among the seven selected poses, one intriguing photograph in the lower right-hand corner depicts the encircled dancers gazing down upon an empty space in the center.[3] The subject of their gaze becomes apparent when comparing the magazine images with the seven "Post Cards" Franz Huld published as part of his "Cake Walk/Negro Dance" series around 1901.[4] Although the performers' poses are the same, the postcard includes extra space between Wiley and Walker to feature a young girl of mixed racial heritage bending forward while hiking the back of her dress with her smiling face proudly held high (Fig. 1). If standing upright, she appears to be less than four feet tall and perhaps five to nine years of age. Given the obscure date and location of her photo shoot, her birth year could

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Figure 1.
(L to R) Belle Davis, Stella Wiley, the girl, George Walker, and Bert Williams; ca. 1901. Purchased by author, 26 August 2017.

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range anywhere from the mid-1880s to the early 1890s. Like Thomas F. DeFrantz, an African American dance theorist who gazes upon two 1920s photographs of other dancing girls, my gaze leads me to wonder about her identity, how she met and socialized with these four dancers, and whether she pursued a theatrical career.[5]

Despite my extensive investigations, the actual identity of the cake walk photo girl remains an enigma. Her very anonymity encapsulates the dilemma that theatre and performance studies scholars face when seeking to recuperate the embodied personalities and migratory lives of performing girls.[6] As but one instance of visual culture, her body represents a uniquely positive depiction of a young cake walker, unlike caricatured illustrations of cake walkers that proliferated on sheet-music covers and other postcards, and may very well predate those of other dancing girls.[7] Moreover, I argue that the pride and pleasure she exhibits as the center of attention among four exceptional dancers aptly symbolizes the importance of black girls who performed during a pioneering period in the development of African American musical theatre from the 1890s through the 1910s. Some girls achieved national, as well as international, recognition as celebrated dancers, singers, and actresses over their adolescent and adult careers. Others earned recognition in name only in managers' rosters and black critics' brief newspaper reviews. Like the cake walk photo girl, most remain as anonymous footnotes whose names, bodies, and identities may never be known in the annals of musical theatre history.

In this essay, I imagine the possible migrations of the cake walk photo girl by explaining how and why black girls entered show business via multiple circuitous routes both within and away from their original birth places as an alternative occupation to domesticated lives. Although black girls were expected to carry out their mothers' aspirations for racial progress as wives and mothers, as Nazera Sadiq Wright uncovers, musically inclined girls challenged these domestic agendas by pursuing avenues of personal and racial uplift through performance.[8] Upon discovering the joys of bodily self-expression at young ages, they took advantage of various opportunities in their immediate environments and utilized multiple strategies to achieve their respective dreams as dancers and singers. Given the breadth of performative contexts, I limit my selection of girls to their direct or potential associations with Belle Davis, Stella Wiley, Bert Williams, and George Walker, as well as Walker's accomplished wife, Aida Overton Walker, and connect a few missing dots in their respective migrations over a fifteen-year period. Alongside their theatrical associates, these five prominent performers, born in the 1870s and 1880, mentored innumerable girls and young women as they shifted African American musical theatre away from its racist roots in minstrelsy.

This interdisciplinary project builds upon and extends the biographical foundations and critical analyses of black performance historiographers and theorists who situate the imperatives of black bodies and aesthetic sensibilities within visual culture across migratory roots and routes.[9] Similar to Jayna Brown's critical methodology,[10] I offer a different performance genealogy of black girls, based on verified or guesstimated birth years, as cake walking dancers in touring companies,

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vaudevillian "picks" (short for "pickaninnies"), and chorus girls in Williams and Walker's productions. Collectively, these three overlapping categories of performance reveal how and why two cohorts of girls took their first performative steps and pursued multiple strategies of freedom and survival during the oppressive Jim Crow era of segregation. To visualize performing girls within "a new paradigm for beauty" established by emerging black newspapers in the 1890s, as photography historian Deborah Willis documents,[11] I provide limited examples herein and source the earliest known photographs of young theatrical women to suggest their respective personalities. By uncovering, tracing, and uniting what little is known of each girl's entrance into theatre, this emergent reconstruction explains how and why girls strategized their careers via three musical routes and challenged domestic agendas of black girlhood through performance. As a consequence, I argue that their concerted efforts led African American musical theatre toward the intricacies of modern tap dancing and syncopated ragtime songs.

CAKE WALK DANCERS

The physical and musical roots of the cake walk have been traced back to nineteenth-century Southern plantations as well as several African cultures. After observing the quadrilles and grand marches of the white gentry, couples held in bondage released their oppressed frustrations by mocking and exaggerating these dances while competing for a cake. Dressed in hand-me-down finery, they strutted and pranced in "chalk-walk lines" with arched backs, high kicks, and pointed toes to the syncopated rhythms of banjos, fiddles, and drums. Not unsurprisingly, the white gentry mistook this subversive satire as simply stereotypical expressions of "Negro fondness" for dancing and music. White minstrels in blackface subsequently appropriated and distorted this "walk-around" as a double-edged irony of white satire of black folk caricatures of white aristocratic customs. Cake walk performances at the 1876 Centennial Exhibition in Philadelphia sealed plantation stereotypes further to wider audiences, and competitive cake walk events spread to other cities throughout the 1880s.[12]

As more African Americans migrated to northern cities in the 1890s, the popularity of the cake walk exploded and the dance crossed racial, class, and transnational boundaries, even as upper- and middle-class blacks debated its worth as a viable means of racial uplift.[13] Given white producers' profit-driven, plantation and minstrel mythologies, black managers, such as Sam Lucas, Billy McClain, and Bob Cole, staged and toured cake walk acts in several, long-running, indoor or outdoor performances that included *The Creole Show* (1890–7), *South before the War* (1892–8), *Black America* (1895), *The Octoroons* (1895–1900), *Oriental America* (1896–9), *Darkest America* (1896–8), and Black Patti's Troubadours (1896–1915).[14] The improvisational experimentation and stylistic virtuosity of dancers intensified as national cake walk championships were held annually at Madison Square Garden beginning in 1892, in which throngs of "spectators went fairly wild over the great exhibition of style, elegance, and grace."[15] *Creole Show* dancers Charles E. Johnson and Dora Dean, billed as the "King and Queen of Colored Aristocracy," modernized the cake walk with elegant

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sophistication in fashionable evening attire, as did 1897 cake walk champions Billy and Willie Farrell. Throughout this period, it was not uncommon for children to participate in local cake walks and to travel with companies. For instance, after leaving the *Creole* and *South before the War* companies, little Mamie Payne joined her parents, Major Ben F. and Mrs. Susie Payne, in 1893 in *Slavery Days,* one of many imitative productions.[16]

Beginning in 1890, *The Creole Show*, in particular, opened up new and advantageous performance opportunities for the cohort of African American girls born in the 1870s by featuring female minstrels and choruses. Despite its controversial cake walk dances and minstrel mythologies, this innovative show and its imitators marked a significant transition between all-male minstrelsy and vaudevillian revues.[17] As key representatives of the 1870s cohort, Belle Davis (b. 1874) and Stella Wiley (d. 1930) honed their experiential talents in this show and other companies with numerous others, known only by their names, women whose concomitant birth years and obituaries remain elusive.[18] Unfortunately, we know nothing of their girlhoods or whether they had unreported children. As twenty-something performers, they both appeared in Sam T. Jack's Creole Burlesque Company during the fall of 1894, as evidenced by Jack's August roster that included "Harry Singleton and wife, Belle Davis," as well as Stella Wiley and Bob Cole, her "terpsichorean" partner and future husband.[19] However, during the first half of 1895, Wiley performed with Cole at Worth's Museum in New York; and Davis and Singleton apparently parted ways in March when Singleton joined Cleveland's minstrels.[20] After completing the *Creole* season, Davis reportedly summered in Brooklyn at Manhattan Beach, while Singleton portrayed Old Black Joe in *Black America* with child cake walkers at Ambrose Park in South Brooklyn before leaving New York with the *Suwanee River* company in August.[21]

Ironically, the cake walk phenomenon had achieved further national and international circulation during the summer of 1893 in Chicago when the World's Columbian Exposition, designed to showcase purified images of forty-six nations, became a prominent venue for showcasing several African diaspora performances and thereby laid the sociopolitical foundations for subsequent African American artistic movements.[22] While the "White City" of Chicago, named for its white buildings at the Columbian Exposition, was awash in cake walking contests and performances at several variety venues, Williams and Walker arrived there in September 1895 after performing out West.[23] Based on published reports of the four dancers' whereabouts, they may have first met Wiley, Cole, and Davis, as well as Jesse Shipp and Billy Johnson, here in February and March 1896, when their respective companies were competing for performers in new acts.[24] While Shipp recalled their audition and trial engagement in Cole and Johnson's troupe "The Six Octoroons," the four dancers could have also performed "Rehearsing for the Coon's Cake Walk" with Isham's Octoroons[25]—along with any of the following girls residing in Chicago at this time.

The girlhood of Ida Forsyne (b. 1883), an internationally acclaimed dancer, offers the most detailed explanation of how girls took advantage of local dancing opportunities to initiate and expand their performance networks. While living with her mother above a Chicago saloon, Forsyne recalled learning her "first real

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[dance] steps" from the sporting-house pianist downstairs and picking up pennies and dimes while dancing in front of the candy store and at house-rent parties. At age ten, she joined the Creole company in their cake walks during the 1893 Columbian Exposition for two months that summer for twenty-five cents a day, adding "We went around in a wagon with a ragtime band to drum up trade."[26] To further expand her enthusiasm for buck-and-wing minstrel dancing, she also haunted the Alhambra Theatre to watch rehearsals of *The Coontown 400* and *South before the War*. At age fourteen, she ran away from home to sing and dance with a tab show (a short, tabloid version of musical acts), and when stranded out West, made her way back home singing on trains with an anonymous five-year-old boy who passed the hat for their expenses along the way. Two years later, she joined Black Patti's Troubadours as its youngest member for $15 a week, singing a "coon" lullaby of which she said, "no one thought of objecting in those days," and winning the show's cake walk contests with a partner for seven straight nights. With her "legomania" (rubber-legged eccentric dancing) talents, Forsyne later became "the cakewalking toast of Russia."[27]

The ongoing ubiquity of minstrelsy also served as another interrelated pathway for girls to dance in local or touring troupes. Forsyne's equally accomplished cousin, Ollie Burgoyne (ca. 1885), reportedly danced in minstrel shows at age six and also extended her prominent career on an international scale.[28] In August 1896, she joined Isham's *Oriental America* of female minstrels with Belle Davis, Pearl and Carrie Meredith, and their maternal chaperone, Laura Meredith.[29] Another rising star and South Side Chicago girl, little Lottie Grady (b. 1889), may have first gained experience with Trux's Black 400 touring company before earning praise back home for her "clever singing, graceful dancing and charming simplicity" at age twelve.[30] After playing vaudeville as a sixteen-year-old chorus girl at the Pekin Theatre, she cultivated her acting skills as the Pekin's leading lady under the tutelage of J. Ed Green.[31] This multitalented soubrette went on to costar with Bert Williams in *Mr. Lode of Koal* in 1909 and with Bob Cole in William Foster's 1912 film, *The Railroad Porter*.[32]

As girls made inroads through female minstrelsy and cake walking choruses around the country, Williams and Walker billed themselves as "Two Real Coons" at Koster and Bial's Music Hall in New York City beginning in early November 1896. It was around this time that their manager, William McConnell, purportedly "saw the cake walking pictures in a show window. He decided to produce the dance on the stage, but to get the value of the publicity of the tobacco industry he insisted on the same costumes and the same girls."[33] Indeed, in late November, Williams and Walker added "two, coffee-colored ladies dressed in yellow" to a cake walk finale, and they also satirized the "Colored 400" with a larger contingent of cake walkers while singing Cole and Johnson's "The Black 400's Ball" through March 1897.[34]

Davis and Wiley may or may not have been available for Williams and Walker's cake walks in late November because both were reportedly out of town touring in their respective companies.[35] However, Wiley had appeared at New York's Star Theatre in early November when Black Patti's Troubadours staged Bob Cole's opening forty-minute sketch, "At Jolly Coon-ey Island."[36]

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According to this program, Wiley sang "Belle of Avenue A" and sixteen-year-old Aida Overton sang "4-11-44" with Cole, Billy Johnson, Henry Wise, and Sadie De Wolf. Overton also sang "The Three Little Kinkies" with Misses Lena Wise and Maggie Davis, the latter the seventeen-year-old wife of Charles Davis, an acrobatic dancer who partnered with Ed Goggin.[37]

Like Forsyne, Ada (later stage spelling, Aida) Overton (b. 1880) began her renowned career by dancing along New York City streets with her friends Pauline and Clara Freeman while following a hurdy-gurdy man, who earned more money with their participation.[38] Unlike Forsyne's mother, Ada's dressmaking mother, Mrs. Pauline Reed, enrolled Ada in Mrs. Thorpe's school of physical culture, where she danced the Highland fling and sang "Swinging in the Grape Vine," suggesting another, perhaps more middle-class, route into performance.[39] After making her professional debut in 1896 with the Freeman sisters and honing her talents further with Wiley during the Octoroons' 1897–8 season,[40] Overton sang, danced, and choreographed Williams and Walker's productions beginning in September 1898 and married Walker in June 1899.

Given Williams and Walker's cake walking reputations, Will Marion Cook initiated a plan for them to star in his new "Negro operetta," *Clorindy; or, The Origin of the Cake Walk*, an hourlong entertainment that also needed child performers.[41] So, upon returning home to Lawrence, Kansas, in July 1897, George "Nash" Walker called upon Reverend Albery A. and Caddie Whitman and their "four angel children," Mabel, Ollie, Essie, and Alberta.[42] The first three siblings had begun singing in 1889, and their father had taught them the double shuffle, presumably for exercise.[43] At age ten, Essie won a singing prize in Kansas City, and she remembered cooking greens for Walker, whom she considered "the greatest strutter of them all."[44] In a 1918 interview, Mabel recalled that Walker "desired to be a sponsor for us on a trip to New York for the purpose of starting us on our professional career, but was met with parental objection. Myself, Essie, and Alberta received our rudimentary education in our home town, and were then sent to Boston, Mass., where we attended the New England Conservatory of Music," and subsequently moved to Atlanta.[45] Whether Walker found or took one or more other girls back with him to New York as another performance route for girls remains unknown.

Sometime before or after Walker's sojourn to Lawrence, the four dancers may have repeated their 1896 cake walk act "before the [New York] *Journal* camera" for publication in August.[46] This photo session may have included Ida Gwathmey (b. 1888), a Virginia-born girl who reportedly studied dancing in New York "[a]t an early age," perhaps at Hallie Anderson's school on 53rd Street with Rufus Greenlee and Thaddeus Drayton, who greatly admired Walker's struts.[47] Her father may have been V. M. Gwathmey, a Richmond merchant of tobacco and cigars, suggesting another middle-class dancing route away from home and making her potential identity as the cake walk photo girl all the more tantalizing (Fig. 2).[48] Although nothing further is known of Gwathmey's childhood or her marriage to Charles H. Anderson, a "popular Harlem dance master," she performed in Anita Bush's stock company in 1916 and organized her own Players in 1928.[49]

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Figure 2.
Ida Gwathmey Anderson, in *The Crisis* 15.2 (December 1917), 82.
Courtesy of the Modernist Journals Project, Brown and Tulsa Universities,
at *www.modjourn.org/render.php?id=1292429023445375&view=mjp_object*.

Anderson's future colleague, Abbie Mitchell (b. 1886), also began her professional career in New York, one year after the *Journal* photo session during the summer of 1898 at age twelve. Despite her aunt's protests that she "was only a

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child and nice girls didn't go on the stage!" she auditioned for and sang in *Clorindy* for $35 a week during its sensational run at the Casino Roof Garden starring Belle Davis and Ernest Hogan. Upon returning to school in Baltimore, Will Marion Cook persuaded Mitchell's family to allow her to rejoin the company with Pearl, Carrie, and Mrs. Meredith.[50] When Davis left the company, Mitchell assumed a leading role with Lottie Thompson, Bert Williams's future wife, in Williams and Walker's *Senegambian Carnival*, an expanded version of *Clorindy*. At age fourteen, she married Cook (seventeen years her senior), perhaps to assuage her family as a respectable woman. After giving birth to two children, she performed in three more Williams and Walker's productions before divorcing Cook in 1908 and continuing a multifaceted and long-lived career.[51]

At this juncture, any number of girls had made their way to the performance capital of New York City upon leaving their hometowns with or without their parents or guardians. From mid-August to early September 1898, the four dancers could have posed with other potential girls for another speculative photo session, specifically for Franz Huld in New York. While Williams and Walker played Keith's Union Square Theatre, Davis and Wiley opened Isham's Octoroons with a newly conceived cake walk at Miner's Eighth Avenue Theatre that included Sadie Britton.[52] After closing *Clorindy*, Pearl and Carrie Meredith performed a sketch with Tom Logan at the Casino Roof Garden just before leaving to join Black Patti's Troubadours in Plainfield, New Jersey.[53] By early September, twelve-year-old buck dancer Muriel Ringgold (b. 1886) proved herself a sensational hit with the Troubadours under Ernest Hogan's stage management.[54] It was also during this auspicious summer that Belle Davis first introduced "her pickaninnies" and thereby contributed to a three-decade-long "pick" phenomenon.

Anonymous "Picks"

From 1894 through the 1920s, a new set of wildly popular "pickaninny" acts arose in multiple variety shows, among black and white performers alike, as an ongoing extension of cake walk dances and plantation mythologies staged in all-black companies. Before the Civil War, Harriet Beecher Stowe's characterization of Topsy as "a little Negro girl, about eight or nine years of age" unwittingly christened "pickaninny" imagery and reactivated virulent stereotypes concerning children's lives on plantations throughout the nineteenth century.[55] Although Caroline Howard established the convention of much older white actresses portraying Topsy in blackface for thirty-five years, African American girls or young women, such as Miss Hutchins and Emma Louise Hyers, also characterized Topsy in the 1870s and 1880s.[56]

During the early 1890s, as black managers incorporated numerous, anonymous youngsters in their cake walk acts, visualizations of children dancing in black musical choruses with adults extended racist "pickaninny" imagery and further reinforced contentious plantation mythologies of black domestication. In 1894, former Creole company couples, such as Irving and Sadie Jones, began to introduce youngsters in their minstrel acts. Al and Mamie Anderson publicized "four little pickaninnies" in their "Corn Bread" act, and their colleague, Jerry

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Mills, also presented several at Worth's Museum.[57] After her husband's death, Madame Susie Payne promoted her anonymous "picks" with her daughter, Mamie.[58] Although child performers seldom earned name recognition in public notices, Cole and Johnson advertised and named "Sadie Robinson and Little Dottie" for their New York performances of *A Trip to Coontown* in April 1898.[59] African American boys also played brass instruments in countless "pickaninny" bands in street parades and annual performances of *In Old Kentucky* at New York's Academy of Music (1893–1915).[60]

The concept of specialty "pick" acts appears to have been sparked in May 1894 when Lederer and Canary promoted a petite, nineteen-year-old white woman, "Lucy Daly and her pickaninny band," in *The Passing Show*, "a topical extravaganza" that burlesqued others' acts.[61] Much like black-faced white minstrels who satirized cake walks, Daly parodied black female minstrels in blackface with young black dancers. Thomas Edison's 1894 film of Daly's act not only provides a rare exhibition of buck-and-wing dancing but also reveals that three of her eleven "picks" were actually young men.[62] However, the fact that the infamous Gerry Society, in keeping with New York's child actor laws, forbade her "picks" from performing in their costumes at a Sunday benefit suggests that the other anonymous children were under age sixteen.[63]

Legal-minded managers needed to consider age-sixteen restrictions in their hiring practices, even though girls may have lied about their ages. For Black Patti's Troubadours, managers Voelckel and Nolan appear to have abided by this law when they hired Ada Overton, the Freeman Sisters, and Ida Forsyne for their New York City shows and the Meredith Sisters and Muriel Ringgold for tours outside New York state. To subvert child actor laws, adolescent girls, like Abbie Mitchell and Maggie Davis, often married young to work in New York and across multiple states as reputable actresses.

While some critics considered the employment of underaged "picks" exploitative child labor, their variety sketches with black or white female "coon shouters" and "coon" lullabies "just grew" like Topsy into a long-running rage for several reasons. As old vaudevillians recalled, single, most often white, women would sing a few songs and then bring out two or a half dozen little "Negro kids that really could sing and dance" in their act as "'insurance' . . . for a 'sock' finish" that never flopped among white and black audiences alike.[64] Tom Fletcher added,

> The kids didn't just supply the atmosphere but were clever performers. The activity gave them a chance both to get rid of their extra energy and to further their ambitions as well as be a [financial] help to their parents. The youngsters were well cared for, being kept well dressed both in the theater and outside. The top ones who were with the female stars . . . became big names themselves in the amusement field.[65]

Indeed, although children did not reap managers' one-way profits, girls asserted their self-determined agency by utilizing these opportunistic means of entering show business, earning their own money, and traveling across the country and around the world as a viable alternative to lower-class domestic occupations.[66]

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Paradoxically, these representations of black girlhood onstage conceptualized girls as women's domesticated children, literally their hired help, even though white and black female vaudevillians alike trained them otherwise as more middle-class performers and generated their professional theatrical careers. Among the many white women who followed Daly's footsteps, it is Josephine Gassman about whom we have the most detailed account, including how she hired and trained girls and represented them as her supposed offspring while portraying a "Mammy" in blackface. After singing at Keith's Union Square Theatre, where Williams and Walker also appeared in August 1897, Gassman billed herself as "The Belle of Blackville," initially with a Southern boy, who left, and then with three Northern boys who danced while she sang "Mammy's Little Pumpkin Colored Coons," authored by black composers George Hillman and Sidney Perrin.[67] Six months later, she returned to Keith's with two siblings, six-year-old Ruth and four-year-old Frederick Walker, whom she reportedly had found "living in squalor" in Chicago. Gassman offered their mother, Ella, "a weekly allowance in recompense for their use," bought them new clothes, and taught them cake walking for their debut at Chicago's Opera House, where spectators deluged them with money. In New York, she sang "Enjoy Yourselves" as "coquettish" Ruth flirted with her "swaggering" brother, who bowed gallantly and tied her shoelace while bent on one knee.[68] Despite earning over $7 from the stage, the Gerry Society cut short their six-week run, forcing their act to play in other states (Fig. 3).[69]

One year later in St. Louis, Gassman discovered another youngster, Irene Gibbons, whose mother consented to renaming and taking her three-year-old daughter on the road across the US, Europe, and Australia from 1899 through 1917.[70] At age six, little Eva Taylor posed between two unnamed children for souvenir photographs handed out at matinees in Los Angeles.[71] By 1917, "Phina and Company" included three "fully grown" girls, possibly Taylor, Edith Spencer, and Ruth Good, as well as pianist Walter Hall and comedian Bill Bailey, who also edified prisoners at Blackwell's Island that Thanksgiving.[72] After Taylor ran away at age twenty-six, little Katherine Howard impersonated others' singing of various songs and eulogized Teddy Roosevelt.[73] Not until 1921 did these company members finally gain the name recognition they deserved.[74]

In addition to Taylor and Spencer, who achieved lauded musical reputations as adults, two other noteworthy girls also initiated their distinguished careers by first laboring as other white women's "picks." Like Gassman, Pauline Hall (aka Bonita) used a brown pigment rather than burnt cork to darken her white skin while performing with her anonymous children, billed as "African" or "Cuban midgets." Sometime between 1901 and 1905, she hired Florence Mills, who had triumphed at age eight singing "Hannah from Savannah," Aida Overton Walker's signature song from *The Sons of Ham*, as well as the Mallory Brothers' lullaby, "Don't Cry My Little Picknaninny," five years earlier. However, Mills proved too young for the Gerry Society and was forced to leave Hall's company to pursue alternative options with her sisters.[75] Mamie (or Mayme) Remington, a former Topsy delineator, depended upon an unnamed girl and boy in 1897 and later featured four anonymous "ragtime brunettes" or

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Figure 3.
Fredy (Frederick) and Rudy (Ruth) Walker posing with Josephine Gassman. Courtesy of Lester S. Levy Collection of Sheet Music, Sheridan Libraries, Johns Hopkins University, at *http://levysheetmusic.mse.jhu.edu/collection/105/127*.

"Buster Brownies."[76] In 1901, she hired an eight-year-old girl, who had studied dancers' variations of the strut, grind, or shuffle at her father's honky-tonk in Birmingham, for so-called ethnic dances. After touring South Africa and Europe with Remington's fifteen-member troupe, Leola "Coot" Grant performed with other partners in vaudeville.[77]

After leaving the *Clorindy* company, Belle Davis exploited this roiling trend for thirty years beginning in August 1898, when she and Stella Wiley returned to

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Isham's Octoroons.[78] For a new ragtime opera and cake walk entitled "The Darktown Aristocracy," Davis sang her signature songs and introduced her anonymous "pickaninnies" through early October.[79] While Wiley remained with the Octoroons' tour, Davis broke away to assert her own "pick" act in Chicago.[80] She then seized a profitable opportunity to earn $300 a week playing a cook with "two pickaninnies" and a white cast in the three-act musical farce *Brown's in Town* that opened in Milwaukee in December.[81] Upon leaving this company, Davis sustained her popular sketch with unidentified "picks" and returned to Chicago in the summer of 1900 with "three oddly rigged negro lads," along with Will A. McConnell, Williams and Walker's former manager.[82] During the winter and spring of 1901, she featured a "precocious" girl, a "little colored tot who sings her little solo" and "makes goo-goo eyes" that seemed "particularly appealing to the youngsters in the audience," according to Boston reviewers.[83] Having won critical acclaim and financial independence as "the Queen of ragtime singers," Belle Davis sailed for England in June 1901 with two boys, aged seven and nine, and costarred with them and other boys across Europe until at least 1929.[84]

Back in Chicago, at least one local girl pursued theatrical opportunities at the new Pekin Theatre, along with Lottie Grady. Katie Milton and Hen(ry) Wise helped to open the Pekin with their "two pickaninnies" in 1904; and Chicago-born Nettie Lewis featured the "Buster Brown Boys and Girls" singing "The Tale of the Monkey and the Snake" in *Captain Rufus* in 1907.[85] Fourteen-year-old redhead Ada "Bricktop" Smith may have performed in this latter show to satiate her "stage-struckitis." With the Pekin so near her home, she attended Saturday matinees regularly and haunted the stage door for tips on how to get a job until Robert Motts hired her and some friends. After two weeks of rehearsals and performances, a truant officer grabbed her backstage one night and lectured her mother about keeping her daughter in school. She then bided her time by catching every Williams and Walker show in Chicago; and, upon turning sixteen, she joined Flournoy Miller and Aubrey Lyles in their road show.[86]

Perhaps as a contrast to Gassman's reported treatment and training of her "picks" as a white manager, Mabel Whitman offers another known model of a black manager. Despite having missed her opportunity to work with George Walker in 1897, Whitman coached her nine-year-old adopted sister, Alice, in various dances with the "Dixie Boys" beginning in 1909. As a formidable matriarchal manager, she convinced parents that their children would be well cared for, safely protected, and privately tutored by her husband. Based on her strict moral code for sexual conduct, she insisted that girls travel and lodge separately from boys and forbade her protégés from smoking and drinking. Although her deep booming voice, powerful frown, and "hell-fire and brimstone" disciplinary methods struck fear in her charges, girls looked up to her as a surrogate mother within an extended family of budding vaudevillians.[87] With the waning of vaudeville, Whitman's schooling of this generation signaled the end of "pick" acts, as minstrelsy sketches gave way to full-blown musical comedies.

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CHORUS GIRLS

Like other visionary black producers, Williams and Walker auditioned and hired a multitude of chorus girls as they sought to uplift the burgeoning wealth of unrecognized talent in seven productions that continued to feature cake walks from 1898 to 1909.[88] Beginning with *Senegambian Carnival*, their first black-authored, ragtime pastiche, their core company initially involved Abbie Mitchell and Lottie Williams, as well as Ada Overton and Grace Halliday in a sister act, and Mazie Brooks and the Mallory Brothers, among others.[89] *A Lucky Coon* spotlighted Ollie Burgoyne, along with Lottie Meredith among thirty-five to forty-five anonymous cake walkers; and, its subsequent fifty-person version, *The Policy Players*, began to feature eighteen young women in character roles within a loosely knit plot.[90] *The Sons of Ham*, another fifty-member production, showcased a gigantic, sixteen-foot-high cake for "a grand spectacular cake walk ballet" with thirty elegantly dressed chorus girls.[91] The Broadway-breaking success of *In Dahomey*, with its cake walk performances before King Edward and his nine-year-old grandson in London, and the parodic production of *Abyssinia*, with an initial company of over one hundred people, broke new ground by introducing the African diaspora to audiences.[92] Unfortunately, *Bandanna Land*, which included Muriel Ringgold among its seventy-five cast members, would be George Walker's final "high and mighty" cake walk performance with his renowned wife before illness forced his retirement in March 1909.[93]

As the stunning number of company members multiplied, so too did the widespread obscurity of innumerable chorus girls, known only by their names, brief descriptors with hometowns, character roles, isolated photographs, or short biographies in obituaries as publicized in the black press. For example, Mattie Evans was described as a "dashing little maid" from Louisville with a "clarion voice" that towered above choruses, and Lavinia "Tiny" Jones was lauded for winning a free scholarship to the National Conservatory of Music in New York.[94] Katie Jones, characterized as a petite and clever toe dancer, played a "kid" in *Bandanna Land* (and "a boy in overalls" much later), as did Marguerite Ward and Bessie (Brady) Thomas, "two little chorus girls" whose "correct ages" were unknown to the managers.[95] Given the increasing need for proficient singers, many women from an older cohort came with previous experiences from all-black companies—such as for *A Trip to Coontown*, a landmark musical comedy produced by Cole and Johnson—stayed for only one or two productions, and then left for other engagements.[96]

Performing and touring together in close quarters not only presented opportunities for single women to cultivate intimate relationships with company members but also posed potentially sexual threats seldom reported in public. For instance, Effie Wilson, a twenty-year-old chorus girl, realized the hazards of budding friendships when, for petty reasons, she was struck by a male company member, who was summarily arrested and fired.[97] Nevertheless, several women met husbands from among the company's gifted performers, lyricists, composers, playwrights, stage managers, or personal secretaries.[98] For instance, Laura Bowman (1881–1957) explained how she gained confidence singing in church choirs before auditioning for Walker and rehearsing with Cook at age twenty-two.

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Despite her marriage at age seventeen, she left her husband and began a common-law and professional partnership with Pete Hampton.[99] During long stretches of travel, these nomadic twentieth-century women organized and led sewing or literary and musical clubs, served luncheons, loudly cheered the "boys'" baseball games, and engaged in their own sporting events.[100]

At least four sixteen-year-old girls began or extended their performative proficiencies with the company, all of which further prepared them to pursue interrelated and entrepreneurial careers. Minnie Brown (1888–1936) initiated her six-year tenure after raising concert money to study voice and graduating from Spokane high school. Upon retiring from the stage in 1910, this gifted soprano soloist sang at St. Mark's M. E. Church in Manhattan for twenty years, inaugurated a concert bureau with fellow member Daisy (Robinson) Tapley, taught at the Musical Settlement School, and directed several choral groups throughout New York City.[101]

Anita Bush (1883–1974) met Williams and Walker when *The Policy Players* came to Brooklyn's Bijou Theatre, where her father worked as a tailor. After much cajoling, her father permitted her to join their company as a dancer in at least four productions, whereby she likely applied Walker's business acumen to her own pioneering company.[102] Odessa Warren (1883–1960) moved to New York City with her parents in the spring of 1898 and may have been in a summer run of the afterpiece "Cook's Tour" at Koster and Bial's before Isham "hurriedly engaged" her for his Octoroons. In addition to her chorus roles beginning in 1899, she created the fashionable "Bon Bon Buddy" hats for *Bandanna Land*, opened her own millinery shop in New York City in 1908, and later starred with Bert Williams in the 1913 film *Lime Kiln Field Day*.[103]

After spending two years touring with the Blind Boone Concert Company, Marguerite Ward (b. 1889) joined the company from Kansas City, Missouri, in 1904 as a petite dancer, contralto singer, and ardent admirer of Aida Overton Walker.[104] Like other members, she subsequently performed in S. H. Dudley's Smart Set company and Cole and Johnson's *Shoo-Fly Regiment* before achieving her initial dream as a vaudeville star with her husband, Kid H. Thomas.[105] Frustrated with the lack of specialized stage makeup for the "bouquet race" of African American women, she founded the Marguerita Ward Cosmetics Company in Chicago in 1922 and manufactured thirty-two different shades of "sun-tan" powders from "deep dark to cream white," an apt extension of her fashionable chorus girl days with Mrs. Walker.[106]

To dignify the company's chorus girls further (during or after their stints), photographs of individual women in black newspapers visualized all skin (and makeup) colors, coiffed hairstyles or wigs, body sizes, and modes of dress both onstage and off.[107] Images of identified, self-posed women in the 1904 company of *In Dahomey* also suggest distinct personalities and cosmetic makeup choices in comparison to unidentified women, presumably in stage makeup, posing in two photographs from *Abyssinia*.[108] Although the anonymous women in the latter two photos challenge discernible comparisons against individual and company photos, knowing their chorus roles and characters narrows down the possibilities toward attaching names to blurry images. Situated entirely in Africa, *Abyssinia*

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featured Lottie Williams, Maggie Davis, Lavinia Rogers, Ada Guiguesse, and Aline Cassell as US characters; while Annie Ross, a former Creole company member, portrayed the Queen of Abyssinia with Aida Overton Walker, Hattie Hopkins, and Katie Jones as named Abyssinian maidens.[109] Among a bevy of chorus girls, "who needed but little making up to appear as the native born," the market scene photograph may have depicted petite Bessie (Brady) Thomas, contralto Bessie Payne, Mazie Bush (a former 1895 Creole company member), and Lizzie De Massey from Jamaica as flower girls led by Minnie Brown.[110]

Knowing full well the racial prejudices and theatrical struggles that young women faced, "Dorothy," a columnist of the *Indianapolis Freeman*, lauded these and other "Abyssinia Maids" for "raising the standard of that womanhood that has chosen the stage as a means of service to humanity," while wrestling with "the troublesome race problem." For those unmarried women "without a legal protector," she surmised they were learning "a lesson of self-dependence" through "hard toil and sacrifice," while broadening the minds and hearts of their sisters with other beneficial talents.[111] Aida Overton Walker also emphasized that "many well-meaning people dislike stage life, especially our women. On this point I would say, a woman does not lose her dignity today—as used to be the case—when she enters upon stage life." She counseled young women "of good thoughts and habits" not to choose stage work for its dazzling brilliance but "for the love of the profession" whereby hard earnest work would repay them handsomely with a noble life.[112]

To these ends, Mrs. Walker continued to showcase new "dancing girls" by producing two highly successful entertainments.[113] To benefit the White Rose Industrial Association for Colored Working Girls in June 1908, she reintroduced Bessie and James Vaughn's five-year-old daughter, whom they christened Ada. While dressed as Mrs. Walker in miniature, little Ada Vaughn enamored audiences by singing George Walker's "Bon Bon Buddy" with her godmother wearing male attire.[114] Tucked among seventeen chorus girls who represented Southern flowers lay another budding star raised in the cotton fields of Tennessee. Lottie Gee (ca. 1886) had begun her career at age nine with a ragtag jubilee company and learned dancing from other troupers.[115] After nineteen-year-old Effie King joined her in *Bandanna Land*, Gee performed a sister act with King as the Ginger Girls before her breakthrough role in *Shuffle Along* in 1921.[116]

As George Walker's health worsened, Bert Williams opened *Mr. Lode of Koal* in September 1909 with his new costar, Lottie Grady, in lieu of Aida Overton Walker, who instead chose to star in Cole and Johnson's *The Red Moon* and other companies before her untimely death in 1914.[117] Nevertheless, sixteen loyal women whom she had assiduously tutored earned noteworthy praises in this short-lived production.[118] Despite the tragic losses of George Walker and Bob Cole in 1911, the young women in their respective companies had not only benefited their own careers but had also paved the way for subsequent generations of chorus girls.

When *The Darktown Follies* closed at Harlem's Lafayette's Theatre in 1914, its grand cake walk finale by the entire cast marked the end of grandiose cake walking performances in large musical companies. However, its serpentine circle dance

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presaged a new sensational period of African American musical theatre in 1921 when Lottie Gee and former "picks" Florence Mills, Edith Spencer, and Eva Taylor achieved stardom in *Shuffle Along*.[119] Even though Williams and Walker had broken Broadway's racial boundaries twenty years earlier, and *The Darktown Follies* had inspired white audiences to trek to Harlem, all-black companies had faced ongoing struggles for another decade until *Shuffle Along* pioneered girls' culmination of modern jazz dancing and the long sought-after approval of a romantic song, "Love Will Find a Way."[120] In other words, once girls born in the 1870s and early 1880s had successfully pushed the limits of female minstrelsy in the 1890s, girls born from the mid-1880s through the mid-1890s found their ways of innovating musical comedies in the 1920s.

Conclusion

This reconstructed genealogy of black performing girls reveals a more complex portrait of the multifarious strategies they employed to achieve their dreams in lieu of otherwise domesticated lives. Initially, most youngsters likely discovered the roots of their embodied passions by freely expressing their bodies and voices through dramatic play and by meticulously scrutinizing other performers' tactics as they joined local entertainments in their immediate environments. Upon earning their own pennies from local gigs or cake walking contests, they likely apprehended how performance could not only be a joyful route of artistic self-expression and innovative experimentation but also an alternative financial means of economic freedom for themselves and their families' survival.

However, to cultivate their nascent song-and-dance talents, girls took different strategic routes, with or without their families' blessings, both within and away from hometowns that spanned the entire United States. For those who left home at an early age, some mothers decided to expand their daughters' prospects for them as "picks" with female guardians. Others supported their daughters' budding desires to train as dancers and/or singers by allowing them to leave home to study with specialized teachers while living with same or different family members in other cities. Some unruly girls simply decided to run away with ragtag minstrel troupes to practice their own experiential schooling through performance, while others brought their mothers along with them as company chaperones or traveled with their theatrical parents. For those who stayed near their homes, many bided their time by taking dance or voice lessons, singing in church choirs, playing musical instruments, watching rehearsals, attending shows, and finishing their formal schooling before making their professional stage debuts as adolescents. Once on the road to their performative lives, their growing networks with other performers escalated their options in sister acts or husband-and-wife teams, other choruses, or leading roles in all-black musical comedies. Whichever routes they followed, whether as cake walkers, "picks," or chorus girls, each girl uplifted her own racialized life on her terms by taking full advantage of respective local, national, and international opportunities.

While the cake walk photo girl endures as a postcard commodity for others to enjoy, share, and collect in scrapbooks, black girls' lifelong achievements as

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groundbreaking dancers, singers, and actresses should no longer be regarded as mere footnotes in the history of musical theatre. Although very little documentation exists on the childhoods of these girls, historians might consider writing more complete, recuperative biographies of these theatrical women, drawn from sources provided herein, that could also broaden historicized perspectives on black girlhood culture. For now, girls' historically contingent strategies of artistic freedom and socioeconomic survival reflect those of grown performing girls today, as black girlhood scholars theorize and practice hip-hop feminism with today's dancing girls.[121] By initiating performative acts from girls' embodied creativity, perhaps the ghosted legacies of the cake walk photo girl and her lesser-known companions may persist among present and future generations of performing girls.

ENDNOTES

1. "A Lesson for Society Cake Walkers," *American Woman's Home Journal*, 22 August 1897, 12; at *www.loc.gov/resource/sn83030180/1897-08-22/ed-1/?sp=12&q=Cake+Walk+1897*, accessed 27 August 2017. Note that I conserve "cake walk" as two words herein, per apparent African American preferences around the turn of the twentieth century.

2. William Foster misidentified Belle Davis as Ada (Reed) Overton in "Pioneers of the Stage: Memoirs of William Foster," *The Official Theatrical World of Colored Artists National Directory and Guide* 1.1 (April 1928): 40–9, at 47. He propagated the following myth about Aida (her stage name spelling) among subsequent biographers:

> A tobacco company had engaged Williams and Walker to pose some cake walking pictures to be used in advertising their product. Walker instructed a girl friend, named Stella Wiley to get another girl who could dance and meet him and Williams at the studio . . . to make up the four-some. Aida accepted, earned twenty dollars for posing and returned home without paying any particular attention to Mr. Walker; *at least so the story goes*. (my italics)

Jayna Brown includes five of the seven photographs from Stella Wiley's scrapbook (Scrapbook of the Negro in Theatre, Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University) in *Babylon Girls: Black Women Performers and the Shaping of the Modern* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 151. See also illustrations of Walker and an unidentified woman in "Cake Walks and Culture," *The World*, 23 January 1898, 33.

3. Along with other photographs, this same pose was reproduced as a colorful but undated sign advertising Old Virginia Cheroots, as well as prints without the added lettering advertising the brand, before 31 December 1899. See *www.icollector.com/old-virginia-cheroots-cardboard-sign_i5839440* and *www.icollector.com/Old-Virginia-Cheroots-Paper-Sign_i12110019*, accessed 27 August 2017.

4. Franz Huld published various card types from 1900 to 1914; *www.metropostcard.com/publishersh2.html*, accessed 23 August 2017. Sherry Howard and others attempt to date his cake walk postcards at *http://myauctionfinds.com/2009/11/24/cakewalk-postcards-at-auction/*, accessed 6 September 2017. On dating postcards, see Smithsonian Institution Archives, "Postcard History," at *https://siarchives.si.edu/history/featured-topics/postcard/postcard-history*, accessed 9 March 2018.

5. Thomas F. DeFrantz, *Dancing Many Drums: Excavations in African American Dance* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2002), x–xi.

6. Jo A. Tanner provides an extraordinary directory of black women performers in the appendix of her germinal dissertation, "The Emergence and Development of the Black Dramatic Actress, 1890–1917" (Ph.D. diss., Department of Theatre, CUNY, 1989), not included in her *Dusky Maidens: The Odyssey of the Early Black Dramatic Actress* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1992).

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7. Brooke Baldwin, "The Cakewalk: A Study in Stereotype and Reality," *Journal of Social History* 15.2 (1981): 205–18, and idem, "On the Verso: Postcard Messages as a Key to Popular Prejudices," *Journal of Popular Culture* 22.3 (1988): 15–28.

8. Nazera Sadiq Wright, *Black Girlhood in the Nineteenth Century* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2016), 3–4.

9. For example, *Black Performance Theory,* ed. Thomas F. DeFrantz and Anita Gonzalez (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014).

10. J. Brown, 1–2.

11. Deborah Willis, *Posing Beauty: African American Images from the 1890s to the Present* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2009), xxviii.

12. Summarized from Baldwin, "Cakewalk"; Marshall Stearns and Jean Stearns, *Jazz Dance*: *The Story of American Vernacular Dance* (1968; repr. New York: Da Capo Press, 1994), 22–3; Tom Fletcher, *100 Years of the Negro in Show Business* (New York: Burdge, 1954), 103.

13. Lynn Abbott and Doug Seroff, *Out of Sight: The Rise of African American Popular Music 1889–1895* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2002), 205–9.

14. See the alphabetized entries on these and subsequent productions noted below in Bernard L. Peterson Jr., *A Century of Musicals in Black and White* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1993). Billy McClain claimed he originated cake walks in productions; "Billy McClain—Originator of the Cake Walk," *Indianapolis Freeman*, 23 April 1910, 6. For biographies, see the alphabetized entries in Bernard L. Peterson Jr., *Profiles of African American Stage Performers and Theatre People, 1816–1960* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2001).

15. "The 'Cake Walk' a Big Success," *New York Press,* 18 February 1892, quoted in Abbott and Seroff, *Out of Sight*, 205–6.

16. Paynes in *New York Clipper*, 5 August 1893; Abbott and Seroff, *Out of Sight*, 365–6, 370–3.

17. For incisive critiques of female minstrelsy, see J. Brown, chap. 3.

18. Davis's birth year and place are deduced by Rainer E. Lotz, "Belle Davis," in *Black People: Entertainers of African Descent in Europe, and Germany* (Bonn: Birgit Lotz Verlag, 1997), 65–87, at 65, 68. Earliest photograph of Belle Davis, reportedly taken 22 July 1897, possibly during *Journal* photo shoot, at *www.ipernity.com/doc/285591/40178466*. Compare with photo in *New York Clipper Annual for 1899*, 13, at *https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=nnc2.ark:/13960/t2x36xz2q;view=1up;seq=15*, both accessed 26 August 2017. Obituary of Stella Wiley, who spent her childhood in Joplin, Missouri, in *Chicago Defender*, 15 March 1930, 1. Earliest photograph of Stella Wiley (ca. 1895) with Bob Cole in Thomas L. Riis, *Just before Jazz: Black Musical Theater in New York, 1890–1915* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution, 1989), 27.

19. *New York Clipper*, 18 August 1894, 372.

20. Respective performances in *New York Clipper*, all 1895: 12 January, 9 February, 9 March, 13 and 20 April, and 23 March. Worth's Museum in Bernard L. Peterson Jr., *The African American Theatre Directory, 1816–1960* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1997), 12–13.

21. *New York Clipper*, 22 June, 13 and 27 July, and 17 August 1895. Lori L. Brooks critiques *Black America* in "Journey to a Land of Cotton: A Slave Plantation in Brooklyn, 1895," *American Studies* 53.1 (2014): 57–78. Singleton and his new wife later joined *Darkest America*; *New York Clipper*, 17 July 1897, 318.

22. Anna R. Paddon and Sally Turner, "African Americans and the World's Columbian Exposition," *Illinois Historical Journal* 88.1 (1995): 19–36.

23. George W. Walker, "Bert and Me and Them," *New York Age*, 24 December 1908, 4; Bert Williams, *Indianapolis Freeman*, 14 January 1911, 5; Eric Liddell Smith, *Bert Williams: A Biography of the Pioneer Black Comedian* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1992), 16–19.

24. Wiley and Cole performed with Jack's Creoles at his Madison Street Theatre, in *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 23 February 1896, 1 March 1896, 32; while Davis performed with Isham's Octoroons in Chicago, in *Daily Inter Ocean*, 17 February 1896, 8, and 24 February 1896, 6 and *New York Clipper*, 7 March 1896, 10.

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25. Shipp in *Bert Williams, Son of Laughter,* ed. Mabel Rowland (New York: English Crafters, 1923), 28–9, 34; Ann Charters, *Nobody: The Story of Bert Williams* (New York: Macmillan, 1970), 26–7. This "character song" introduced Octoroon members in an opening sketch entitled "The Blackville Derby"; Abbott and Seroff, *Out of Sight*, 166–7; Riis, 21 n. 11.

26. Quotations in Stearns and Stearns, 250–1.

27. Quotations in ibid., 251; Peterson, *Profiles*, 91–2. Photograph of Ida Forsyne, billed as Topsy, in Henry T. Sampson, *Blacks in Blackface: A Sourcebook on Early Black Musical Shows*, 2d ed. (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2014), 1: 118.

28. Burgoyne biography in John O. Perpener, *African-American Concert Dance* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001), 73–7; Peterson, *Profiles*, 39. Photograph and biography in Sampson, *Blacks in Blackface*, 2d ed., 1: 425, 2: 1383–4.

29. *New York Clipper*, 22 August 1896; *Indianapolis Freeman*, 7 November 1896; *Washington Bee*, 28 November 1896. Obituary of Pearl Meredith in *Chicago Broad Ax*, 28 July 1917.

30. Henry T. Sampson, *The Ghost Walks: A Chronological History of Blacks in Show Business, 1865–1910* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1988), 191; *Indianapolis Freeman,* 2 March 1901 and quoted in 15 June 1901.

31. Thomas Bauman, *The Pekin: The Rise and Fall of Chicago's First Black-Owned Theater* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2014), 55; *New York Age*, 14 May 1908; "Lottie Grady Makes Hit," *Indianapolis Freeman*, 19 March 1910, 1.

32. Tanner, *Dusky Maidens*, 74–8; Mark A. Reid, *Redefining Black Film* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 7–9. Photograph of Lottie Grady on sheet music of "Dat Lovin' Rag," 1907 at *https://memory.loc.gov/diglib/media/loc.award.rpbaasm.0009/000901v.tif/200*, accessed 30 October 2017.

33. Foster, "Pioneers," 47.

34. Quoted in "Notes of the Week," *New York Times*, 29 November 1896; see also Smith, *Bert Williams*, 26–9.

35. Davis was in Washington, DC, with Isham's *Oriental America* and in other cities through late February 1897; *Washington Bee,* 28 November 1986, *Indianapolis Freeman*, 2 January and 2 February 1897. Wiley was in Binghamton, Philadelphia, and other cities until mid-March; *New York Clipper*, 28 November 1896, 27 March 1897.

36. Peterson, *Century*, 19–20.

37. Maureen D. Lee, *Sissieretta Jones: "The Greatest Singer of Her Race" 1868–1933* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2012), 102–3, 110–11. Lena Wise in *New York Clipper,* 12 December 1896. Obituary for Maggie Davis in *Chicago Broad Ax*, 8 September 1917, 3.

38. While many biographers rely on Foster's 1928 memoirs in "Pioneers," see also Floyd G. Snelson, "Aida Overton Walker," *Pittsburgh Courier*, 16 July 1932, 7; Richard Newman, "'The Brightest Star': Aida Overton Walker in the Age of Ragtime and Cakewalk," *Prospects: An Annual of American Cultural Studies* 18 (1993): 465–81.

39. "A Children's May Party," *New York Age*, 13 June 1891, 2.

40. *New York Clipper*, 21 August 1897.

41. Marva Griffin Carter, *Swing Along: The Musical Life of Will Marion Cook* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 38–46.

42. "A Lawrence Boy," *Lawrence Weekly World*, 15 July 1897, 7; "How He Started," *Lawrence Daily Journal*, 9 August 1897, 4; quoted in *Kansas City American Citizen*, 8 January 1892. Ollie Whitman disappears from Kansas newspaper reports around 1896.

43. *Wichita Daily Eagle*, 19 April 1889, 5; Stearns and Stearns, 85.

44. Stearns and Stearns, 86.

45. Quoted from "The Whitmans," *Chicago Defender*, 26 January 1918, 4; see also 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), 13–19.

46. Quote from "A Lesson for Society Cake Walkers." Over this summer, Wiley apparently broke up with Cole over his court case dispute with the Troubadours' managers; Lee, 112–14.

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Rather than perform in Cole and Johnson's blacklisted tour of *A Trip to Coontown*, she signed on with Isham's Octoroons in mid-July with Ada Overton and Ada's mother, Pauline Reed; *Indianapolis Freeman*, 17 July and 28 August 1897; *New York Clipper*, 31 July and 21 August 1897. Having embarked upon a tour of Great Britain with Isham's *Oriental America* in April, Davis may have returned to the States with Mattie Wilkes in July; *New York Clipper*, 1 May 1897; *Indianapolis Freeman*, 24 July 1897. Davis later joined Wiley in the Octoroons' "Darktown Outing at Blackville Rock" sketch; *Boston Sunday Globe*, 24 October 1897, 10. See J. Brown, 150–2, for an alternative explanation of this photo session.

47. Quoted in Floyd J. Calvin, "Lincoln Audience Gets Big Thrill When Pretty Actress Cries 'Double-Crossed,'" *Pittsburgh Courier*, 19 May 1928, 13; for Greenlee and Drayton, see Stearns and Stearns, 291. Anderson's Dancing Academy at 116 West 53rd was near Marshall's Hotel at 127 & 129 West 53rd, where Williams and Walker, among others, strategized their next moves away from minstrel stereotypes; Richard Bruce Nugent, "Marshall's—A Portrait," *Phylon* 5.4 (1944): 316–18.

48. *Richmond Planet*, 19 March 1898, 2.

49. Quote from Tanner, "Emergence," 345; see also Peterson, *Profiles*, 8.

50. Compare Mitchell's journals in Carter, 49, with Lee, 127. Quote from Carter, 47.

51. Carter, 44–9, 56, 91–2; Paula Marie Seniors, "Ada Overton Walker, Abbie Mitchell, and the Gibson Girl: Reconstructing African American Womanhood," *International Journal of Africana Studies* 13.1 (2007): 38–67. Earliest photograph (1903) of Abbie Mitchell at *www.ipernity.com/doc/285591/39339566*, accessed 30 October 2017.

52. Although Sadie's birth year remains unknown, she married her vaudeville partner, Joe Britton, in 1894 and died in 1925; *New York Age*, 13 October 1910, 6, and 31 January 1925, 9. Photographs of Sadie Britton in Henry T. Sampson, *Blacks in Blackface*, 1st ed. (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1980), 64; Sampson, *Blacks in Blackface*, 2d ed., 1: 119.

53. *New York Clipper*, 20 and 27 August 1898.

54. *Indianapolis Freeman,* 10 September 1898; Lynn Abbott and Doug Seroff, *Ragged but Right* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2007), 52–3. A photograph of the 1899 Black Patti Company may include Ringgold and the Meredith sisters; Sampson, *Blacks in Blackface*, 2d ed., 1: 662.

55. Harriett Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin; or, Life among the Lowly* (Boston: John P. Jewett), 91. See J. Brown, chap. 1 ("'Little Black Me': The Touring Picanniny Choruses"); Robin Bernstein, *Racial Innocence: Performing American Childhood from Slavery to Civil Rights* (New York: New York University Press, 2011), 43–55.

56. John W. Frick, *"Uncle Tom's Cabin" on the American Stage and Screen* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 43, 110–11; Miss Hutchins in *New York Clipper*, 21 April 1877; Errol Hill, "The Hyers Sisters: Pioneers in Black Musical Comedy," in *The American Stage,* ed. Ron Engle and Tice L. Miller (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 115–30.

57. Andersons, *New York Clipper*, 20 October 1894; Mills, *New York Clipper*, 30 March and 13 April 1895.

58. *Indianapolis Freeman*, 22 April 1905.

59. *New York Clipper*, 5 March 1898. Little Dottie's last name and age are unknown.

60. Abbott and Seroff, *Out of Sight*, 403–9; Stearns and Stearns, 80–4.

61. *New York Clipper,* 17 February and 19 May 1894.

62. "The Pickaninny Dance, from the 'Passing Show' (1894)," *www.imdb.com/title/tt0285903/*, accessed 13 October 2017. Almost half of the one-minute film may be seen here: *www.youtube.com/watch?v=LDxgGk-iDyQ*, accessed 12 September 2018.

63. *New York Times*, 18 June 1894, 8. Daly herself could not appear at Tony Pastor's Theatre until she reached age sixteen; *New York Clipper*, 18 August 1894. Shauna Vey, "Good Intentions and Fearsome Prejudice: New York's 1876 Act to Prevent and Punish Wrongs to Children," *Theatre Survey* 42.1 (2001): 53–68.

64. Joe Laurie Jr., *Vaudeville: From the Honky-Tonks to the Palace* (New York: Henry Holt, 1953), 56, 203.

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65. Fletcher, 157; for more on "picks" and "coon shouters," see Trav S. D., *No Applause—Just Throw Money* (New York: Faber & Faber, 2005), 109–11.

66. Stearns and Stearns, 83.

67. *New York Clipper*, 14 August 1897, 27 November 1897, 26 March 1898; "Didn't Care for Stage So Colored Dancer Is Now Again in Southern Home," *Philadelphia Tribune*, 6 April 1912, 3.

68. "New York Sees the Youngest Cake Walkers," with illustrations of them and Gassman's story in *The World*, 27 February 1898, 10. Williams and Walker were featured on the sheet-music cover of "Enjoy Yourselves."

69. *New York Dramatic Mirror*, 5 March 1898. In 1902, Rudy and Fredy Walker took Paris by storm with the help of publicity photographs that promoted their cake walking fame across Europe. See their biographies in Rainer E. Lotz, "Rudy & Fredy Walker: Les Enfants Nègres in Europe," *Doctor Jazz Magazine* 44.192 (2006): 9–23.

70. "Eva Taylor Started Stage Career at Age of Two," *Afro-American*, 10 February 1934, 6.

71. *Los Angeles Times,* 7 May 1901, 1. Photograph in Fletcher, 158.

72. *Variety*, 25 February 1911; *New York Clipper*, 13 June and 5 December 1917.

73. *New York Clipper*, 12 and 26 February 1919, 12 March 1919.

74. *Chicago Defender*, 1 October 1921.

75. Bill Egan, *Florence Mills: Harlem Jazz Queen* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2004), 1–8, and her photograph at age five, n.p. (facing 168).

76. Sampson, *Ghost Walks*, 131; quoted in *New York Clipper*, 7 October 1911, 7.

77. Stearns and Stearns, 24, 81; Abbott and Seroff, *Ragged but Right*, 126.

78. *New York Clipper*, 15, 20, 27 August 1898, and 3, 10 September 1898.

79. *New York Clipper*, 3 September 1898, 1, and 7 October 1898; *Baltimore Daily Record*, 12 September 1898; *Washington Bee*, 17 September 1898.

80. *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 16, 24, 27 October 1898, and 13, 17 November 1898.

81. *Boston Sunday Globe*, 13 November 1898, 33; *Book Notes* 12 (January 1899): 58–9; *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 9 January 1899; quoted in *Topeka Plaindealer*, 10 February 1899.

82. Quoted in *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 16 July 1900, 7; *Chicago Broad Ax*, 21 July 1900, 3.

83. Quoted in *Philadelphia Inquirer*, 19 February 1901, 3; quoted review in *Boston Post*, 5 April 1901; *Boston Daily Globe*, 26 February 1901, 8. Interestingly, Davis sued Will Isham for owing her $250 and "a chattel mortgage [of her scenic properties] for $1,500"; *Indianapolis Freeman*, 20 April 1901, 5; *New York Clipper*, 27 April 1901, 185.

84. Lotz, "Belle Davis."

85. Bauman, 25, 61; on *Captain Rufus,* see Peterson, *Century*, 71–2.

86. Bricktop [Ada Smith] with James Haskins, *Bricktop: Prohibition Harlem, Cafe Society Paris, Movie-Mad Rome* (New York: Atheneum, 1983), 19–23, quote at 20.

87. Stearns and Stearns, 86–91, quote at 91; George-Graves, 25–6, 96–8.

88. Over this period, they broke away from white producers and achieved complete artistic control and long-running success by directing their subversive farces to black audiences.

89. Grace Halliday (1872–1906) married Frank Mallory, and Mazie Brooks (1873–1949) married Ed Mallory. See respective obituaries, *Indianapolis Freeman*, 10 November 1906, 5; *Kansas City* (Kansas) *Plaindealer*, 1 July 1949, 3; and Peterson, *Profiles*, 179. Obituary of Lottie Williams, *New York Age*, 23 March 1929, 1.

90. These two productions were likely inspired by Williams and Walker's experiences with Chicago's gambling saloons and policy shops in the mid-1890s, in Bauman, 5–6, 11–13. Respective notices of cast members and characters in *Cleveland Gazette*, 15 April 1899; *Colored American*, 6 May 1899; *New York Clipper*, 21 October 1899; *Indianapolis Freeman*, 10 February 1900, 5. Pearl and Carrie's sister, Lottie Meredith, in *Indianapolis Freeman*, 31 December 1898 and her 1901 marriage to Dr. Robert Cooper (d. 1932) in *Chicago Broad Ax*, 1 January 1921; *Chicago Defender*, 23 July 1932.

91. *Indianapolis Freeman*, 6 October 1900, 5. Cast and characters in *Syracuse Evening Herald*, 13 November 1900, 4.

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92. George W. Walker, "How the 'King of Dahomey' Met the King of England," *Kansas City* (Missouri) *Rising Son*, 10 July 1903, 1. David Krasner, *Resistance, Parody, and Double Consciousness in African American Theatre, 1895–1910* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997), 66–73, 99–115; Daphne A. Brooks, *Bodies in Dissent: Spectacular Performances of Race and Freedom, 1850–1910* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), chap. 4 ("Alien/Nation").

93. Quoted in *New York Times*, 4 February 1908, 7; Krasner, *Resistance*, 149–55. For further details on respective Williams and Walker productions, see Riis, and Peterson, *Century*.

94. Mattie Evans in *Indianapolis Freeman*, 29 October 1898, 5; Lavinia Jones in *Cleveland Gazette*, 11 April 1896; *Indianapolis Freeman*, 17 January 1901.

95. Katie Jones in *New York Age*, 24 March 1908 and *Pittsburgh Courier*, 2 January 1926, 10; Ward and Thomas in *New York Age*, 12 March 1908, 6. Obituary of Bessie Brady Thomas (b. 1882) in *New York Age*, 19 September 1912, 6.

96. For example, see Nettie Glenn in Sampson, *Blacks in Blackface*, 2d ed., 1:170–1, and obituary of Jennie Scheper-Haston in *New York Age*, 30 January 1937, 9; on *A Trip to Coontown*, see Peterson, *Century*, 359–61; Riis, 75–8.

97. "The Tragic Breaking of a Thespian Friendship," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, 27 October 1899, 2.

98. For example, Adah Fleming Banks (Mrs. Arthur H. Payne), a widow and former music teacher, in "Midnight's Musings," *Baltimore Afro-American Ledger*, 5 September 1908, 1, and *Chicago Defender*, 16 August 1924; Carrie Carter (Mrs. Louis H. Saulsbury), in *Topeka Plaindealer*, 26 May 1899, 2; Anna Cook (Mrs. Theodore Pankey), in *Pittsburgh Courier*, 10 September 1927; Maggie Davis (1879–1917) (Mrs. Jessie Shipp), in *Chicago Broad Ax*, 8 September 1917, 3; Mamie Emerson (ca. 1877–1916) (Mrs. Clarence Logan), in "New York City Marriage Records, 1829–1940," provided by Oberlin Heritage Center, 30 August 2017; Lavinia Gaston (1879–1940) (Mrs. Alex C. Rogers) and Ida Day, in *New York Age*, 23 November 1940, 1, and 30 November 1940, 8; Ada Guiguesse (Mrs. Sterling Rex), in *New York Age*, 11 October 1917; Lizzie Harding (Mrs. Dan Avery), in *Chicago Broad Ax*, 2 March 1912, 2; Alice Mackey (Mrs. Will Accooe), in *Indianapolis Freeman*, 24 December 1898, 6; Estelle Pugsley (Mrs. Charles Hart), in *New York Age*, 8 December 1917, 6; and Daisy Robinson (ca. 1882–1935) (Mrs. G. Henri Tapley), in *Indianapolis Freeman*, 11 September 1909, 6.

99. Le Roi Antoine, *Achievement: The Life of Laura Bowman* (New York: Pageant Press, 1961), 49, 78, 83–90, 96, 106–7.

100. *Indianapolis Freeman*, 12 May 1900, 5; *New York Age*, 4 March 1909, 6.

101. *Kaslo* (British Columbia) *Prospector*, 20 June and 25 July 1895; *Salt Lake City Broad Ax*, 22 June 1912; "H. Lawrence Freeman Recalls the Work of Miss Minnie Brown," *Afro-American*, 9 May 1935, 10; *Indianapolis Freeman*, 11 September 1909, 6. Photograph at *www.icp.org/browse/archive/objects/minnie-brown*, accessed 30 October 2017.

102. *New York Clipper*, 4 November 1899, 747; Sister M. Francesca Thompson, "The Lafayette Players: 1915–1932," in *The Theatre of Black Americans*, ed. Errol Hill (New York: Applause Theatre Book Publishers, 1987), 211–30.

103. *Indianapolis Freeman*, 24 December 1898, 1, with photograph; *New York Age*, 21 February 1921; "100 Years in Post-Production: Resurrecting a Lost Landmark of Black Film History," with photograph, *www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/1478?locale=en*, accessed 3 March 2018.

104. Melissa Fuell-Guther, *Blind Boone: His Early Life and His Achievements* (Robbins, TN: Evangel Publishing Society, 1918), 103–4; *Kansas City* (Missouri) *Rising Son*, 4 September 1903, 12 August 1904.

105. *Indianapolis Freeman*, 10 December 1910, 5; Sampson, *Blacks in Blackface*, 2d ed., 1:239, 262–3.

106. Story and photograph in *Chicago Defender*, 3 October 1942, 9. In 1916, two years after Mrs. Walker's death, Anthony Overton manufactured Aida Hair Pomade in honor of his step-cousin and advertised it in his *Half-Century Magazine*.

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107. For examples, see Nettie Glenn and Anna Cook Pankey in *Indianapolis Freeman*, 30 March 1907, 8; Jessie Ellis, possibly in her *Bandanna Land* costume, in *New York Age*, 23 April 1908, 6; Ada Guiguesse in *New York Age*, 5 June 1913, 6; and Pauline Freeman in *Pittsburgh Courier,* 20 August 1932, 1.

108. *In Dahomey* photo at *www.flickr.com/photos/147039490@N04/31612539440*, accessed 30 October 2017; and *Abyssinia* photos in *Indianapolis Freeman*, 6 October 1906, 7. See also the last company *Bandanna Land* photograph of unidentified members in Fletcher, 234.

109. *New York Tribune*, 18 February 1906, 7. Hattie Hopkins in *New York Age*, 26 January 1929, 10.

110. Quoted in *Indianapolis Freeman*, 20 October 1906. Women's names and hometowns in *Indianapolis Freeman*, 7 October 1905.

111. Dorothy, "The Abyssinia Maids," *Indianapolis Freeman*, 20 October 1906, 5.

112. Aida Overton Walker, "Afro-American Men and Women on the Stage," *Chicago Broad Ax*, 14 October 1905, 1–2.

113. Programs and reviews in *New York Age*, 28 May 1908, and 11 June 1908, 6; 22 April 1909, 3, and 6 May 1909, 6

114. Photograph of Ada Vaughn in *New York Age*, 2 April 1908, 6.

115. Gee relates her girlhood in *Boston Sunday Post*, 10 September 1922, 37.

116. Photographs in *Cleveland Gazette*, 16 August 1913, 1.

117. Tanner, *Dusky Maidens*, 45–6, 75–7.

118. Review in *New York Age*, 16 September 1909, 4 November 1909, 6. New York cast and characters in *New York Clipper*, 13 November 1909.

119. After Florence Mills took over Gertrude Saunders's role, Edith Spencer and Eva Taylor each replaced her during the show's run.

120. Stearns and Stearns, 125–31; David Krasner, *A Beautiful Pageant: African American Theatre, Drama, and Performance in the Harlem Renaissance, 1910–1927* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 239–67.

121. For example, see Ruth Nicole Brown, *Hear Our Truths: The Creative Potential of Black Girlhood* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2013); and Rosemarie A. Roberts, "Dancing with Social Ghosts: Performing Embodiments, Analyzing Critically," *Transforming Anthropology* 21.1 (2013): 4–14.

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