Bulldaggers, Pansies, and Chocolate Babies

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“Hottentot Potentates”: The Potent and Hot Performances of Florence Mills and Ethel Waters

All the crown heads of Europe have trouble with their throne;
But I got a kingdom in the hollow of my hand:
I’m the Empress Jones;
Hail from Harlem!
Settled here, knocked this Congo on its ear,
I came, I saw, and I conquered a nation with my trickeration.

I brought my bottle of Chanel with me,
I took along a script of Lulu Belle with me;
I win ’em all, but, oh, it raises hell with me,
The Hottentot Potentate.*

“YOU CAN’T DO WHAT THE LAST MAN DID”

Throughout the 1920s, Lulu Belle proved to be a remarkably durable and malleable persona. The darling of the gay subculture, which embraced her outrageousness and rebelliousness, she was also associated with the most prominent African American performers of the era. Almost immediately after Lulu Belle opened on Broadway, rumors began to circulate that the fictional title character was based on one of the most popular black entertainers of the time, Florence Mills. On February 19, 1926, the New York Times printed an advertisement with the provocative heading: “Was ‘Lulu Belle’ Written from the Life of Florence Mills?” Capitalizing on the success of the show and encouraging people to see the reputed real-life counterpart, the advertisement says, “That is a question theatre-goers are asking each other in New York to-day. This powerful Belasco
triumph has caused more talk than fifty average shows put together.”¹ The ad provides information about how one can see Florence Mills’s show at the Plantation, a postshow nightclub on Broadway and Fiftieth Street. Mills, who had been considered for the title role in Lulu Belle, promptly refuted the allegation. In an interview with the New York Graphic, she said:

> Though I have not seen ““Lulu Belle” yet, I have read the script of the play. It is not founded on the story of my life. That has nothing to do with my refusal of the part now played so splendidly by Lenore Ulric. What would my people think if I took the lead in a production which paints the negro race in such a light?²

Even with nothing to support it, the rumor persisted, and “Lulu Belle” became shorthand for any suddenly successful black woman like Florence Mills.³

In 1927, Ethel Waters, a fast-rising star on Broadway, resuscitated the character and fanned the gossip flame that another hugely successful black woman, Josephine Baker, was a real-life Lulu Belle. Waters’s musical revue Africana included a comedy sketch called “Harlem Transplanted to Paris,” in which she satirized Baker’s sensational stardom in Europe. Baker had made a splash on Broadway in Shuffle Along (1921) and Chocolate Dandies (1924) and then moved to Paris, where she became a sensation in La Revue Negre at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées two years before Waters’s send-up. Adding an ironic edge to the sketch, Waters performed the role as it might have been performed by Lenore Ulric in Lulu Belle. In a complicated intermingling of cultural references, Waters appeared in the scene wearing diamonds and furs, the accoutrements of fame and fortune for Baker and Lulu Belle. Women in the chorus (dubbed “banana maidens” in the program) garbed in banana headdresses and garishly exotic costumes, trademarks of Baker’s own act, surrounded Ethel Waters on stage. In the scene, Waters wooed a dignified count, played by Louis Douglas, an act that parodied the fictional Lulu Belle’s marriage to a count and real-life Baker’s marriage to a fictional count. The centerpiece of the sketch was Waters’s performance of the song “You Can’t Do What the Last Man Did.” As Waters explains in His Eye Is on the Sparrow, she parodied Lenore Ulric, who “played a Negro trollop who works her way up to a count and a boudoir in Paris by her diligent whoring.”⁴ Adding yet another layer of irony, the sketch alluded to Ulric’s crossed-race performance of working-class blackness (and Baker’s performance of aristocratic whiteness?). According to the critic of the New York World Telegram, the biggest laugh in the entire show came during the scene “when one of the comics asked Miss Waters if she were trying to ‘pass.’”⁵
Lulu Belle’s crossover act, this time to the black musical revue, reflects the continual circulation and cross-pollination of socially and artistically constructed images of blackness. In fact, the black musical revue with its loose structure, cartoonish settings, and anything-goes spirit was the perfect site for Lulu Belle’s drag. The revues of the 1920s offered an assorted concoction of music, dance, comedy, and sentimentality, and were variously set among palm trees, watermelon moons, and high-class mansions. A costume list for a typical show would further demonstrate the theatrical contradictions. The leading lady, for instance, might be called upon to wear a stylized bandanna and apron in one scene, a jungle-like grass skirt and fright wig in the next, and a man’s black tuxedo in another. The continuously shifting parade of racial and sexual identities might rival any at a Rockland Ball.

There has not been a great deal written about black musical revues, except in the ways in which the success of *Shuffle Along* (1921) helped create a new theatrical genre, and, as Langston Hughes famously wrote, “gave a scintillating send-off to that Negro vogue in Manhattan.” While the revue was one of the few theatrical arenas where an African American performer might find a modicum of success in the white-dominated popular theater of the 1920s, the shows recycled blackface comedy and structural elements left over from minstrelsy. The form upheld stereotypical notions about black womanhood as well. In such musical revues as *Put and Take* (1921), *Strut Miss Lizzie* (1922), *Blackbirds of 1928* (1928), and *Hot Chocolates* (1929), black women were generally represented as either exotic, primitive African natives; smiling, subservient “mammies”; or as sexually voracious, social-climbing “Lulu Belles.” As David Krasner writes, “Black musicals could be both a blessing and a curse. They broke barriers and yet perpetuated stereotypes.” Nevertheless, the careers of some of the most illustrious black women performers of the early twentieth century, including Florence Mills, Ethel Waters, Josephine Baker, and Adelaide Hall, all developed from their appearances in musical revues.

A defining feature of the shows is their “blackness.” They were, after all, the theatrical cousin to the “white” revues of the era, including Ziegfeld’s *Follies*, George White’s *Scandals*, and the Shuberts’ *Artists and Models* series. Critics often compared the black revues to these shows, remarking, for instance, that by 1930 Lew Leslie’s *Blackbirds* series relied too much on “the white man’s formula for stage diversion.” Yet in 1930, black actors were still “blacking-up,” or putting on the minstrel mask, which according to Nathan Irvin Huggins allowed them “to move in and out of the white world with safety and profit.” The minstrel
mask, Huggins claimed, made African Americans far less intimidating for many white Americans.

This is no doubt true, but it ignores the fact that many of the revues, or similarly designed vaudeville shows, were not written and performed exclusively for white audiences. Black musical revues, which contained blackface comics like Apus Brooks, Izzy Rhinegold, and Sandy Burns, also performed for primarily black audiences in Harlem. These shows played such theaters as the Lafayette, Alhambra, and Lincoln, where they might precede a movie. They were also performed across the country in theaters and tents that catered to working-class African American audiences. Sometimes these shows (or revised versions of them) played Broadway, but more often than not, they played limited engagements in vaudeville houses on the TOBA (Theater Owners' Booking Association) circuit.10 Black audiences apparently adored the familiar chicken-stealing sketches, minimally dressed jungle maidens, and slow-witted, malaprop-spouting comedians. Black critic Theophilus Lewis pointed to the stereotypical content in the shows and argued that black audiences were complicit in their perpetuation. According to Lewis, African American performers did not have to perform derogatory images of blackness within these venues. In an essay for The Messenger in June 1927, he wrote:

If we do not like the social ugliness we see on the stage, the remedy is not to close the theatre or bawl the actors out, but to change our way of living. When people pack a theatre every night, it is a sign that they like the social behavior they see reflected there. When they cease to like it they will stay away from the theatre and the producer will alter his entertainment to suit the changed taste of the public.11

Black vaudevillian and playwright Salem Tutt Whitney weighed in on the argument, saying that in the precarious world of show business, producers and actors “must give the public what it wants” if they intend to make a living.12 It seems clear from Lewis’s statements and the unremitting lineup of black musical revues in the 1920s that the representations of blackness were just as popular and ingrained with African American audiences as they were with white.

Two of the most famous black women entertainers of the Harlem Renaissance, Florence Mills and Ethel Waters, gained fame and fortune as a result of their work in black revues of the 1920s. While the black revue in musical theater and African American history tends to be footnoted as a series of Shuffle Along
rip-offs or else apologetically described as a hybrid minstrel / Ziegfeld Follies show, it deserves greater attention. This is especially true in the case of the shows starring Mills and Waters, who were acclaimed by both black and white audiences, and, in very different ways, exposed the contradictory yet intertwined elements of blackness and whiteness that the revues encompassed. Responses to Mills’s performance in Dixie to Broadway (1924) and Waters’s in Africana (1927), Blackbirds of 1930 (1930), and At Home Abroad (1935), their most significant Broadway appearances in musical revues, indicate that these performers negotiated the racial and sexual stereotypes while gesturing toward a truly pluralist art form. Their performances, perhaps more so than those of other musical stars of the era, helped resolve the tension between pleasure and disdain evoked by the black musical revue, a genre that both affirmed and unhinged racial and sexual stereotypes. In performances that call to mind Lenore Ulric’s in Lulu Belle, Mills and Waters allude to the masquerade of race, class, and gender, which they often applied on stage.

“PUT YOUR OLD BANDANNA ON”

One of the most successful revues of the period, Dixie to Broadway, is perhaps best remembered as the show that catapulted Florence Mills, already famous in Europe, to stardom in the United States. The show was particularly notable because for the first time, a black revue was constructed to showcase the talents of a woman and not designed around two blackface male comedians. Even more impressively, it played the Broadhurst Theatre, a respectable, choice house in the “very heart of Broadway,” rather than “on the fringe of the theatrical district” as all-black shows tended to play (Shuffle Along, for instance, played at Daly’s on Sixty-third Street). Dixie to Broadway was quite successful, garnering generally excellent reviews and running seventy-seven performances on Broadway, which makes it also noteworthy as the first black revue to “pay back its cost.” In addition to the accolades awarded Florence Mills, the show established white producer-director Lew Leslie as a major presence on Broadway, one who “capitalized on the growing interest of New York’s elite in the culture and history of black Manhattan.”

Dixie to Broadway began as an entertainment that catered to a white, middle-class audience and for the most part remained so (except a two-week stint at the Lafayette). Its first appearance was in a New York nightclub setting, then on a European tour, and finally on Broadway, opening October 29, 1924. Reviewers praised Florence Mills wherever she played, and Leslie sought to use her
European popularity when he brought the revue back to the States. Although its run of seventy-seven performances is quite short by today’s standards, the show was an unqualified success. The unanimously favorable notices accorded Florence Mills, billed “The Sensation of Two Continents” in program listings and newspaper advertisements, are responsible for the profit the revue turned. The show was Mills’s third Broadway appearance, and regrettably, it was also her last.

Florence Mills was born in Washington, DC, in 1896, and by the age of three, she was already making a name for herself in show business. As “Baby Florence Mills,” she entertained Washington diplomats in their drawing rooms, performing an adroit cakewalk and singing such songs as “Don’t Cry, My Little Pickaninny.” At eight, she made her professional stage debut in a road-show version of the Bert Williams and George Walker musical Sons of Ham, in which she received a rave notice from the Washington Star that noted, “As an extra attraction is Baby Florence Mills singing ‘Hannah from Savannah.’ Baby Florence made a big hit and was encored for dancing.”

After touring with this show briefly, Mills and her two sisters, Olivia and Maude, put together a vaudeville act, and the Mills Sisters or the Mills Trio, as they were variously known, traversed the country. She joined legendary cabaret owner Ada “Bricktop” Smith and dancer Cora Green in 1914, and they billed themselves as the Panama Trio after the Chicago club in which they performed.

In 1916, she joined the Tennessee Ten, which was then playing the influential Keith vaudeville circuit. While appearing with this act, she met dancer U.S. “Slow Kid” Thompson, whom she later married, and as Theophilus Lewis wrote, “They were considered one of the most happily married couples in the profession.”

Her big break, though, came in 1921 when she replaced Gertrude Saunders in Shuffle Along. Almost immediately, Mills captured the attention of director-producer Lew Leslie, who cast her in his Plantation Revue at his newly opened Plantation Club. A very young Paul Robeson was part of this show and wrote, “How thrilling it was to listen to Florence Mills sing nightly—‘Down Among the Sleepy Hills of Tennessee.’” In addition to her acclaim on Broadway and in London, Mills also has the distinction of being the first African American to “headline” at New York’s Palace Theatre, the most prestigious vaudeville venue of its day. A year later in 1926, she made a rather surprising debut at the Aeolian Hall in New York, which was primarily known for its programs featuring operatic and classical selections, and occasionally traditional black spirituals sung by individuals like Robeson and Roland Hayes.

Mills’s magnificent career came to an untimely end, though. While ready-
ing Lew Leslie’s *Blackbirds of 1928* for Broadway, she was struck with acute appendicitis, and she died on November 1, 1927. She was thirty-one. As James Weldon Johnson wrote, “It is not an exaggeration to say that her death shocked the theatrical world.” Twenty-one thousand mourners packed the Mother Zion Church in Harlem for her funeral—the church could comfortably fit only about two thousand—and over 150,000 people lined Lenox and Seventh Avenues to pay respects as the procession took her body to Woodlawn Cemetery. The newspapers reported that Harlem had never seen such a public outpouring of grief as it had during this funeral, and all were amazed at the spectacle of the occasion. Thirty women from the various choruses of Mills’s shows served as flower girls leading the coffin out of the church, and eight notable female stars from the black theater, including Ethel Waters, Gertrude Saunders, and Cora Green, were honorary pallbearers. Celebrities and family members eulogized her, read poems, and sang hymns to her memory. And presumably because of the overcrowded conditions combined with the heightened emotion, about fifty people fainted in grief. The papers also reported that a cornet player in the band “collapsed from heart disease on Seventh Avenue and died before an ambulance surgeon arrived.” But by all accounts, the coup de grâce occurred when lyricist Andy Razaf dedicated his song, written with J. C. Johnson, “All the World Is Lonely (for Our Little Blackbird)” to her, and a thousand blackbirds were released from a plane overhead. It was a breathtaking and stunning tribute to a young woman who had been hailed “the pride of the race.”

The last flourish was a reference to Mills’s trademark song, “I’m a Little Blackbird Looking for a Bluebird,” which she sang to great enthusiasm in *Dixie to Broadway*. Although she had appeared on Broadway before, this was the show that sealed Mills’s success in show business and confirmed her as a source of pride for African Americans. As James Weldon Johnson wrote about her, “She had made a name in *Shuffle Along*, but in *Dixie to Broadway* she was recognized for her full worth.” In fact, with the opening of *Dixie to Broadway*, Florence Mills emerged as both an extraordinary entertainer and as a national spokesperson for her race. For her performance, she was hailed as a unique and forceful new talent on Broadway, and her sudden fame allowed her the opportunity to publicly speak out against racial prejudice. And although Mills portrayed well-worn representations of black women in the show, donning both the jungle and plantation costumes, she also assumed the images of bourgeoisie romanticism and aristocratic refinement. Taken as a whole, her performance represents the modernist tension between savagery and civilization, and it also demonstrates the manner in which Mills playfully, with the collaboration of the
show’s white creators, demolished the stereotypical associations with black womanhood.

A script for the revue is not available, but it is possible to glean the overall effect of the show on the basis of the reviews and program listings of the New York production. In his biography of Florence Mills, Bill Egan is especially thorough in his description and reconstruction of the show, act by act and song by song. The act and song titles are in fact indicative of the milieu the show evoked. The production’s prologue, “Evolution of the Colored Race,” was intended to introduce a motif for the entire show, and it shoehorned in references to Salome, Madame Butterfly, and Abraham Lincoln. After the first few numbers, including “Put Your Old Bandanna On” and “Dixie Dreams,” the show dropped this framing device. Familiar features of the black musical revue followed, such as a haunted house sketch, “Treasure Castle,” which played upon the notion of superstitious, easily spooked black people. There were several big, energetic dance numbers, such as “Jazz Time Came from the South” and “Darkest Russia.” And the show included a customary “Oriental” skit, called “The Sailor and the Chink,” performed by Henry Winfred and Billy C. Brown, or as one critic described the team, “the former being vaudeville’s best known Chinese portrayer and the latter a ‘cork’ artist [i.e., a performer in blackface] of class and a vocalist of ability.”

The New York critics tended to focus on particular numbers more than others. Several reviews single out dancer Johnny Nit, whose first significant appearance in the show was as part of a trio of dancers chained together by the ankles in “Prisoners Up-to-Date.” Alexander Woollcott of the New York Sun referred to this former vaudevillian as the “dark Mr. Nit with the toothful smile,” and claims that “the lisp of his feet on the floor is rhythm’s self, and it was out of the efforts of the honky-tonk pianists to bend their measures to the likes of him that the thing called ragtime was born.” The critics praised other dancers as well, including Willie Covan and Mills’s husband U. S. Thompson, for their remarkable energy. Gilbert Gabriel of the Telegram and Evening Mail wrote that Covan and Thompson “shuffle up to a hysteria of motion, bouncing and cavorting on every inch of their bodies that will afford a landing place.” Another highpoint was the homage to and imitation of such performers as George M. Cohan (“Georgia Cohans”), Eva Tanguay, and Walker and Williams in the “If My Dreams Came True” segment.

But the focus of attention was clearly on twenty-eight-year-old Florence Mills, who had six numbers in the show. From her first appearance in the show to her last, audiences responded rapturously to this unlikely new star. Often de-
scribing her as “birdlike,” “beautiful,” and “grotesque,” the critics went to some pains to explain Mills’s mysterious but undeniable appeal and unique talents. Mills’s unexplainable charm produced by these contradictory qualities is perhaps best exemplified by Heywood Broun’s description in the *New York World*:

Curiously enough there are not particularly good voices in *Dixie to Broadway* but there is a striking one. The method of Florence Mills is like that of no one else. She does not precisely sing but she makes strange high noises which seem to fit somehow with a rapidfire sort of sculpture. Sometimes the intent is the creation of the grotesque and then it fades into lines of amazing beauty. Now I have seen grace.\(^{30}\)

Others described her as a “nimble microbe,” “intensely lively, and agile, and industrious,” “strung on fine and tremulous wires,” and “a flashing and beautiful woman who lights up like a Christmas tree when she dances and is quite as festive.”\(^{31}\)

In general, the critics applauded numbers set in plantations or among glittery jungle backdrops, and they singled out such scenes for their “authenticity” and warm nostalgia. For example, in two of the most successful numbers in *Dixie to Broadway*, Mills and her chorus-girl ensemble, the “Plantation Chocolate Drops,” paid tribute to a romanticized pre–Civil War South. At these moments, Mills and her ensemble energetically re-created the representations of singing and dancing “darkies” for the amusement of the Broadway audiences.

It is important to remember that the majority of the audiences at *Dixie to Broadway* tended to be white and middle class. Although the Broadway theaters were no longer formally segregated at this time, few blacks attended the productions. Of course, there would be a greater number at the black revues than there would be at standard white fare, but the percentage was still rather small. In a 1928 article written for *The Messenger*, a monthly black periodical, Randolph Edmonds described the usual composition of a Broadway show audience: “There is very little, if any prejudice on Broadway now. But if the managers suddenly decide to put us in the gallery, there will be too few of us to make any difference, for we pay very little of the thousands of dollars necessary to run them for a year.”\(^{32}\) In addition, the white audiences who frequented the Broadway shows were often the same audiences who traveled uptown to sample the talent in the Harlem clubs.\(^{33}\) So even though this was the first musical on Broadway that Florence Mills headlined, many in the audience were familiar with her work from other venues.
Androgynously dressed, wearing stylized tramp’s clothing, including loose-fitting, brightly striped short pants, a baggy white shirt, a beggar’s hat, and totting an over-the-shoulder hobo’s kit bag (i.e., a handkerchief-bundle tied to a stick), Mills made her first appearance singing “Dixie Dreams.” The bittersweet song evokes the tradition of Stephen Foster, recalling such standards as “Old Folks at Home” and “My Old Kentucky Home.” Similar in tone and style to those songs, “Dixie Dreams” begins with the lyric, “Dear Old Dixieland, how I long for your sunshine, / Gee, I’m sorry I ever started to roam,” and it includes references to “sunny southern bowers,” “fields of white” (i.e., cotton), and nostalgic recollections of “mammy’s songs and stories.”

Set on a plantation with the ensemble wearing straw hats, the number reflects the show’s unabashed lineage to minstrelsy. In fact, “Plantation Melodies,” as Eric Lott describes the songs of this genre, were integral to minstrel shows of the nineteenth century. In these numbers, blackface entertainers pined for the carefree, rustic, and far less complicated life of slavery. The South was posited as wholesome and familial, and the North, where the narrators in these songs had regretfully arrived, was corrupt and lonely. Lott claims that these numbers often elicited a sentimental yearning to return to the South or to slavery. Blackface performers generally had great success touching a collective emotional nerve in their urban audiences by lamenting the missed pleasures of “de ol’ plantation.” According to Lott, the songs metaphorically played upon the desire to return to an insouciant childhood, as well as helped mollify white guilt over the treatment of black people.

In the “Dixie Dreams” number, Mills recapitulated, or—to employ Gates’s terminology—“signified on,” the simple, sentimental minstrel caricature. As a woman taking on the formerly male persona, she also demonstrated the remarkable malleability and fluidity of the minstrel mask. Invented by white male performers in blackface, adopted and perfected by African American male performers in blackface, including Williams and Walker who billed themselves as “two real coons,” the minstrel mask took on a new veneer with Mills’s rendition. As one critic remarked, her performance evoked the sentimental and comical persona that Bert Williams evinced on stage. He wrote, “She is the lithe embodiment of the song and sorrow, the poetry and the pathos, and the rich comedy of her race.” To other critics, Mills’s next number in Dixie to Broadway produced a similar transitory experience.

In a bizarre merging of representations of the African savage and the antebellum “mammy,” Mills and the Plantation Chocolate Drops performed an exuberant dance number called “Jungle Nights in Dixieland.” The dancers wore
colorful grass skirts and large white wigs, and they shuffled, shimmied, and shook accordingly. Beneath the grotesquerie of the costumes and dancing, though, several critics pointed to the glimpses of a presumed black authenticity that the number offered. To them, “Jungle Nights in Dixieland” provided a transparent view of the supposedly “real” cultural distinctions between the races. That is, although Florence Mills was born in Washington, DC, thirty years after slavery was abolished, and although, as she stated, she had “never visited a jungle,” she could effectively tap into a seemingly collective black consciousness. And according to one critic at least, Florence Mills embodied the entire history of her race within “Jungle Nights in Dixieland.” He wrote: “[Mills] can shift from the frenzied war whoops that takes one back to the days of her ancestors on the Congo to the soft easy dribbles of hummed speech that were intoned on the plantations back in those dear old southern times before the war.”

Responses from the black community to the production reflect the widely divergent opinions on the depictions of the primitive and the folk in African American arts. Many of the young Harlem Renaissance writers presented these elements in their own work, offering them as a defining feature of black artistic expression. Granted, for many artists this was a way to appeal to white patronage, but it also represented an aesthetic to which they could lay claim. Langston Hughes, for instance, encouraged other writers to listen to “the tom-tom cries and tom-tom laughs” and to celebrate the dialect poetry and folk tales of Paul Laurence Dunbar and Charles Chesnutt. In “How It Feels to Be Colored Me,” Zora Neale Hurston writes about the African savage that arises within her when she hears a jazz orchestra begin to play. In a description that does not sound too far removed from the over-the-top performance of “Jungle Nights in Dixieland,” she writes:

I dance wildly inside myself; I yell within, I whoop; I shake my assegai above my head, I hurl it true to the mark yeeseooww! I am in the jungle and living in the jungle way. My face is painted red and yellow and my body is painted blue. My pulse is throbbing like a war drum. I want to slaughter something—give pain, give death to what, I do not know.

For many of the black writers, primitivism was regarded as an affirmative element, reflecting an idea that African Americans were closer to “nature” and as a result were more instinctual, unconstrained, and more elementally alive than whites who were trapped in industrialization and modern life.
This helps explain why Variety’s George Bell, who was invited as a “Negro first nighter” to review the show, called it a “credit to the colored race, rather than a ridicule.” Tony Langston, drama critic of the African American paper the Chicago Defender, had only raves for the show, referring to it as “The great review [sic] is one of the best shows of its kind ever seen in a Loop theater. It surpasses everything of the type shown in Chicago in the past several years.” And the Amsterdam News remarked on Mills’s ability to transport her audience to a peaceful southern setting in the “Dixie Dreams” number: “Her singing, coupled with the music of Bill Vodery’s Plantation Orchestra, unfurls to your gaze filled with wonder Aurora Borealis rising over yon distant green hill in old Virginny and the sweet nectar of roses wafted to you on zephyric breeze, and you are only released from your hypnotic state at the volume of applause which crashes about you as Florence leaves the scene, though forced to come back again and again.”

Other African American critics were less than complimentary of the tone of the show (although they praised the performance of Florence Mills). The attitude mirrored the other side of the artistic debate in which individuals like W. E. B. Du Bois vehemently opposed the perpetuation of racial stereotypes. Du Bois argued that such shows confirmed derogatory black representations for white audiences and increased attitudes of black inferiority. He argued that the ridicule of blacks was evident in the musicals by the “loud ejaculations and guffaws of laughter [that] broke out in the wrong places.” Similarly, critics in the Messenger and Opportunity reflected this standpoint. Never a big fan of Lew Leslie’s shows or black musical revues in general, Theophilus Lewis of the Messenger stated, “Mr. Leslie impudently thrusts his show forward as an apologist for the Negro race.” Roger Didier of Opportunity was also offended by the stereotypical nature of the production, which to him was evident even in the scenery:

There is not only a repetition of the threadbare stereotypes of defunct minstrelsy but something which comes dangerously near to obscenity. The drop used throughout the show, gaudy and indecorous, pictures on one side a “comic strip” Negro stealing a chicken and on the other similar Negroes playing at dice. The overused razor crops up as the show goes on.

While the diverse reactions to the Dixie to Broadway reflect the conflicting attitudes toward representations of African Americans in the arts, the responses to the show and Mills’s defense of it hinted at yet another prevalent view of artistic expression, cultural pluralism.
In his advancement of cultural pluralism, Alain Locke emphasized the importance of “race cooperation” and “constructive participation” in order for the New Negro to ultimately “celebrate his full initiation into American democracy.” In his essays “The Concept of Race as Applied to Culture” (1924) and “The New Negro,” Locke does not minimize the importance of racial self-determination and individuality, as they were crucial elements in the development of “race consciousness.” The resultant artistic output is the by-product of this collective group expression, which distinguishes one cultural group from one another. To Locke, a culture is defined by its artistic creations, including literature, art, and theater. Yet although he wrote about the particular “traditions” and “values” of a particular race that are necessary components of a culture’s artwork, Locke did not see them as stable entities. To Locke, race and culture are not fixed entities that separate one group from another. They evolve as a result of migration, historical circumstances, and contact with other groups. Therefore, it is imperative in Locke’s philosophy that races not only respect and “study” the cultural output of other racial groups, but that they also share their own artworks with other groups. To Locke, an enlightened civilization depends upon the exchange and distribution of these cultural products, which he saw as a fundamental duty of the New Negro in the advancement of a truly integrated American society. He writes, “To all of this the New Negro is keenly responsive as an augury of a new democracy in American culture. He is contributing his share to the new social understanding.” In order to demonstrate “race loyalty,” artists need to put the needs of their culture over their own efforts at personal success and advancement. Locke believed that such cultural connections were already being wrought through the work of the artists in Harlem.

Whether or not Florence Mills had read Locke’s work and consciously set out to embody his philosophy of cultural pluralism in the musical revue is not certain. It is certain, however, that she saw herself as a spokesperson for the race, and she forwarded many of the ideals of the New Negro in interviews. In a statement during her pre-Broadway engagement of Dixie that appeared in the black newspaper Chicago Defender, Mills explained why she did not accept an offer from Florenz Ziegfeld to appear in an edition of his hugely successful Follies series. Although the Follies were almost exclusively white except for an occasional featured black artist, the opportunity would allow her to follow in the tradition of Bert Williams, the first black performer in the Follies. It would surely bring her to an altogether new height of stardom in the white theater. She explained:
I felt . . . that since Williams established the Colored performer in association with a well-known revue, that I could best serve the Colored actor by accepting Mr. Leslie’s offer, since he had promised to make this revue as sumptuous and gorgeous in production and costume as Ziegfeld’s Follies, White’s Scandals or the Greenwich Village Follies, at the same time using an all-Colored cast. I felt that if this revue turned out successfully a permanent institution would have been created for the Colored artists and an opportunity created for the glorification of the American High-Brown. My wish and Mr. Leslie’s promise have been fulfilled in *Dixie to Broadway.*

Adopting Locke’s view of racial loyalty, Mills saw the black musical revue, particularly *Dixie to Broadway,* as an effort to strengthen black culture rather than as a means of purely personal gain. For Florence Mills, the black musical revue represented a form of social uplift that epitomized the ideals of the New Negro and gave African Americans an international presence. On her death, the *Amsterdam News* alluded to this fact when the editorial page stated, “It is not too much to say that her popularity in Paris helped to soften anti-American feeling in France.”

Paradoxically, the show that Mills regarded as an emblem of cultural empowerment was not written by African Americans. *Dixie to Broadway,* like many of the black revues of the 1920s, was written and produced by a contingent of white men. While the black comics would have written their own material for the show, and the dance teams would have done their own choreography, the white composers and authors would have written the connective material and Mills’s sketches. In fact, the juxtaposition was somewhat jarring for some of the critics, who faulted the show for its overpowering “whiteness.” When the material pulled away from plantation settings, jungle costumes, and tap-dancing chain gangs, and the cast performed in elegant evening wear and in front of an oversized, white grand piano, critics accused the show and the performers as trying to “pass” for white. The most noteworthy example is during the “Mandy Make Up Your Mind” number. The segment appeared near the end of the first act of the show, and it strongly recalls the spectacular wedding finales of the *Ziegfeld Follies.* Lew Leslie and Florence Mills, however, put their own spin on it. In this version, Mills, who was known for cross-dressed roles (for instance as Sammy, the Dixie waif, she performed in the “Dixie Dreams” number), played the groom and was surrounded by a full, formally dressed wedding party as she sang to the reluctant bride:
Marchin’ down the aisle,
Your style will make ’em all stare.
With a little black-eyed Susan
Stuck in your hair.
Gee, but your candy, Mandy
Won’t you decide?\(^{54}\)

Not only does the act conjure images of the “white” wedding Ziegfeld motif, but the dignified costumes contrast sharply with the bandannas, convict outfits, and grass skirts worn by the cast earlier in the show. A complete role reversal had been accomplished by the conclusion of this act. In “Jungle Nights in Dixieland,” Mills performed the picture of a displaced jubilant African woman celebrating the joys of plantation life; in “Mandy,” she depicted the image of a sedate, sophisticated, and domineering white, upper middle-class American man.

The transition from the frenetic jungle savage to the boyish plantation wanderer to the aristocratic gentleman reveals a form of cultural evolution from primitivism to modernism. The shifting images also imply that the representation of the jungle dancer is as much an act as the aristocratic white man. For some critics this merging of cultural images was particularly off-putting. George Jean Nathan referred to it as “a music show miscegenation.”\(^{55}\) The critic from the American was similarly distressed by the cultural hybridity of the show:

In these colored entertainments there is a growing tendency to obliterate race peculiarities as much as possible and to “make-up” white. I think that a pity. After all, we go to these entertainments for the sake of differences—just as we travel to find something alien to our own customs. But of course there are still qualities that cannot be deleted, and on these we can bank.\(^{56}\)

Florence Mills herself alluded to the cross-pollination of cultural images when she explained in the Defender interview that she and Lew Leslie were attempting to create a new entertainment institution that combined black vaudeville (read “low-brow”) with the white Follies (read “high-brow”) to form a middle-class, “American High-Brown” revue. The form of entertainment Mills prescribed was much more refined and bourgeois than what one might see in Harlem nightclubs and vaudeville. Her performances at the Palace Theatre on Broadway and at the Aeolian Hall affirm her desire to reach a middle- and up-
Fig. 7. Florence Mills as the groom and Alma Smith as the bride in “Mandy, Make Up Your Mind” from Dixie to Broadway (1924). © White Studio. (Billy Rose Theatre Division, The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations.)
per-class audience. The method in which she and Leslie pursued their American High-Brown revue appears as if it were explicitly modeled on Lockean philosophy of cultural pluralism.

Florence Mills’s big number in the show, and the song for which she would be forever identified, “I’m a Little Blackbird Looking for a Bluebird,” is in the tradition of Bert Williams’s portrayal of the melancholic, every(black)man. His songs, both as written and in his languid, despondent delivery in his resonant bass voice, summoned the sadness and weariness of living a lonely existence within circumstances he is powerless to change. Williams’s most famous songs, “Nobody” and “Jonah Man,” articulate the pain and dejection of being black and vulnerable in a white man’s world. Mills’s version of “Blackbird” created a similar effect through the lyric:

Never had no happiness
Never felt no one’s caress
Just a lonesome bit of humanity
Born on a Friday, I guess
Blue as anyone can be
Clouds are all I ever see
If the sun forgets no one,
Why don’t it shine for me?

The song’s lyric is relentlessly sentimental, and the rhymes are undeniably simplistic. The melody, which was suited to Mills’s “birdlike” voice, contributes to the song’s perceived syrupy melancholy. The grammatically incorrect lines make it even more jarring on the ear. There are, however, specific references to race in the song, such as “Tho’ I’m of a darker hue, I’ve a heart the same as you,” and the lyric takes on greater social significance and increased empathy.

The tone of the song shifts somewhat in the middle. While the first part focuses on a universal sense of isolation that African Americans face, the second part is much more closely linked to the singer’s gender. The lyric demurely highlights the singer’s desire for male companionship and love. The bluesy folk tradition in the first stanza leads into a love ballad in the Tin-Pan Alley tradition. Previously in the song the singer comes across as abandoned and destitute, but by the end she is downright coy and presents herself as a jazz baby:

I’m a little blackbird looking for a little bluebird, too.
You know little blackbirds get a little lonesome, too, and blue.
I’ve been all over from east to west.
In search of someone to feather my nest.
Why don’t I find one the same as you do?
The answer must be that I am a hoo-doo
I’m a little jazz-bo
Looking for a rainbow too.\(^{59}\)

It sounds not unlike a song that Lulu Belle might perform. But in fact, Mills believed that this, her signature song, had a deeper social significance than simply the lament of a lonely woman looking for the love of a man. Although it is not strongly evident in the song, she tried to convey the antiracist argument in her performance. Writing for London’s *Sun Chronicle*, she claimed that “Blackbird” profoundly articulated the “Negro’s attitude towards life.” In a short essay called “The Soul of the Negro,” Mills compares the plight of black people in the United States to “a small boy flattening his nose against a pastry-cook’s window and longing for all the good things on the other side of the pane.”\(^{60}\)

The conflicting images and structure of the song are the result of a merge of different music traditions, a cultural pluralism. Mills indicated this aspect when asked about the white authorship of the songs and how this fact could potentially undercut the truthfulness of the message she hoped to convey. In one interview, for instance, she was reminded that her onstage performance of a presumably authentic lived black experience was filtered through the composition of two Jewish men. She responded:

That’s true. . . . But then I always say that the Negroes and the Jews are, in art, brother peoples. They are two of the three most ancient races in the world, they’ve retained their national characteristics right through thousands of years. Both have a fund of natural simplicity and love of art to draw on.\(^{61}\)

Her comments parallel Locke’s own words when he referred to Harlem as “the home of the Negro’s ‘Zionism,’” and wrote, “As with the Jew, persecution is making the Negro international.”\(^{62}\) For Florence Mills, the combined traditions and values could indeed create a powerful and new form of artistic expression. Understanding, appreciating, and incorporating Jewish culture in her own creative work was a way of realizing the goals of the New Negro. (In 1926, at the final performance of *Blackbirds* in London, she further demonstrated her solidarity with Jewish culture by singing the hymn “Eli-Eli.”)\(^{63}\)

The combination of Florence Mills’s innate performance ability and her
commitment to social progress helped make the song a musical phenomenon. Although a recording of Mills performing the song does not exist (indeed the great misfortune is that none of her songs had been recorded), based on the descriptions of her singing it, one can understand to some extent how she could, with this simple song, manage to “so quickly[,] so certainly and so electrically get an audience into her grip and keep it [t]here.” The contradictory elements of the song lyric, such as the racial protest set against sexual desire and the sentimentality that is pitted against the coyness, made perfect sense in her rendition. Her performance capitalized on the song’s contradictions, and she used her high-pitched birdlike tones to emphasize the sadness and highlight the comic aspects. These qualities are especially evident in the description by Theophilus Lewis, who generally disdained the black musical revue form. Even he had to concede Mills’s mesmeric power as a performer:

[Florence Mills] has perfect control of both the technique of restraint and the technique of abandon. In the early scenes of From Dixie to Broadway she employs restraint. But when she sings her song “I’m a Little Blackbird,” she lets herself out, and—My God! Man, I’ve never seen anything like it! Not only that, I never imagined such a tempestuous blend of humor and passion could be poured into the singing of a song. I never expect to see anything like it again, unless I become gifted with second sight and behold a Valkyr riding ahead of a thunderstorm. Or see Florence Mills singing another song.

Mills’s offstage persona was similarly contradictory. While she forwarded the ideals of the New Negro, she frequently referred to herself as a “pickaninny,” and in interviews and essays for the press, Mills often performed this stereotypical caricature. In an article for London’s Sun Chronicle titled “The Soul of the Negro” (which calls to mind Du Bois’s The Souls of Black Folk), Mills incorporates the language of folk poetry and slave narratives. For example, she defends black people by denoting their “childish trust” and “white to the core” feelings, and attesting that although they “may not be so sophisticated, so developed as the white man,” they do not deserve to be treated as social outcasts. Pathos and mawkishness nearly overburden her plea for acceptance; the strains of a Dixie melody seem to underscore the writing. She writes, for example, “When I was born I was just a poor pickaninny, with no prospects but a whole legacy of sorrow.” Cannily, Mills seemed to recognize that in order to make people listen to a young black woman’s appeal for racial equality, she had to do it from behind a familiar, nonthreatening guise. She writes: “In America, de-
spite the very real prejudice that exists, the Negro race is rearing its head in all branches of social life. In England where the color line is practically nonexis-
tent, Negroes have achieved a virtual equality.\textsuperscript{66} Her performance of the un-
threatening and simple “pickanniny” role both on stage and off helps explain why she was so successful as a black spokesperson. It granted her a platform that otherwise might have eluded her, and once she had it, she was able to reg-
ister her racial protest.

Yet while she exuded a good-willed, ever-cheerful, and nonmalicious spirit, she also, depending upon the audience, used her position for more pointed at-
tacks at racism. In an article appearing in the \textit{Amsterdam News}, a black news-
paper, Mills was more direct in her criticism of the color barrier in the United States. She said, “There are many colored boys in America who, after being trained as lawyers and doctors, have to become train attendants because they are black and there is no place for them.” And addressing the incongruity of racism in the United States, she told the interviewer, “If a white person in a theatre is put next to a Negro, the white person objects. Yet the same white person will eat food cooked by a colored person and be waited on by another Negro.”\textsuperscript{67} Unlike other black performers, who did not risk their careers on speaking out against social injustices, Florence Mills believed that doing so was her duty as a public figure.

The technique by which Florence Mills strove for racial tolerance was based on her ability to ingratiate herself with her public. She once remarked, “The stage is the quickest way to get to the people. My own success makes people think better of other colored folks.”\textsuperscript{68} Mills’s performance strategies were no-
table for applying exaggerated images of racial stereotypes to the material writ-
ten for her. While overplaying these stereotypes, she showed that they were as-
sociated with cultural performance traditions rather than as defining features of her race. This inflection is evident in a review by George Jean Nathan, who described her performance of multiple images associated with her race:

\begin{quote}
When Florence Mills sings, the voice of her Negro people is in that singing, even when the lyrics of her songs are out of the Yiddo-American Broadway music publishers’ shop. When she dances, the feet of all the pickaninnies since the Civil War are in her shoes. And when, in the argot of her own people, she struts her stuff, you get in her the spirit of our colored Americans off on a gala holi-
day. She is surely worth seeing.\textsuperscript{69}
\end{quote}

Indeed as the proclaimed toast of Broadway and the ambassador of her race, Florence Mills was surely worth seeing.
Mills’s contemporary and a celebrated Broadway performer in her own right, Ethel Waters, also used her star status to critique black representations. In her performance of the songs “Stormy Weather” and especially “Supper Time,” Waters could strike a forceful blow against the dehumanizing effects of racism. Unlike Mills, however, Waters’s predominant stage persona was not characterized by innocence and androgyny, but by mischievousness and sexual playfulness. While Mills intentionally eliminated, or at the very least downplayed, the bawdiness of the musical revue material—James Weldon Johnson wrote that it was “impossible for [Florence Mills] to be vulgar, for she possessed a naïveté that was alchemic”\(^70\)—Waters often nudged the boundaries of decorum with her “blue” songs, or those with risqué or double entendre lyrics. Like Florence Mills, Waters at times adopted stereotypical representations, but in her demeanor and vocal style, she distanced herself from these images. Applying the raucous performance style she developed in front of working-class black audiences, Ethel Waters called attention to the ludicrousness of the stereotypical depictions through satire and mock sentimentality, thereby draining them of their potency.

“SHAKE THAT THING”

Although today she is primarily known for her film work in the late 1940s and early 1950s, including *Pinky* (1949) and *The Member of the Wedding* (1952), and while she is best remembered as a corpulent, spirituals-singing black woman, Ethel Waters was not always the embodiment of the familiar image of the matriarchal African American. In the 1920s and early 1930s, Waters was regarded as a sometimes glamorous, sometimes sexy, sometimes bawdy, and always original singer and comedienne. Her voice did not have the raw blues power of Bessie Smith or the distinctive birdlike quality of Florence Mills, but with her inimitable puckishness and impudence, she could put across a song like no one else. When she opened on Broadway in the mostly white 1935 musical revue *At Home Abroad*, the last revue in which she appeared, Brooks Atkinson of the *New York Times* described her as a “gleaming tower of dusky regality, who knows how to make a song stand on tip-toe.”\(^71\)

Born in Philadelphia in 1896 and out of wedlock—her mother, then twelve, was raped at knifepoint by her father, a man Ethel Waters never knew—Waters seemed an unlikely candidate for international stardom. In *His Eye Is on the Sparrow* (1951), Waters recounts the tumultuous early years of her life with unflinching candor. Upon reading a segment printed in a staid magazine prior
Fig. 8. A demure Ethel Waters (circa 1930) in typical attire of the black musical revues: plantation drab meets Broadway glitz. © White Studio. (Billy Rose Theatre Division, The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations.)
to the book’s release, Carl Van Vechten wrote to painter and lithographer Prentiss Taylor: “The part of Miss Waters’s Memoirs in the October issue of the *Ladies Home Journal* is sensational in all respects. How that cumbersome conservative magazine happened to publish all this rape and bastardy and adultery is beyond anybody, but they did.”

Added to these shocking descriptions is her unembarrassed narration of a life filled with crime and hard luck. As a child, Waters stole and associated primarily with whores, thieves, and hardened criminals. And at thirteen, she was married for the first time to a man who brutally beat her. The marriage lasted barely a year.

Her lucky break came when she was seventeen. While supporting herself as a chambermaid, Waters performed at a Halloween party on a whim. Known as “Chippie” Waters to her friends at the time, she claims in her autobiography that she had become “a really agile shimmy shaker,” and notes: “It was these completely mobile hips, not my voice, that won me friends and inspired admiration.”

A pair of professional vaudevillians in the audience that night saw her and offered her the opportunity to perform with them in a small TOBA unit out of Baltimore. She reluctantly accepted and began a highly successful vaudeville career under the name “Sweet Mama Stringbean,” in reference to her height and lanky frame. While touring—chiefly in the South—she quickly developed a following for her blues songs and “shake dancing,” or the shimmy. Although the shimmy had explicit sexual connotations, Waters applied a playfulness that undercut the dance’s potential lewdness. As William Gardner Smith points out, when Waters danced, it did not seem crude or base, impressions other women dancers often gave while performing in a similar manner. Smith explained in a profile written years after Waters had given up shimmying:

She did the hottest shake dance of her, or any other day. She used to hold her arms far out from her body, to give the freest movement to all parts of her anatomy; she wore tassels on her hips sometimes, and a large buckle on her belt, to accentuate the movements of her body. She could squirm, twist, shake and vibrate in a way which was absolutely uncanny. And yet—who ever felt the slightest sense of vulgarity? One had the impression that she could bathe in mud and still remain clean.

Her elfin grin and mischievous demeanor added a layer of innocence that made her sexy but not coarse. She made the shimmy almost respectable.

The shimmy was an appropriate dance for Waters, whose early career was based on her movement between working-class and middle-class venues. As
Rebecca A. Bryant explains, the dance, which emerged from “black and tans” (working-class cabarets and bars that catered to both white and black patrons) on the fringes of urban centers in the second decade of the century, gradually found its way onto vaudeville and Broadway stages. On the one hand, the shimmy coincided with the emergence of the independent, modern woman. The isolated shaking of the torso, hips, and shoulders was a direct assault on the Victorian attitudes toward women, which were reflected in the formal social dancing of the nineteenth century. And as David Krasner notes, the pulsating, liberating movements of the shimmy provided a welcome release for working-class African Americans, who craved relief from the regularized rhythms of factory work. The dance also had practical benefits. Since the dance floors in African American speakeasies and clubs tended to be miniscule, social dances that required extensive movement or travel would have been impossible. The shimmy could be done standing in one place. The dance gradually caught on, and performers like Sophie Tucker, Mae West, and Ethel Waters were responsible for the introduction of this dance to middle-class audiences and its assimilation into social dance styles and Broadway musical theater.

The shimmy was ideally suited for a Harlem nightclub like Edmond’s Cellar, where Ethel Waters made a name for herself beginning in 1919. The club, located on 132nd Street and Fifth Avenue, was considered a dive in its day, but for Waters, it provided an entrée into New York’s world of popular entertainment. Edmond’s attracted a rough crowd. Prostitutes, drug dealers, ex-convicts, and numbers runners were the club’s main patrons, and even though Broadway was just a few miles away, the entertainment worlds could have been in entirely different universes. The smoky nightclub had a particularly low ceiling, seated about 150 to 200 people, and had a “handkerchief-size dance floor.” If the audience appreciated the performer’s act, they reflected it in tips that went into a kitty and were divided among all of the performers. If they did not, then it was most likely the end of the line. As Waters quipped, Edmond’s was the “the last stop on the way down in show business. . . . After you had worked there, there was no place to go except into domestic service.” While performing jazz and blues songs such as “St. Louis Blues,” “I Want to Be Somebody’s Baby Doll So I Can Get My Lovin’ All the Time,” and her trademark shimmy number, “Shim-Me-Sha-Wabble,” Waters was a huge hit with the crowd, and the kitty overflowed as Waters performed from night until dawn.

By the mid-1920s, Waters became a major recording star for Black Swan, a label that specialized in “race records.” The act she perfected for the dicey crowd at Edmond’s helped make her nationally known through records, but it proved
to be quite controversial for the mainstream. Jazz music and the shimmy dance were associated with sexual depravity and baseness, and black and white conservatives wanted to eliminate them from popular entertainment. Although Waters’s sexualized physicality naturally could not come across on her records, the connotations were often evident in her vocal delivery, and her rendition of “Shake That Thing” became the flashpoint for a cultural firestorm. The song is a string of coy sexual insinuations and double entendre, a form to which she returned to again and again. The title plays on the notion of a particular dance style called “shake that thing,” in reference to the shimmy, but it also alludes to a sexual act between a man and a woman. The lyric includes references to “jellyroll,” which was simultaneously associated with jazz (e.g., “Jelly Roll Morton”) and sex. Bessie Smith, for instance, recorded “Nobody in Town Can Bake a Sweet Jelly Roll Like Mine,” which included the lyric, “No other one in town can bake a sweet jelly roll so fine, so fine / It’s worth lots of dough, the boys tell me so.”

A good deal of the humor, and the controversy, in “Shake That Thing” stems from the fact that those who are “shaking that thing” are primarily older people, and they are teaching the young ones how to do it. The song flies in the face of respectability:

Why, there’s old Uncle Jack, the jellyroll king,
He’s got a hump in his back from shakin’ that thing,
Yet, he still shakes that thing,
For an old man, how he can shake that thing!
And he never gets tired of tellin’ young folks: go out and shake that thing!

On the recording, Waters heightens the sexual connotations by elongating and seductively growling the “oh’s” and “ooh’s” that are used in the musical break. The throbbing, honky-tonk piano contributes to the erotic overtone. In addition, her back-of-the-throat delivery of this song contributes to an overt sense of sexual longing and desire. Yet Waters’s characteristic sense of applied innocence is also evident. Indeed, there are moments in the song when she sings with such a level of sincerity—such as when she compares it to other dances, including the Charleston and the pigeon-wing—the listener questions whether or not Waters herself is in on the joke. James Weldon Johnson indicated this quality about her, which helps explain how Waters earned the title “Queen of Double Entendre.” “Miss Waters,” he writes in Black Manhattan, “has a disarming quality which enables her to sing some songs that many singers would not be able to get away with on the stage. Those who have heard her sing ‘Shake
That Thing’ will understand.”

And William Gardner Smith remarked similarly on the way “she raised her full, clear voice in songs with triple-meanings without making the most sensitive souls among her audience withdraw.”

Others were not so convinced of Waters’s ability to mask the sexual allusions in “Shake That Thing,” and her presentation of the oversexualized black woman—not unlike the prototypical Lulu Belle—also received a great deal of criticism. Her recording of “Shake That Thing” may have sold more copies than any other for Columbia Records until that time, selling equally well among black and white audiences, but some were distressed by the trend that this success signaled. Conservative black writer George S. Schuyler, who wrote a weekly column for the Pittsburgh Courier, mockingly referred to the song as the “Negro’s National Anthem” because to him it represented the basest form of entertainment for which Blacks seemed to yearn. Similarly, in August 1926, the Amsterdam News reprinted an article that first appeared in the Chicago Bee and castigated all those connected with the recording of “Shake That Thing” for pandering to the white and black public’s insatiable taste for sexual content. The author writes, “The American people crave filth and dirt. They thrive on a diet of mud. Like microbes they grow in dark cavernous quarters. They relish artistic carrion. They are prurient for songs suggestive of the vulgar.” The article goes on to say that this appetite explains the sensational success of Waters’s recording, which, in the author’s view, has no artistic merit:

Here is the proof positive of it: For this popular song is about the most vulgar, sordidly suggestive, indecent in connotation which any company has put upon the market. Devoid of richness of rhythm, lacking beautiful music, unspeakably low in language—this song is a tawdry, musically cheap and linguistically common composition, compared with which “Yes, We Have No Bananas” was as a production from Bach or Beethoven.

“Shake That Thing” may not have been Bach or Beethoven, but it pushed Ethel Waters to the highest echelon of mainstream entertainment: Broadway. Waters knew, however, that as a Broadway performer, she would need to tone down her shimmy and ease up on the sexual connotations. In short, she would have to be more like Florence Mills.

As performers, Mills and Waters had a good deal in common. Waters, like Mills, was as comfortable with up-tempo jazz numbers as she was with sentimental ballads. They were both resourceful comediennees and adept dancers, and they could convincingly play the standard roles of the black revue, includ-
ing the Dixie waif, jungle maiden, and the New York sophisticate. Still, their stage personalities were quite different, and no one could confuse one with the other. Mills appealed to her audience through her endearing and sympathetic traits; Waters won them through her mischievous and devil-may-care qualities. Folk and Tin Pan Alley were the primary songs in Florence Mills’s repertoire; blues and double entendre were in Ethel Waters’s. While Florence Mills strove for respectability and hoped to raise the level of black musical performance by appealing to middle- and upper-class tastes, Ethel Waters retained her working-class roots and sensibility and poked fun at the notion of celebrity.

Following a career path comparable to Mills’s, Waters worked her way from vaudeville and New York nightclubs and onto Broadway. In 1927 she opened in the musical revue *Africana.* Unlike most of the black musical revues of the 1920s, *Africana* was produced by an African American, Earl Dancer (her husband at the time), and it had songs by Donald Heywood, who was also black. When the show opened at Daly’s, the theater that previously housed *Shuffle Along,* the *Amsterdam News* noted its “barbaric and primitive splendor,” and other critics praised the show’s “liveliness” and “swift pace.” The *New York Times* called it “a simple corking Senegambian show that takes its place at once in the same category with ‘Shuffle Along’ and ‘Runnin’ Wild.’” Not surprisingly, the show contained the standard features of the black revue. Waters sang, for instance, the obligatory “Wish I Were in Dixie” song, here called “I’m Coming Virginia” (which includes the lyric, “Beneath your bright southern moon, / Once more I’ll croon / A dear old mammy tune”), and the “cotton bale” scene in which Waters sang “Here Comes My Show Boat.” Some of the critics complained about the unevenness of the show’s numbers, particularly in a dance number that concluded the first act. “Pickaninny” Hill, advertised in the program as “the champion cakewalker of the world,” led the company in “Old-Fashioned Cakewalk” that received particularly negative reactions. Hence, within the week, several of the numbers were dropped and new ones substituted.

Notably present on opening night of *Africana* was Carl Van Vechten, who remained a good friend and champion of Ethel Waters for most of her career. On a sign outside of the theater was printed his endorsement, in which he said he “would rather hear Ethel Waters sing ‘Dinah’ than hear [Spanish singer] Raquel Miller sing her entire repertoire.” Several critics described Van Vechten’s behavior during the show, which, according to at least one observer, was “embarrassing.” Critic Bide Dudley wrote that Van Vechten clapped loudly and called out requests for songs during the performance. According to show business columnist Walter Winchell, Van Vechten “occupied a fourth-row-on-
the-aisle chair” and shouted for Waters to sing “Dinah,” which she did.89 Robert Garland wrote that “Mr. Van Vechten did everything to prove that Miss Waters is his favorite colored girl and no fooling. There was the passion of possession in Mr. Van Vechten’s claps and cheers.”90 For many, Van Vechten’s presence was a reminder of Waters’s connection to Harlem and her nightclub appearances in which audiences tended to be much more vocal and boisterous. This was not necessarily a good thing. While her performance seemed completely appropriate for Broadway, in their view, his was not. Broadway audiences tended to be much more reserved and decorous. In fact, Waters found the difference between black, working-class nightclub and vaudeville audiences and white, middle-class audiences quite striking. In an interview in the Amsterdam News, she stated, “Some of the white women in the audience with their husbands just sit there and glare at me and the poor man, much as he would like to show his appreciation, dare not move.”91

In Waters’s Broadway debut, the critics invariably compared the new star with Florence Mills. “Since Florence Mills first showed Broadway, in ‘Shuffle Along,’ what a gifted Negro comedienne could really do when she set her mind to it,” Richard Watts, Jr. wrote, “no similar player has proved so ingratiating as did Miss Waters last night.”92 Rowland Field of the New York Times said that she “must be ranked on an equal footing with Florence Mills and Josephine Baker as a colored chanteuse.”93 But the elements that made Ethel Waters a vaudeville and nightclub headliner and a recording star also emerged in her performance in Africana. Because of her broad, outlandish humor along with a lanky frame and a few high kicks, a couple of critics compared Waters with Charlotte Greenwood, the white vaudeville and musical theater comedienne. Others wrote about her unpredictability, which the critic of the New York World Telegram succinctly described as the “hint of smouldering menace under her vast iridescent smile.”94 Several critics remarked on Waters’s ability to perform off-color numbers and make them seem completely inoffensive. The critic for Dance magazine said that “her impish grimaces and her casual jollity slip over many a wisecrack that might be objectionable under less infectious guidance.”95

As evident in these responses, Ethel Waters, like Florence Mills, rose above stereotypical stage depictions by revealing the masquerade of black womanhood. While Mills accomplished this representation through overplaying the images and exaggerating them, Waters detached herself from them. Performing the Dixie number in a bandanna and tramp costume, or shimmying in a scanty skirt and top, Waters seemed to wink from behind the representation of the pickaninny or the hypersexed black woman. She drew the audience into her
game, and they were willing to participate in the amusement. Offstage, she could be just as mischievous. Whereas Florence Mills was terribly sincere and took her responsibilities as a celebrity very seriously, Ethel Waters often took a different approach, satirizing the image of a sophisticated starlet. In an interview that appeared in the *New York Herald Tribune*, for instance, she presented herself at the height of elegance, immersing herself in all of the trappings of a glamour goddess of the Broadway stage. Nowhere are there signs that she had been raised among prostitutes and thieves. She is described as wearing a black-and-white chiffon gown, white silk stockings, and Deauville sandals. Full of self-importance and dropping names all over the place, she is quoted as interrupting the interviewer to ask her husband, Earl Dancer, if he would inform her when it is 5:45 p.m. “This charming lady,” she explains, “has asked me to talk about myself, and you know how I enjoy that. Carl Van Vechten and his wife are giving a dinner for me and I must keep track of the time.” Later in the interview, she explains how she found herself in show business. It appears that her father, “a terribly respectable and serious man,” had told the young Ethel that she was destined to be a “domestic,” but the call of the stage was too strong. She continues to have fun at the interviewer’s expense when Earl Dancer returns promptly at 5:45 p.m. to remind Waters of her dinner engagement. When the interviewer tells her how handsome Dancer is, Waters drops the primness and replies that Dancer’s face shall remain beautiful only as long as he is true to her. With an almost demonic intensity, she shouts at the interviewer, “But, oh, I’m jealous, I’m wild, I’m fierce! I could kill for love—I’m primitive in my passions!” After a short laugh, she tells the interviewer, “Forgive me. I didn’t mean it. I didn’t, really.” And she resumes the interview as the archetypal glamorous starlet.

This unpredictability and outlandish humor were the hallmarks of Waters’s Broadway career as she continued performing in a series of revues (some all-black, and some with a white cast). Waters continued to tease the limits of decorum, nowhere more than in her performance of black composer Eubie Blake and lyricist Andy Razaf’s “My Handy Man Ain’t Handy No More,” which she introduced in *Lew Leslie’s Blackbirds of 1930*. The show also starred Flournoy Miller, one of the stars and creators of *Shuffle Along*. Nevertheless, it was a critical and financial disappointment. As Waters quipped: “*Blackbirds* opened at a Forty-second Street theater right next to the flea circus. Our show was a flop, and the fleas outdrew us at every performance. The Depression came in and made our business worse. But it didn’t dent the take of the flea circus at all.” In typical Lew Leslie fashion, the revue rehashed familiar settings, such as its opening number situated on a levee in Mississippi, an African jungle number in Mozam-
bique, and of course, Harlem. The sketches consisted of parodies of Green Pastures, a black biblical retelling by white playwright Marc Connelly; All Quiet on the Western Front, here called “All Quiet on the Darkest Front”; and Shakespeare’s Othello, in which Waters played Desdemona.\(^98\) Naturally, the women in the large choral dance numbers were characteristically underdressed and suitably energetic. In his review, Percy Hammond acknowledged, “The dusky young women of the ensemble sing well and undress successfully; and the dancing is rhythmic and acrobatic.”\(^99\) All of the ingredients in the Leslie recipe were in place, but by 1930, the confection had lost all of its airiness and distinctive flavor.

A low point in the show was a sketch called “Aunt Jemima’s Divorce Case,” which combined all of the most degrading black stereotypes into one skit. According to several critics, the jokes were tired, and the humor forced as it retried old minstrel show gags. The characters included Aunt Jemima; Cream of Wheat, her husband; The Ham What Am, the judge; and Sambo, the lawyer. To critics who had once applauded, or at least tolerated, the debased caricatures, the gags had worn out their welcome on Broadway. The images had been rehearsed and replayed so often on stage in the musical revue that the comic elements of the minstrel mask had all but dropped out. White critic Richard Lockridge of the Sun railed against Lew Leslie’s perpetuation of exaggerated blackface humor as reflected in this sketch, which he said concealed a truly uncorrupted, and presumably untapped, African American talent. In a tirade about white culpability and black gullibility for the original construction of the “stage darkie” caricature, he wrote:

> It would be interesting to discover, and quietly murder, the man who first convinced Negro comedians that the way to be a comic lies in blacking brown faces. You take a Negro, who is apt to have naturally certain qualities which the white race cannot acquire, and black him up. You lay on his dialect with a trowel—and with no closer relationship with the actual dialect of the Negro than may be found in the phonetic idiosyncrasies of the average white writer about him. You tell him it is funny to twist words, using for example, “evict” in place of “convict,” which ninety-nine times out of one hundred, it isn't. You make him, in short, a bad imitation of what was not a very good imitation in the first place, and you tell him to make the people laugh. He—and I shall never know why—believes you.\(^100\)

Lockridge’s argument is telling in that in an age when black performers had gained considerable artistic and commercial ground, the white assumption that
African Americans were merely unwitting imitators and unoriginal pawns was still thriving. The attitude evokes Henry Louis Gates’s discussion of the nineteenth-century notion that black writers were actually “mockingbird poets” because they were “generally thought to lack originality.” African Americans supposedly “excelled,” according to Gates and his charting of the widely held belief, “at mimicry, at what was called mindless imitation, repetition without sufficient revision.”

Regarding the black musical revue, the recycled jokes, sketches, and musical numbers had become so commonplace on Broadway that the exotic appeal no longer impressed the mostly white audiences. New images of the “authentic” would need to be found.

*Blackbirds of 1930* and its indefatigable fidelity to the old formula and its
lack of originality anticipated the demise of the black musical revue on Broadway. Lew Leslie, the master of the form, would try to resuscitate the genre with two more editions, in 1933 and 1939, but with dismal results. (Leslie’s immediate follow-up to *Blackbirds of 1930*, *Rhapsody in Black* in 1931, was moderately successful, but that show, which also starred Waters, had eliminated the typical format of the black musical revue and was structured more or less as a concert.) Theophilus Lewis once criticized Leslie for shamelessly recycling material from one show to another, stating, “Mr. Leslie seems to think that all you have to do to make a dance appear new is to change the costumes of the dancers. He has the same idea regarding a song.” The only salvation in the 1930 show was Ethel Waters, who provided respite from the tediousness of the over three-hour-long opening night show, and whom Lockridge himself referred to, with highest praise possible, as “endlessly original.” To Lockridge, Waters was not simply a copy of incessantly reproduced images of blackness, but offered an animated spark lost among the lackluster proceedings.

Charles Darnton of the *Evening World* said that Waters was one of the few bright spots in the show, and added, “I don’t know what we would have done without her.” Fortunately, she had some terrific Eubie Blake and Andy Razaf songs to sing, including “Lucky to Me” and “Memories of You.” But the highlight was her rendition of the fiercely funny “My Handy Man Ain’t Handy No More.” To several critics, though, the song bordered on pornographic. Darnton called it “one of the frankest ballads of this free age”; Richard Lockridge referred to it as “so disturbing a mess of double meaning”; and the *New Yorker* said that only Waters’s “innocence and cleansing quality” made the song “almost permissible.” “My Handy Man Ain’t Handy No More” was actually a follow-up to a number Razaf had written and composed for Waters in 1928 titled “My Handy Man.” That earlier song offers a glowing tribute to a man who satisfies the singer’s every domestic need. She relishes the way “He shakes my ashes, / Greases my griddle, / Churns my butter, / Strokes my fiddle”; and how “He threads my needle, / Creams my wheat, / Heats my heater, / Chops my meat.” The sexual double-entendre also includes allusions to “Feed[ing] the horses in my stable” and “Trimming the rough edges off my lawn.” But the last verse justifies why Barry Singer deems “My Handy Man” “a bawdy blues of such transcendent craft and consummate comic timing that it nearly overwhelmed all memory of its innumerable predecessors, becoming, on the instant, the genre’s quintessential representative and remaining so till today.” Even on a recording, Waters’s playful naughtiness mixed with haughty boastfulness is irresistible as she sings about her handy man:
My ice don’t get a chance to melt away,
He sees that I get a nice, fresh piece every day.
My man is such a handy man.

The musical sequel to this song, composed two years later, revisits the same handy man, who, it turns out, does not gratify in the same way he used to.

“My Handy Man Ain’t Handy No More” is, if anything, even funnier than the first installment, and it benefits from Blake’s music, which has been described “as funny as Razaf’s words.”

The singer sets the mood by explaining that “Somethin’ strange has happened to my Handy Man, / He’s not the man he was before,” and “He never hauls his ashes ’less I tell him to.”

The lyric also visits a familiar domestic territory, once again subtly comparing parts of the woman singer’s anatomy to a “stove,” a “stable,” and a “front lawn.” In this version, the handy man’s admirable abilities have all but disappeared, and he is absolutely useless to her:

Once he used to have so much endurance,
Now it looks like he needs life insurance;
I used to brag about my Handy Man’s technique,
Around the house he was a perfect indoor sheik
But now “The spirit’s willing but the flesh is weak”:
My Handy Man ain’t handy no more.

According to Allen Woll, the song’s torrid, controversial lyric was enough to induce an “audible buzz” among the opening night audience and cause one critic to warily dub the show “Hot Stuff” in his review.

Although “My Handy Man Ain’t Handy No More” was written by two black men, it has a great deal in common with the songs of the 1920s “blueswomen,” including Bessie Smith, Gertrude “Ma” Rainey, and Alberta Hunter. On one level Blake and Razaf’s song may be regarded as uncomfortably stereotypical as it rehearses the familiar image of the sex-mad African American woman. But on another, the song, like many blues songs, offered a space for resistance. The blues was a productive site for protesting oppressive social and political ideologies concerning black women. First, by exaggerating and undermining the singer’s references to various household duties, “My Handy Man Ain’t Handy No More” reverses and subverts cultural presumptions surrounding black gender and sexual roles. In Razaf’s lyric, the (presumably) black man is responsible for carrying out domestic duties, and the woman is entrusted with the power to
make sure they are completed. As the decision maker, she is the one who calls the shots in the relationship. And in a switch from the common criticism that might have been directed at a black woman housekeeper whose abilities to keep an orderly home had begun to slip, the handy man “has lost his domestic science / And he’s lost his self-reliance.” The song also debunks the traditional middle-class notion of home in which a woman accedes her independence to marriage, domesticity, and the will of her husband. And even more radically, it inverts the image of the stereotypically macho and hypersexualized black man. Here the handy man is sexually enervated and rendered impotent (the cliché “the spirit’s willing but the flesh is weak” takes on a whole new provocative meaning in Waters’s delivery), while the woman is represented as the aggressive partner.

Thus, the setting of “My Handy Man Ain’t Handy No More” may represent a familiar place for a black woman, but the singer has transformed it into an arena in which she is both empowered and has sexual autonomy. In this domestic, although eroticized, scene, the handy man is only useful to her when he can provide services that fulfill the singer’s needs. Yet flying in the face of current discourse surrounding black women’s morality, she unapologetically rejects middle-class sentiments about chastity and fidelity. This was, after all, an age when black women needed to constantly protect themselves from attacks against their supposed depravity. But as Angela Davis explains, “In the process of defending black women’s moral integrity and sexual purity, they [were] almost entirely denied sexual agency.”

The blues, however, were a site of resistance where black women could proclaim their assertiveness and independence. For as Hazel Carby convincingly argues in her analysis of women blues singers, the blues opened a space of resistance for black women to unashamedly present themselves as “sexual beings,” thus affirming their freedom and individuality. Drawing upon the blues tradition of sexual liberation while performing this song, Ethel Waters, along with composers Blake and Razaf, effectively “redefined women’s ‘place’” and constructed “a space in which the coercions of bourgeois notions of sexual purity and ‘true womanhood’ were absent.”

Sexual allusions of the blues were standard in the 1920s rent parties, honkytonks, and after-hours Harlem clubs, but with the enforced decency laws on Broadway, a song like “My Handy Man Ain’t Handy No More” could force a show to close. The fact that the song did not meet with a wrathful censor was most likely due in large part to its uncanny delivery by Ethel Waters. Vocally, she offered a more refined presentation than her “blues mama” contemporaries...
such as Bessie Smith and Gertrude “Ma” Rainey. As Barry Singer explains, “Blessed with bell-like vocal timbre that was complemented by a vaudeville-derived conscientiousness about enunciation, Waters, unlike the rawer, more rural belters, delivered the blues with urbane elegance and a lilting melodicism.” But even more importantly, Waters had by now perfected a complex style in which she could appear to accommodate the image of the stereotypical images of black femininity while at the same time undermining this image in her delivery of double-entendre songs. Not only was she adept at using her voice to convey the multiple meanings of a lyric, but she used her expressive face and lanky body to accomplish the same effect. The second-string Times critic summed it up perfectly when he wrote, “Every gesture, every grimace counts. In the rolling of her eyes, the exaggerated showing of her teeth, the comic shrugging of her shoulders, there is a multitude of meanings.”

By the 1920s, double-entendre songs had become part of a popular black cultural tradition. Mel Watkins traces the development of this brand of African American humor back to slave songs. Comical irony, subterfuge, and contradiction, Watkins posits, were “the central means of coping with slavery.” According to Giles Oakley, blues and their often oblique denunciation of whites evolved from black work songs, and while singing under the watchful eye of white overseers, the seditious implications in the songs would go unheeded. Subsequently, black comics had become adept at “masking” their true feelings and intentions in the face of white oppression by employing elusive or culturally acceptable terms that white audiences did not always “get.” In a method similar to the literary metaphor defined by Henry Louis Gates as “double voicedness,” as well as to Du Bois’s “double consciousness,” black humor often contained dual connotations. Therefore, as a form of double-voicedness, double entendre may be regarded as a strategy of black resistance. In these songs, performers and lyricists call attention to the slipperiness and “mutability” of the language of the oppressor, and intentionally displace the “white term” with a distinctively black connotation. Encoded, layered with new or reversed meanings, and manipulated, words in black double-entendre lose their power to debase and demean. In other words, on the surface, a song could appear to be a middle-class household elegy about a man who no longer works efficiently around the house, but underneath it could describe the sexual dissatisfaction of a working-class black woman who craves frequent and stimulating sexual intercourse. In a Broadway theater, the song, particularly with Waters’s exaggeratedly innocent delivery, had the air of respectability, for as Charles Darnton wrote, she sang “My Handy Man Ain’t Handy No More” with “all the innocence
of a domestic lament.” But like the skimpy outfits that black chorus girls wore, the literal meanings just barely concealed the eroticized and titillating images underneath.

A final example of Ethel Waters’s skillful ability to nudge the boundaries of decorum and play with cultural representations occurred in the nonblack musical revue *At Home Abroad*, which opened in 1935. The hit show, directed and designed by famed MGM director Vincente Minnelli, also starred British comedienne Beatrice Lillie, tap dancer Eleanor Powell, and vaudeville song and dance man Eddie Foy, Jr. Structured as a musical “travelogue,” *At Home Abroad* included sketches and numbers set in locales such as Paris, Vienna, Russia, Jamaica, and Africa. Not surprisingly, the last two provided the backdrops for two of Waters’s numbers. The New York critics lauded the show for its cleverness and arch sophistication, and hailed white composer and lyricist Arthur Schwartz and Howard Dietz’s score, which included the hilarious “Paree” sung by Lillie and the now-standard “What a Wonderful World,” as “amusing,” “swell,” and “luxurious.” But as the sole black star of the revue, Waters was expected to provide the evening’s exotica, which she did dazzlingly with the help of Minnelli’s costumes and set design. As Atkinson wrote, “[Minnelli] has set her in a jungle scene that is laden with magic, dressing her in gold bands and a star-struck gown of blue, and put her in a Jamaican set that looks like a modern painting. Miss Waters is decorative as well as magnetic.” Indeed, few could make the jungle seem as alluring, enchanting, and as amusing as Ethel Waters while at the same time pointing to the artifice and the artistry surrounding her.

In *At Home Abroad*, the black segments contrasted sharply with the droll songs and sketches predominantly set in Europe, though these moments reintroduced images of a glittering black savagery back to an increasingly white Broadway. This is particularly evident in the review by Percy Hammond of the *New York Tribune*, who wrote, “Miss Ethel Waters, the Negro prima donna, again brings the jungle to Times Square efficiently.” Backed by a chorus of black men and women dancers in her big African and Jamaican numbers, including “Hottentot Potentate” and “Steamboat Whistle,” Waters represented the merging of familiar black stereotypes with Tin Pan Alley music and lyrics along with polished Broadway showmanship. Of course, the inhabitants of Minnelli’s “jungle” in *At Home Abroad* were Broadway’s version of “savage”: Scantily dressed in sequins, satin, and chintz, the black chorus danced suggestively not to tom-toms and bongoes, but to the jazzy strains of a piano and muted trumpet. The effect was not completely unlike the grotesquerie evoked by
Florence Mills and her “Chocolate Drops” in “Jungle Nights in Dixieland” from *Dixie to Broadway*. Yet as was characteristic of Waters’s performance style in the 1920s and early 1930s, she rendered these images with a knowing wink and a sly smile. Writing for *Women’s Wear Daily*, for example, Kelcey Allen notes Waters’s remarkable ability to “sell” her songs in this show, and Brooks Atkinson described the “enormous lurking vitality” she applied to her numbers.\(^{123}\)

These qualities were particularly evident in her performance of “Hottentot Potentate,” in which Waters not only challenged popular conceptions about black womanhood, but also created a space that recognized and accepted the gay community.\(^{124}\) In this, her “African” number in the show, Waters sings about becoming the ruler of Harlem and bending the will of the people to serve her. À la Julius Caesar, the Hottentot Potentate “came,” “saw,” and “conquered” this “Congo” kingdom, and the residents easily submitted to her “trickeration.” Much of the song’s humor, though, derives from the unabashed joy she receives from the worship the denizens bestow upon her:

\[\text{My witchcraft made them make a crown for me;}
\text{The natives do a lot of bowing down for me,}
\text{And any one of them would go to town for me,}
\text{The Hottentot Potentate.}\]

On one level, the song is a parody of *Emperor Jones* (here she refers to herself as “the Empress Jones”), Eugene O’Neill’s 1920 play about a Pullman porter who becomes the revered (then reviled) ruler of a barbaric, unnamed West Indies tribe. In that play, Brutus Jones, with O’Neill’s own allusion to Caesar, exploits his black subjects who later bring about his descent into madness and suicide. Hazel Carby reads the play as an enactment of the Caucasian fear of black insurrection and “retribution” for slavery. An escaped convict and murderer, Jones “tricks” the natives into believing he is godlike by playing upon their fears and superstitions, and he uses his brute strength to intimidate them further. According to Carby, Jones symbolizes whites’ “historical nightmare” of enslavement by “those they had enslaved.” The play provides an outlet for those ingrained apprehensions. Carby writes: “Within the dominant cultural imagination, *The Emperor Jones* plays an important ideological role in the displacement of social and political anxieties of black rebellion, revolution, and revenge.”\(^{125}\) In “Hottentot Potentate,” Dietz, Schwartz, and Waters push the image inside out. Sex and sophistication, rather than fear and force, are the tools of oppression for the “hot and potent, potent and hot, Hottentot Potentate.”
In addition to the popular cultural allusion to *The Emperor Jones*, the specter of Lulu Belle haunts the song at every turn. Nearly ten years after *Lulu Belle* opened on Broadway, the sordid tale of Harlem’s most famous hussy had not faded from cultural consciousness. As with Lulu Belle, the tantalizing charms of the black temptress in Schwartz and Dietz’s song are irresistible and inescapable. In fact, the song makes direct reference to Sheldon and McArthur’s play: “I brought my bottle of Chanel with me, / I took along a script of *Lulu Belle* with me.” And playing on the title character of that play, not only does the Hottentot Potentate set a snare for the unwitting natives, she revels in her conquests, which bring her tremendous wealth and prestige. The Hottentot Potentate reflects the ease in which she is able to bewitch the credulous natives and capitalize on their particular fears of enslavement. On the recording of the song, Waters purrs with just the right amount of slyness and seduction:

I fool ’em, fool ’em, playing a part,
And I rule ’em, rule ’em, I’ve got an art,
And I ghoul ’em, ghoul ’em, right from the start,
I gave ’em that hotcha, je ne sais quoicha.

Like Lulu Belle, who beguiles an unsuspecting French count, it is fairly obvious that the Hottentot Potentate’s selective command of French comes in pretty handy as well. In this comic parody, though, the Lulu Belle figure is not a harbinger of destruction, but of unyielding, joyful subjugation.

This element in *At Home Abroad* aroused the indignation of at least one critic reviewing the show. A *New York Times* critic, who attended the show’s out-of-town tryout in Boston, found the show “approach[ing] vulgarity” at certain intervals, and he dismissed Waters’s rendition of “Hottentot Potentate” as “not worth her trouble.” To those accustomed to seeing black women performers embodying images of, to use Sterling Brown’s phrase, the “exotic primitive,” her performance must have been unsettling. Instead of reinscribing the familiar representation of black womanhood, she exaggerated it, inverted it, and made it laughable. In this particular number, Waters blatantly turns on its head the culturally accepted proposition that assumes a black woman on stage must be represented as a primitive, eroticized African maiden, a sex-mad Lulu Belle, or a desexed mammy figure. Here not only is the Hottentot Potentate known for her “trickery” and “hotcha,” both familiar images associated with the stereotypical black woman, but more importantly, she is ultra chic with her “drawing room technique,” “modern improvement,” and as she proudly pro-
claims: “The heathens live upon a bed of roses now, / And Cartier rings they’re wearing in their noses now.” Savagery and oppression of O’Neill’s original vision in The Emperor Jones have been replaced by glamour and modernity.

As Mel Watkins explains, this form of reversal was a common method for black performers in confronting an especially degrading image. He explains, “There was no other way of dealing with it except to make fun of it and reverse the joke.” With her inimitable, comedic style, expensive dress, and sinewy voice, not to mention the assistance of Dietz’s witty lyrics, Waters separated herself from the stereotypical image. Rather than reinscribing the image or being trapped by it, or indeed performing it with exquisite grace and artistry as Florence Mills had in her own career, Waters distanced herself from it. And by doing so, she pointed to the artifice of the representations, which is highlighted by the lyric’s numerous implications about theater, art, and “playing a part.”

Another aspect of the song is the way in which it reflects a space that can accommodate nonheterosexual identities as well. Like the Harlem neighborhood itself, the environment articulated in the lyrics of “Hottentot Potentate” is not only comprised of contested black representations, but it also offers a space for gay inclusion. While the song’s references to Lulu Belle point to customary stereotypes about black women, they also signal not-so-veiled nods to the gay community that adopted the title character of Sheldon and MacArthur’s play as its icon. At one point, the Hottentot Potentate comically warns that certain kinds of behavior will not be tolerated in her utopian society. She sings: “The new name for the Congo’s stamping ground / Is Empress Jones’s Africana vamping ground; / I don’t allow no camping on my camping ground!” But just a few verses later she seems to recant, and she takes pride in the fact that she has made of this land a much less barbaric and virile atmosphere:

This wild and savage, open airy land
With lions and with tigers was a scary land
Until I made of it a savoir fairyland.

On the recording, Waters feigns shock at her verbal slip with an inflected “Dear!” By doing so, she not so subtly winks at the coterie of “male queers” who often saw her perform. As she notes in her autobiography, when she performed at Edmond’s it was not uncommon for gay men to “beg me to let them wear my best gowns for the evening so they could compete for the grand prizes” in various Harlem drag balls.

For gay men in the Broadway theater, the comical allusions to “Lulu Belle,”
“vamping,” “camping,” and “savoir fairyland” meant that Waters affirmed and publicly recognized their existence in a site that by law prohibited lesbian and gay subject matter. The raids of The Captive and The Drag in the same year that Lulu Belle premiered were authoritative admonitions of this fact. Thus, in a mode of resistance similar to the racial double-entendre of the blues, Waters acknowledged a clandestine gay community with coded language. While heterosexual members of an audience might not necessarily have grasped the significance of certain terms, the gay community traditionally delighted in sly references to its lifestyle. As George Chauncey documents, singers in the 1920s and 1930s who presented lyrics with gay-inflected subtexts generally attracted a huge following of homosexual men. In particular, Chauncey notes Beatrice Lillie, who was the featured star of At Home Abroad, and a fixture of Harlem’s gay and lesbian nightlife, as a popular attraction among the gay community. Her comic song “There Are Fairies at the Bottom of the Garden” was a “camp classic” for gay men, and as one of her fans later recalled, “The Palace was just packed with queers, for weeks at a time, when Lillie performed.” Moreover, Chauncey insightfully describes the communal effect such an occasion offers gay men in a non-gay-identified space: “Whether or not the other members in the audience noticed them, they were aware of their numbers in the audience and often shared in the collective excitement of transforming such a public gathering into a ‘gay space,’ no matter how covertly.” It is not unreasonable to imagine, then, that when Ethel Waters sang “Hottentot Potentate,” she created a space for surreptitious community-building among gay men. During the brief span of the song, Waters regally and unabashedly evoked an environment that was not ruled by a predominantly racist, sexist, and homophobic ideology, but was inclusive and liberating. That is, in this number, the sexually emancipated, “hot and potent, potent and hot” Hottentot Potentate presided over an “Africana vamping ground” in which cultural representations of race, gender, and sexuality were subverted and reimagined.

At Home Abroad was one of the last musical revues in which Ethel Waters would appear. She had scored terrific notices in Rhapsody in Black (1931), and especially Irving Berlin’s nonblack revue As Thousands Cheer (1933), in which she introduced the powerful antilynching song “Supper Time.” But the all-black, Broadway musical revue trend had all but run its course by 1935, and Waters’s appearance in the otherwise white At Home Abroad offered a nostalgic throwback to the glitzy jungle scenes from the revues of the 1920s. In the 1930s, minstrel shows, vaudeville, and musical revues were no longer all the rage. With the emergence on stage and film of the “integrated” musical, or one in which
the songs are (generally) connected directly with the plot and character, variety shows were more likely to be found on the radio. African Americans were not generally “integrated” into these new musicals, so the roster of black musical performers diminished considerably. By the middle to late 1930s, the black musical theater had entered a “period of exile.” And as Allen Woll explains, with the Depression and a preponderance of integrated book musicals and black plays depicting social realism, “A once thriving cultural tradition faded to a mere whimper on Broadway. Black-performed musical shows did not disappear during the next twenty years, but they existed on the fringes of Broadway as oddities, exotica, or nostalgic reveries.”

By all accounts, Waters had a remarkable career, which spanned seven decades. She was one of the few black Broadway stars of the 1920s, along with Josephine Baker and Bill Robinson, who continued to find work after—to paraphrase Langston Hughes—the Negro was no longer in vogue. In her later career, Waters gradually replaced her sexy, vamping, and often risqué image—indeed, Waters was known for her dramatic image changes—with the one for which she is best known today. Beginning in the late thirties, as she got older and heavier, and parts for middle-aged black women were fewer and farther between, she accepted roles that required her to be matriarchal and pious. This was first evident in her dramatic debut as Hagar in Dorothy and DuBose Heyward’s *Mamba’s Daughters* (1939). Roles in *Cabin in the Sky* (1940), *Pinky* (1949), for which she earned an Academy Award nomination, *Member of the Wedding* (1952), and a brief stint as a maid in the television series *Beulah* followed. She continued to sing, notably with the Billy Graham Crusades, up until her death in 1977.

The contributions that Ethel Waters and Florence Mills made to Broadway and musical theater should not be overlooked. The black musical revues of the 1920s and early 1930s are problematic, and they will never be considered among the great works of the American stage. The sketches and musical numbers often recycled offensive stereotypes, and they were built around individual talents, so the shows rarely could be successfully recast with different performers. Although the genre produced a number of musical standards, such as “I’m Just Wild about Harry,” “Black and Blue,” and “I Can’t Give You Anything but Love,” just as many songs, like “Juba Dance,” “Oriental Blues,” and “That Brownskin Flapper,” could never make a convincing case for rescue from oblivion. And although it is tempting to dismiss the revues because they were often produced, directed, and written by white men for chiefly white Broadway audiences, this response oversimplifies the issue. The performances of Florence Mills and Ethel
Waters, who perfected their acts in predominantly black venues, demonstrate the complex interconnections of race, gender, and class identifications. And without denying the commercial motivation behind the revues, the shows embodied the contradictory social and artistic attitudes of the 1920s and early 1930s. Mills and Waters simultaneously played the stereotypes to the enjoyment of both black and white audiences, and with the assistance of their white or black creators, they often satirized, exaggerated, and poked fun at these depictions. They merged elements of primitivism and modernism and attempted to realize the goals of cultural pluralism and racial uplift. In the process, they forged new possibilities for images of African Americans, and opened spaces for working-class sensibilities and a recognition of a gay and lesbian subculture. Above all, Waters and Mills were unapologetically resilient and outspoken in an era when neither of these qualities was popularly acceptable for black women.