ONE OF COLE and Johnson’s most important innovations in the way of performative African American female uplift came through their featuring of an all-female chorus called the “Gibson Gals.”2 These African American women appeared on stage as sophisticated, pure, and respectable. The team’s Gibson Gals performed in regular stage makeup, with the repulsive practice of “blacking up” discarded, which replicated Bob Cole’s 1891 performance as the white-faced character Willie Wayside, the Tramp. The Gibson Gals contested negative notions of African American women during this period by exemplifying the ideals of the Cult of True Womanhood—appearing as pious, innocent, submissive, domestic, virtuous, weak, and fragile: attributes denied African American women both on stage and off.3 Through the Gibson Gals, Bob Cole, J. Rosamond Johnson, and James Weldon Johnson communicated a politics of uplift and racial pride.

Charles Dana Gibson created the Gibson Girl, illustrations of well-bred and cosmopolitan women, for Life Magazine in 1890. Gibson himself described the Gibson Girl as the ultimate “[a]ll American girl to all the world.”4 His sister, Mrs. Josephine Gibson Knowlton, maintained that

[m]y brother wanted to portray a totally American type. The Gibson Girl was symbolic of a wholesome, healthy, utterly American Girl. She liked
sports, was a little ahead of her time, definitely athletic, and certainly did not smoke or drink—then. Importantly, she carved a new type of femininity,” suggestive of emancipation.5

Stephen Warshaw asserts that the Gibson Girl represented American womanhood, with a sarcastic and realistic edge, embodying “[m]ore than the American girl, certainly; but more like what the American girl hoped to be was the Gibson Girl.”6 The popularity of the Gibson Girl lasted for two decades, and many white society women claimed they modeled for the original rendering, although Woody Gelman in The Best of Charles Dana Gibson maintains that Josephine Gibson Knowlton, Gibson’s sister, posed for the illustrations. The Gibson Girl appeared in illustrations as youthful, fashionable, and blue-blooded: a woman of noble birth.7 White women of the era tried to pattern themselves after her, copying her hairstyle, dress, and gestures. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that African American women would also follow the fashion and style of the Gibson Girl.8

Nan Enstad argues that fashion signified white women’s class and privilege. She maintains that certain articles of white women’s dress connoted their sexual purity and standing in society. A small waist, curved back, petite hands and feet, corsets, and petticoats denoted that a white woman belonged to the middle-class, led a life of leisure, and, most importantly, her dress marked her as a lady.9 Fashion magazines in the nineteenth century depicted African American women as the opposite of white women, that is, as fat, crude, unchaste, and far removed from a lady given her slave past or working-class status.10 Thus U.S. society positioned African American women as the antithesis of The Cult of True Womanhood. African American women confronted extreme obstacles in their fight for womanhood rights during the early part of the twentieth century. They came up against the menace of rape, a horrific inevitability in many African American women’s lives, and they found themselves routinely and derisively called racial epithets or “girl” instead of being properly addressed as “lady,” “Miss,” or “Mrs.” The use of the image of the Gibson Girl as symbolic of African American womanhood, therefore, proved a powerful tool for emancipating them from the dictates of white society and from the obstacles they dealt with physically and psychologically. While they were excluded by whites from womanhood rights, respect, and middle-class standing, and were situated as the antithesis of womanhood, the positioning of African American women as the Gibson Girl, all-American, fashionable, and patrician, proved an incredibly progressive and praiseworthy claim. Thus the use of the Gibson Girl iconography in black vaudeville and in The Red Moon proved a deliberate and calculated attempt to uplift African American women’s status.
The Whitman sisters appeared on stage in the 1900s in “full Gibson Girl style with high pompadours.” By performing on stage as cosmopolitan women dressed exquisitely and at the height of fashion, they presented a dignified image on stage of African American femininity. They communicated that African American women exuded beauty, politesse, and sophisticated fashion sensibilities. This contrasted sharply with common representations of African American women as the asexual Mammy, the oversexed Jezebel, the wild, childlike, dancing Pickanniny, and the Tragic Mulatto.

Cole and Johnson also used the image of the Gibson Girls, a la the “Gibson Gals,” to elevate African American women’s social position. The placement of the “Gibson Gals” in The Red Moon worked to legitimize African American women as refined, reputable, and extremely well dressed. The Gibson Gals worked as a lesson to audience members and specifically to white people about the decorum of African American women, their womanhood, and their moral character. Just as black writers like Jessie Fauset presented extremely conservative depictions of African American female virtue, fidelity, and chastity in order to make credible arguments for citizenship and marriage rights for African American women, the Whitman Sisters and Cole and Johnson deployed portrayals of black respectability as part of a broader strategy of uplift.

Cole and Johnson situated African American women at the axis of true womanhood by christening African American women in their production the Gibson Gal. The contention here is that the team recast African American women as the Gibson Gal to signify their blackness; to reappropriate the pejorative term girl, which was assigned to African American women; and to affirm African American womanhood. Cole and Johnson envisioned the Gibson Gals as wealthy, reputable, and cosmopolitan, “the social leaders” of their town. Mollie Dill portrayed Amanda Gibson, while Bessie Tribble, Lulu Coleman, Mayme Butler, Tillie Smith, Bessie Sims, and Blanche Deas portrayed the Gibson Gals. Bob Cole’s notes for the production indicated that in the second act an “[a]uto horn [is] to toot on entrance of [the] Gibson Gals.” The car represented middle-class standing, upward mobility, polish, and the gentility of the Gibson Gals. Henry Gant portrayed Bill Gibson, the saloonkeeper, who, although he is the richest man in town and finances his daughter’s forays into “Negro society,” is nevertheless excluded from “Negro society.”

During the 1908–1910 theatrical seasons of The Red Moon, a column entitled “The Red Moon Rays” appeared in the Booker T. Washington–owned newspaper, The New York Age. The column, written by Charles A. Hunter, the stage manager and press agent for the production, followed the company as they toured the United States and Canada. This column
featured varied topics, including light gossip and brief reviews, as well as other relevant issues about the show and the cast members. The articles offered insight into the strategies used to elevate African Americans. Four important themes threaded through the column in relation to the female entertainers: the importance of marriage, racial uplift, the positioning of the women cast members as Gibson Girls, and the use of women’s clubs started by them to promote women’s rights while on tour. Through “The Red Moon Rays” Cole and Johnson and the female performers made a conscious and strategic effort to venerate African American women.

The projects of uplift, marriage, and the protection of African American women proved essential elements to Cole and Johnson’s program for raising the rank of African Americans on and off stage. Bob Cole’s scrapbook offers insight into the reasons why uplift and protection proved necessary for African American women, and reveals some of Cole’s influences. One such article from the 1895 Republican newspaper The Press recounted the murder of black men in Georgia’s Brooks County by white men which culminated in “their wives’ and daughters’ subject[ion] to [the] most inhuman indigni-
ties.”¹⁹ The brutal treatment the women encountered most likely included rape, beatings, and torture, but the paper felt that the atrocities proved too horrible to print in detail. Before their brutalization by white men, many of the women dealt with the horror of witnessing their husband’s murder. Others found their spouses dead upon returning home. The article also related that the inhumane treatment they experienced proved as barbaric and as ter-
rible as the Armenian genocide.²⁰

These types of articles acted as reminders that Bob Cole himself escaped lynching at the age of fifteen. These incidents and the many other atrocities committed against African American people during his lifetime influenced Cole to protect blacks, most specifically African American women, and to raise their societal rank. His family life influenced his efforts to aggrandize African American women because he adored his mother and his four sisters. Because of these warm familial relationships, Cole promoted respectability through the marriage trope in both Shoo Fly Regiment and The Red Moon.

In 1900 African American clubwoman Fannie Barrier Williams contended that African American women met extreme challenges in gaining womanhood rights and the safeguards it afforded.

There has been no fixed public opinion to which [African American and I will add Native American] women could appeal; no protection against libelous attacks upon their characters, and no chivalry generous enough to guarantee their safety against man’s inhumanity to woman.²¹
Williams argues that as insurmountable as these obstacles appeared, African American women persevered, and by 1900 they ascended to American womanhood. The character of Minnehaha and the Gibson Gal chorus represented this ascension. Like her white Gibson Girl counterpart sitting in the park with her beau in “In The Park” (1898), the African American/Native American Gibson Gal fit firmly in this mold, precious and deserving of all the protections and comforts of womanhood.22 “The Red Moon Rays” also worked to uplift African American women through marriage and propriety.

While marriage proved central to the plot of *The Red Moon*, it also dominated the lives of Cole and Johnson and the cast members. Married couples in the company included Bessie and Andrew Tribble, Theodore Pankey and Anna Cook Pankey, and Bessie O. Brown and Frank Brown (figures 18 and 19). Abbie Mitchell, recently divorced from Will Marion Cook, and Ada Overton Walker, who married George Walker, rounded out the married cast (figure 21).

Marriage played an important role in the personal lives of Cole and Johnson as well. Cole married soubrette Stella Wiley early in his career, while James Weldon Johnson married Grace Nail in 1910, and J. Rosamond Johnson married Nora Johnson in 191323 (figures 22, 23, and 24).
Figure 21. Ada Overton Walker and George Walker.
The Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture
Figure 22. Bob Cole and Stella Wiley. James Weldon Johnson Papers, Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library

Figure 23. James Weldon Johnson and Grace Nail Johnson. Special Collections Department, Robert W. Woodruff Library, Emory University. Protected by Copyright Law, Title 17 U.S. Code
Figure 24. Nora Johnson and Baby Mildred. Special Collections Department, Robert W. Woodruff Library, Emory University. Protected by Copyright Law, Title 17 U.S. Code

Figure 25. Gertrude Townsend Robertson. The New York Age. May 11, 1911, 6
“The Red Moon Rays” also promoted marriage and touted the women of the company as attractive and good marriage material. For example, “Sam Lucas, in speaking of pretty women in the profession, says that were The Red Moon Company’s ladies in the matrimonial market, a suitor could easily be blindfolded, grasp the first one near and be happy ever after.” The New York Age also reported that Gertrude Townsend Robertson met and married a wealthy Canadian while on tour (figure 25).

Articles about the married couples appeared in “The Red Moon Rays,” with accounts of gift giving among them. Bessie Oliver Brown gave her husband a birthday present of “a silver filigreed fountain pen and a gilt edge morocco bound check book” which, according to the article, left “no loophole for the forthcoming ever ready ‘touch’ for spring millinery.” “The Red Moon Rays” made a clear attempt to reverse not only the cruelty that African Americans encountered, but reinscribed their status from victims to people with agency. The discussion of marriage within the article and the marriages of the cast members accomplished the goal of seizing civilizing and respectability tropes for African Americans in the face of the savagery of whites in the United States.

“The Red Moon Rays” promoted the female performers as reputable due to their marriages and as the embodiment of the Gibson Girl. The female cast members’ women’s clubs celebrated African American womanhood and intellect. Some of the women such as Abbie Mitchell belonged to the larger African American women’s organizations such as the National Council of Negro Women, while others, including Mitchell and Ada Overton Walker, participated as clubwomen, performers, and financial supporters of local New York women’s clubs such as Victoria Earle Matthews’s White Rose Mission and the Travelers Aid Society. Theatrical women like Abbie Mitchell, Ada Overton Walker, and the women of The Red Moon followed in the footsteps of Hampton University teachers Georgiana Washington and Amelia Perry Pride, who belonged to women’s clubs and who through these clubs founded organizations, agitated against racism, and fought for civil rights. In 1898 in the “Afro-American Notes,” T. Thomas Fortune detailed the activities of African American clubwomen. He noted that the Woman’s Auxiliary of the Summer State League of Connecticut and women in Pine Bluff, Arkansas, endeavored to build homes for orphans and homes for the aged. Fortune reported that Atlanta Clubwomen’s Carrie Steele orphanage in Atlanta flourished, and that the Women of the Soldiers Aid Society of Boston sent supplies to African American soldiers in “Porto Rico.” The Crisis also reported on the activities of clubwomen, while Cornelia Bowen, Principal of Mt. Meigs Institute, the school that Georgiana Washington founded, wrote
of the efforts made by the National Federation of Colored Women’s Clubs in Mount Meigs to operate a reformatory to prevent the criminalization of African American youth imprisoned with “hardened criminals.” Some famous clubwomen belonged to the black bourgeoisie like Mrs. Booker T. Washington (Margaret Murray), the Mississippi Senator Blanche K. Bruce’s wife, Fannie Barrier Williams, Victoria Earle Matthews, who founded the New York Black Women’s Club, and Washingtonian Mary Church Terrell, who founded the National Association of Colored Women. Others, like Madame C. J. Walker, a former washerwoman and the first African American female millionaire, discovered that the elite clubwomen rejected her application to join the NACW, but eventually relented. These elite women, while more than willing to aid the less fortunate, drew distinct color-caste and class distinctions.

The women of *The Red Moon* yearning to learn propelled them to the center of the disputations surrounding raising the status of African American women and the Gibson Girl. They organized two women’s clubs, *The Red Moon* Mending Club, with Bessie Tribble as president, and a dramatic class, organized and taught by Elizabeth Williams. Williams was no novice to acting and teaching given that in 1905 she organized The Elizabeth Williams’ Oriental Empire Stock Company. Through these clubs the women presented themselves as not only intellectual but also cultured and concerned about the issues African American women encountered in U.S. society. Their efforts replicated the work of African American clubwomen across the country like Mrs. Fannie L. Gordon of Fargo, North Dakota, who in 1903 held the position of president of the H. P. C. Literary Club of Fargo. In 1898 T. Thomas Fortune lauded clubwomen and wrote that “[i]n all directions there are signs that Afro-American women are taking hold of the race problem with intelligence and are finding that those who help themselves have plenty of people to help them.” The importance of respectability appeared a concern for *The Red Moon* clubwomen. For example, at one of the biweekly meetings of *The Red Moon* Mending Club, Mrs. Bessie Tribble asked the participants, “What is a lady?” Mrs. Bessie O. Brown stated:

> A lady, in a true sense is one who abhors vulgarity of both thought and speech; one who dislikes to be conspicuous in any way and avoids notoriety; she sets higher store by personal cleanliness and neatness than by fine clothes. One who tries to look and dress like a lady and is ever willing to behave and act like one.

The women of the club worked to change the perception of African American
women to that of a “lady”: well spoken, clean, neat and well dressed.

Middle-class standing, and the right to call one’s self a lady, proved essential to African American women at the turn of the century. The women of *The Red Moon* appeared acutely aware of the obstacles African American women met with in the struggle for rights and respect within U.S. culture. Blackface minstrelsy, coon songs, and virulent stereotypes all worked to denigrate African American women through ugly and reprehensible images and ideas. By claiming the title “lady,” by abjuring vulgarity, and by dressing immaculately, the African American women of *The Red Moon* steadfastly seized womanhood as their own.

Similarly, the drama class taught by Elizabeth Williams advanced the notion that the women of the company embodied culture and superior mental abilities. The drama club, described as “[t]he latest of the many intellectual and social organizations connected with *The Red Moon* Company,” positioned the African American women of the company as concerned with intellectual as well as social issues of the day. The participants in the group, Bessie O. Brown, Mayme Butler, Bessie Tribble, Blanche Deas, and Lulu
Coleman, were, according to the column, “rapidly advancing in this art.” Williams stated that she “is very proud of the class and says that the time is not far distant when there will be six new character artists in the profession.” The female cast members of *The Red Moon* aspired to broaden their knowledge base and present themselves as well-bred women. Like the Gibson Girl in “All’s Well That Ends Well” who sits at the piano dressed exquisitely in a mutton-sleeve dress while accompanying her Gibson Girl friend who dreamily sings off into the distance, the female cast members of *The Red Moon* pursued musical, theatrical, physical, and literary knowledge and aspired to broaden their overall knowledge base and present themselves as well-bred women. One could easily locate the women of *The Red Moon* in this drawing, as they fully encompass the essence of the Gibson Girl as students, teachers, and performers through their pursuit of erudition and culture. While society routinely afforded white women the privilege of womanhood and education, African American women seized womanhood rights through the creation of clubs whose primary object included uplift.

Correspondence between James Weldon Johnson and his wife Grace Nail also illustrates the significance of elevating the African American female through education. Nail belonged to the black aristocracy of Brooklyn, and was known as a notable and popular hostess of the New York elite, a woman with “schooled sensitivity to the finest art and literature, and a deep concern for community welfare” (figure 26).

While Johnson acted as the American consul in Venezuela in 1912, his wife lived in Florida with his parents. The interconnections between perceptions of theatrical African American women and laywomen is illuminated by the couple’s attention to her cultural and scholarly pursuits as evidenced by Johnson’s May 8, 1912, inquiry from Corinto as to her progress in her French and piano lessons:

> And how are you getting on Chicken? Still sticking to your French? Don’t slow down on it. Try and do a little work on your piano if you find time, but I suppose its already getting too hot for that. But your French is fine outdoor work for you. Nothing nicer for whiling away a few morning hours in the Park.

Nail’s pursuit of enlightenment and James Weldon Johnson’s encouragement of these endeavors follow both the ideology of W. E. B. Du Bois and Booker T. Washington, who saw the importance of ennobling African American women. Washington and Du Bois’s daughters attended elite white institutions, and pursued music and other markers of the upper class. We must
remember that while Washington publicly promoted industrial training over higher education, he felt that edification at the university level and the pursuit of culture remained key to elevating African Americans. Although Francille Rusan Wilson notes that Du Bois did not encourage Atlanta University female students to further their education, he did support his daughter’s efforts at higher learning. Another important trope of uplift illuminated within the correspondence between the Johnsons included his respect for African American womanhood. The correspondence elucidates Johnson’s reverence and regard for his wife. He wrote from Corinto on May 18, 1912:

Don’t get discouraged with your French, you can only master it by constant repetition—you know it was the same with your Spanish, hour after hour of repetition, then suddenly you found out that you could speak Spanish and that you knew more than you had any idea that you knew. It would be fine if you could find some little French shop in the neighborhood where you could stop in every day or two, spend a dime and get a dollar’s worth of French in return.

While Grace Nail enjoyed a life of leisure, the reality of the majority of African American women’s lives at the beginning of the twentieth century included working as domestics, washerwomen, and laborers. According to Kali Gross in *Colored Amazons*, even in northern cities such as Philadelphia, African American women found themselves confined to domestic service, given the discriminatory hiring practices which barred them from factory work. Nail’s membership in the black aristocracy of Brooklyn freed her from this type of life.

Grace Nail’s 1912 diary offers us a view into how African American women carved a space in society and positioned themselves at the center of the spheres of womanhood and respectability. Nail made entries in the diary when she stayed with her family in New York while James Weldon Johnson acted as the consul in Venezuela. She detailed her daily activities, which included taking French lessons at the Berlitz School, shopping for clothing, lunching with her friends and family, and attending the theater. These activities not only exemplify Nail’s status as a lady of leisure, a true Gibson Girl, but also evince edification and the theater as tropes of uplift. The correspondence and the diary illustrate the Johnsons’ use of uplift to position African American women at the center of womanhood, intellect, and repute. By utilizing the tools of uplift, that is, African American female estimation, education, and deference for African American womanhood, the Johnsons repositioned and reimagined the status of the African American female.
“The Red Moon Rays” also promoted the female performers as fashionable Gibson Girls, cosmopolitan and honorable. Correspondingly, by positioning them as well bred, Cole and Johnson and the female performers contested the notion of stage life as unseemly. Like the Gibson Girl drawings, witty and spirited comments on the fashion sense of the female entertainers dominated the column. A February 18, 1909, article offered that many of them wore fur coats and that “Judging from the number of fur coats worn by The Red Moon chorus girls one would believe that their route laid directly to the North Pole.” In a similar vein, “The Red Moon Rays” reported with mock alarm that the female chorus including Fanny Wise, Zennie Hunter, Mollie Dill, Marie Lucas, Pauline Hackney, and Marie Young had fallen ill and suffered from “millinery hysteria.” The symptoms included “the desire to possess the latest creations in headgear,” but the author assured the reader “that they will probably be cured by pay day.”

Photographs of the female cast members accompanied the articles and presented them as dignified and stylish. A photograph of Zennie Hunter shows her as a slender woman standing sideways with her hair styled in a fashionable roll, wearing a black dress with long sleeves that puff at the shoulders. Her hands rest delicately on a mantle and she glances at the camera displaying just a hint of a smile. Hunter appears as a tranquil and serene presence. In another photograph, Leona Marshall appears serene. She is a large woman who looks directly at the camera, slightly smiling. Marshall wears a white headband knotted at the left side, and a white lace dress with a high neck and long sleeves. The slight smile that plays off Marshall’s lips glows with mischief that the author hints at in the commentary. Finally, Lulu Coleman emerges as the most flamboyantly dressed of the women, as she appears dressed in full costume for the song “On the Road to Monterey.” She stands in a side profile, with her head tilted looking directly at the camera. Coleman wears a mantilla of shoulder-length black lace with flowers that frame her face. She also wears a white high-necked, long-sleeved blouse with a large broach at her throat and a black skirt. She crosses her hands in front of her body and looks placid. All these women radiate a quiet eminence that reflects Charles A. Hunter’s witty comments and a Gibson Girl mystique.

James Weldon Johnson’s letters from Corninto, Venezuela in 1912 to Grace Nail reveal the importance of fashion to the uplift of African American women. In these letters Johnson expresses his desire to see his wife exquisitely dressed and as the most beautiful of the women in their circle. On May 24, 1912, he states, “I’m glad your new dress is pretty. I always want you to look pretty, as pretty as anybody and a great deal prettier than most of them.” Part of the uplift strategy meant introducing African American women to the pub-
lic as the ultimate in sophistication, style, and dress. In her diary, Grace Nail
described shopping excursions which took her to Stern’s for stockings, Wana-
maker’s for shoes, Gimbel’s for lunch, Macy’s for Macy’s, the beauty salon to
have her hair “waved,” and dress fittings at home. These jaunts proved an
important part of situating Nail as the quintessence of African American wom-
anhood. To some this may appear problematic, given Grace Nail’s member-
ship in black society and the color-caste system so ingrained within the group,
which placed Nail over other blacks due to her light complexion. But we must
remember that all African American women struggled for womanhood rights
and experienced extreme racism and discrimination regardless of color. We
also must keep in mind that Cole and Johnson argued for womanhood rights
for all the women of the cast of different hues. On August 9, 1912, Johnson
reveals that not only was he pleased to see pictures of Nail, but that he shared
the photos with his colleagues in Corinto (figure 27).

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*Figure 27. Grace Nail Johnson in "Men’s Clothing." Special Collections Department, Robert W. Woodruff Library, Emory University. Protected by Copyright Law, Title 17 U.S. Code*
The pictures came. They are fine! I gave Mrs. May hers, and she is delighted. I was so proud that I took mine in my pocket and showed it to several of my friends. It is now my favorite picture of you. Your hat and your suit show up splendidly. Little Carlota May admired the picture very much, but wanted to know why you had on men’s clothes.

Little Carlota’s comments elucidate the significance of Cole and Johnson’s battle to elevate African American women in U.S. society. Carlota’s question exposes the hegemonic codes of womanhood, which exclude African American women, codes that placed Nail firmly within the stereotype of the masculinized woman. The comment speaks to why it proved necessary to situate Nail at the center of African American womanhood. No matter how cosmopolitan Nail appears, regardless of Johnson’s efforts to glorify her, her womanhood comes into question when faced with white preeminence in the guise of Little Carlota. The correspondence between the Johnsons reveals the necessity of presenting African American women as refined and decorous not only to one’s husband, but to the public. The diary also illustrates how Nail participated fully in centering herself within the discourse of uplift.

The uplift of the female cast members also included presenting themselves as well bred and pious. Religion proved a central aspect in the uplift of African Americans beginning with slavery, the missionary industrial institutions, and African American adherence to religious doctrine. “The Red Moon Rays” and Cole and Johnson utilized religion and fashion sensibilities to prove African American women deserved citizenship and womanhood rights. In a column dated March 18, 1909, “Edgar Connor claims that when to church a soubrette goes it’s mostly to show her clothes. Our Six Saucy Soubrettes, headed by Daisy Brown, think he is slurring.” The strategy of uplift through the church remains very similar to the vaudeville team the Whitman Sister’s methods. The sisters used the church to dignify and legitimate the women of their vaudeville act. Similarly, “The Red Moon Rays” also used the church to legitimate the women of the production.

Cole and Johnson and the female entertainers of the show utilized “The Red Moon Rays” to promote the uplift of African American women through the Gibson Girls, women’s clubs, and religion to show the moral character, politesse, middle-class status, and intellect of the African American female. The women created meaning for themselves through these symbols. By positioning African American women at the center of such hegemonic tropes, Cole and Johnson used uplift and demanded respect for African American women. Despite the denial of citizenship rights, human rights, and the privi-
leges of the Cult of True Womanhood, these African American women fixed onto the title of “lady” and held firmly to that status.

African American female performers experienced many obstacles in changing perceptions about stage life. In the novel *The Sport of the Gods*, Paul Laurence Dunbar illustrates the negative perceptions of the musical stage, characterizing the stage as low class with its cheap costumes, “pale yellow and sickly green” women, and “tawdry music and inane words.” Dunbar’s novel demonstrates African American women on stage falling from grace, as evidenced by the two characters Hattie Sterling and Kitty Hamilton. Hattie Sterling, although good looking, lost her youth and maintained an affinity for whiskey. Although she attracted the much younger Joe, an innocent from the South whom she likes in a “half-contemptuous, half-amused way,” Dunbar characterizes her as bad to the bone. He states, “Hattie Sterling had given [Joe] both his greatest impulse for evil and for good.” She drove Joe first to drink, then to financial excess by compelling him to lavish his money on her, then to humiliation, and finally to murder.

Dunbar also details Kitty Hamilton’s descent brought about by the evils of the theater. Kitty Hamilton was young, African American, and beautiful and arrived in New York with her doomed brother Joe. After meeting Sterling through her brother, she auditioned and joined Hattie’s Broadway show, in the face of her mother’s disapproval. Her mother vehemently rejected stage life and would rather see Kitty dead, despite Kitty’s retort that “nowadays everybody thinks stage people respectable up here.” Like Hattie, Kitty eventually showed the signs of age, and worked to maintain an illusion of beauty with the aid of cosmetics. Kitty became self-involved, obsessed with clothes, and fixated on the attention and adoration that the theater brought her. Ultimately, Kitty experienced estrangement from her parents, who felt she was worse then dead, and continued a downward spiral because of her association with the stage.

Dunbar paints a bleak picture of stage life. He writes: “It is strange how the glare of the footlights succeeds in deceiving so many people who are able to see through other delusions. The cheap dresses on the street had not fooled Kitty for an instant, but take the same cheese-cloth, put a little water starch into it and put it on the stage, and she could see only chiffon.” Although his theatrical affiliation dated back to 1898, Dunbar painted a depressing picture of theatrical life in the novel. One could ascribe Dunbar’s frustration and contempt for the stage to his assigned position as a dialect poet and finding himself locked into the genre even when writing the librettos for *Clorindy: or The Origin of the Cakewalk* (1898), *Jes Like White Folks* (1900), and *The Cannibal King* (1901), which he wrote with J. Rosamond Johnson.
while Cole produced the show. His close association with show business and his conflicted relationship with women may also account for his insensitive portrayal of African American theatrical women and his total dismissal of the theater as a place for ennobling them.\textsuperscript{59}

While Dunbar envisioned the negative connotations of stage life, \textit{The New York Age} attempted to invert the unfavorable perceptions of the stage. Through what appears as a carefully constructed and planned ideological campaign, the newspaper ran a series of articles in 1909 that advanced the positive aspects of performance life. They promoted a theatrical career as a form of racial uplift in articles with titles such as “College Girls and the Stage,” and “The Church and the Stage.” These articles elevated the status of African American artists by lauding their ethics and religious standards.

“College Girls and the Stage” asserted that although a large portion of college women chose a career on the stage, they failed almost in all instances due to their feelings of superiority. They felt their high breeding, education, and moral character placed them above theatrical women with less education.\textsuperscript{60} The college girl’s family and friends warned her to remember her social standing and status as a lady, as a Christian to hold herself above the other performers through disassociation, and the family expressed sorrow concerning the “evil associations of the theatre.”\textsuperscript{61} This attitude, the author asserted, accounted for the failure of college girls in the theatrical arena. He concluded that college girls who pursued the stage must discard their judgmental attitude toward performers if they wanted to succeed, and avoid judging other theatrical women whose self-sacrifice might enable one woman to support her mother, another woman to send her brother to school, and still another to go without food and clothing to care for an invalid sister.\textsuperscript{62}

Similar efforts to dignify stage performers appear in an article entitled “The Church and the Stage.” In \textit{The New York Age} Lester A. Walton asked ministers to respond to comedian Ernest Hogan’s contention published in a previous issue that church people felt antagonistic toward entertainers. Bishop Alexander Walters responded and assured the readers that his followers respected performers. He asserted that many performers such as Madame Selika, Miss Edna Nahar, and Madame Floretta Batson Bergen began their careers in the church. Walters also assured the readers that the church supported performers “at every stage of the career” and explained that while he pastored at the Mother Zion Church from 1888 to 1892, he introduced Sissieretta Jones to New York audiences.\textsuperscript{63} Similarly, Reverend Reverdy Ransom also noted that many female artists, including Sissieretta Jones, either received their early training in the church or were discovered there. Ransom contends that these women “graduated from our church choirs into a theatri-
He suggests that while the church and the stage, to some extent, lay at two different ends of the spectrum, as a minister he commends those who go into the theatrical profession.

While Bishop Walters felt that a lower class of people attended vaudeville, he assured the readers that appropriate entertainment included light comedy and dramas. He praised the shows of Cole and Johnson and Williams and Walker, asserting that both ministers and laymen enjoyed them. Bishop Walters maintained that the church welcomed performers as long as they declared their “willing[ness] to live up to Christian principles,” and noted that his friends included some distinguished African American performers.

Reverend Reverdy Ransom of the Bethel AME Church held views comparable to Bishop Walters. Because his family included an uncle, Mr. Sam Lucas, who, according to Lester Walton, held the title of “the dean of the theatrical profession among Negroes,” Ransom sympathized with Hogan’s argument. He offered that not only did some church folk express hostility towards theater people, but they also unveiled hypocritical views because many clergymen attended the theater when out of town. He concluded that since they attended the theater, their opinion and attitude toward the stage were due more to “religious public opinion and inherited prejudices than to anything based on moral or religious scruples.” The black press’s participation in debates concerning the theater makes clear that theatrical representations, the image of the stage performer, and their careers proved important to the entire African American community, not just to the entertainers and entrepreneurs.

**Ada Overton Walker and the Gibson Girl**

The Words of pity dwelt upon her lip  
And in her heart good will to all mankind.

But o’er her grave shall hearts to mem’ry warm,  
And tears bedew the pious lady’s tomb  
(Romeo L. Doughterty, “Aida Overton Walker in Memoriam”)

Theater as a place for “staging” a battle for racial inclusion permeated the writings of Ada Overton Walker. In *The Red Moon* she played Phoebe Brown. Walker’s performance glorified African American and Native American women. Her choreographic achievements remained incredibly impressive, given that men dominated the theatrical profession. Walker successfully
carved out a space for herself in the theater, emerging as one of the most renowned African American female choreographers and performers of the time. Because of these accomplishments Ada Overton Walker symbolized the ultimate African American Gibson Girl, modern, independent, self-assured, creative, and womanly. She contended that the stage offered a dignified and acceptable profession for African American women. In her effort to change their station, Walker adopted the principles of The Cult of True Womanhood and the persona of the Gibson Girl.

Walker was born Ada Reed in 1880 on Cornelia Street in New York City. She began her formal dance training with Mrs. Thorp on Seventh Avenue and Thirty-fourth Street. In 1896 Ada Overton Walker joined Bob Cole’s All Stock Theater Company, and performed with them for two years as a dancer, actress, and singer. In 1898 she joined Black Patti’s Troubadours. Bob Cole also performed with the troop as Willy W. This proved a radical career choice given the negative perceptions surrounding theatrical women. Walker assumed the role of the definitive cultured African American female performer. She epitomized an alluring Gibson Girl and closely resembled her white replica in “Studies in Expression: The ‘Chorus Girl’s’ Visit Home.” Gibson envisaged this Gibson Girl from the chorus draped in pearls, a large feathered hat, and a beautiful gown, with her astonished family. Ada Overton Walker at this early stage in her career possessed the style and glamour of Gibson’s chorus girl. Her unique charisma and charm would lead African American theatrical critic Lester A. Walton to proclaim in 1908 that Walker was a “great artist,” “a soubrette second to none in America and whose dancing marks her a genius no. 1.” Her experience with the Troubadours and Cole’s ultimate imprisonment and censure left an indelible mark on Walker, who with Cole and his supporters discovered that the management of the Black Patti Troubadours conspired to blacklist them, as discussed in chapter 1. By supporting Bob Cole and demanding equal pay, Ada Overton Walker exhibited a strong sense of social justice, agency, and determination. This pivotal event most certainly informed her social thought and her strategy concerning racial uplift. Walker’s home decorations also reflected her social and political ideology, and revealed her as a forward-thinking Gibson Girl. She displayed photographs of Frederick Douglass and Booker T. Washington, underscoring her modern and revolutionary philosophy concerning African American uplift. Her loyalty to Bob Cole and her steadfastness in some ways replicated the Gibson Girls in “Rival Beauties,” who brandished axes while radiating propriety. In the vein of these Gibson Girls, Walker radiated decorum, charm, and refinement, while at the same time exhibiting a headstrong nature. Ada Overton Walker remained resolute in her beliefs
and stood ready to go to battle for equity and justice.

The experience with Black Patti’s Troubadours left an ineradicable imprint on Walker and most certainly taught her how to advocate for her rights. This incident colored the ways in which she would argue for the womanhood and civil rights of the African American female entertainer later in her career. Because of the episode with the Troubadours, Ada Overton Walker retired from the stage temporarily only to return later in 1898. Walker joined the African American dancer Stella Wiley, Bob Cole’s wife, and the African American blackface comedians Bert Williams and George Walker for a tobacco advertisement, which featured them cakewalking and led to Walker’s return to the stage. A producer wanted to present a show featuring the quartet cakewalking. Ada Overton Walker initially refused in part because of her bad experience with the Troubadours. She later relented and joined the Williams and Walker Company for New York performances only. Walker’s career blossomed and she was transformed into a famous soubrette, dancer, choreographer, singer, and producer within the Williams and Walker theatrical company.

Ada Overton Walker incorporated lessons learned from Bob Cole and publicly claimed ownership of her creative product as a choreographer and theatrical producer, shaping her image as that of an imposing, confident, yet poised Gibson Girl. Walker performed in the tour of Clorindy: or The Origin of the Cakewalk, The Octoroos (1899), Williams and Walker’s Policy Players (1899) as the choreographer, Son of Ham (1900), The Cannibal King (1901), In Dahomey (1902), Abyssinia (1906) as the choreographer and rehearsal director, Bandanna Land (1907) as the choreographer, The Red Moon (1908–1910), His Honor The Barber (1911), and the “Salome Dance” (1912) as the dancer and choreographer.

While performing in these shows, Walker cultivated her Gibson Girl persona by coupling her work as an artist with strategies learned from her experience with the Black Patti’s Troubadours to campaign for African American rights. She publicly addressed the experiences of African Americans who confronted racism both on stage and off and tackled the question of the love scene interdiction for African American performers. While she promoted African American rights, her creative talents also gained the notice of the press. The Brooklyn Eagle announced that she transcended the color line by performing with “grace and distinction of style which add a touch of Gallic eloquence to the work of Aida Overton Walker.” As the essence of the progressive African American Gibson Girl, Walker reached the zenith at her time.

Walker also incorporated her writings, her career, and photographic
Figure 28. Ada Overton Walker and the Gibson Gal. Fisk University, Special Collections

Figure 29. "Mercy Hospital Benefit: Aida [sic] Overton Walker in Vaudeville. March 26, 1910." Cullen Jackman Memorial Collection. Special Collections and Archives, Atlanta University
images of herself as part of her approach to uplifting African American women in the United States. In a photograph that accompanies an article written by Walker, she embodies the very essence of a Gibson Girl, as she looks directly at the camera with large, piercing black eyes (figure 28). Ada Overton Walker is stunning with her smooth dark brown skin, her hair piled high, her figure adorned with a beautiful crisp white blouse with mullet sleeves, a high neckline, and a silver brooch. Not only did she write articles as part of her strategy for elevating the status of African American women, she also participated in charity work to aid them (figure 29). She performed in the Charity Bee for the benefit of the White Rose Industrial Home, The Home for Protection of Colored Women, Mercy Hospital, and St. Philips Parish Home. In her writings Ada Overton Walker also includes African American men in the project of uplifting African American women. Walker writes

[African American men] have duties on and off the stage, to women as well as to yourselves. Remember this fact: good men help women to be good; and remember also, that in helping women you are really helping yourselves. We must work together in the uplift of all and for the progress of all that is good and noble in life.

Including men in her uplift project, Walker maintains that this partnership will assure the success of not only African American theatrical women, but also the entire race. Walker also alludes to society’s perception of stage life.

Ada Overton Walker addresses the negative connotations that the stage evinced during the 1900s. She suggests that some people such as “so-called [black] society people” perceive stage life as undignified and “regard the stage as a place to be ashamed of.” Walker proposes that performers in fact act as representatives of the race. Walker places herself above “society people” as an actress by saying that “[w]henever it is my good fortune to meet such persons, I sympathize with them for I know they are ignorant as to what is really being done in their own behalf by members of their race on stage.” By first displaying sympathy for the ignorant “so-called society people,” and by placing herself above them, Walker demonstrates that society people remain unaware of the uplift agenda of artists.

In one fell swoop, Walker dignifies the African American female performer; reimagines her as respectable, cosmopolitan; and through her argument, illustrates the intelligence of the African American female performer. One could say that Walker places herself at the center of society as a “Gibson Girl.” Through this form of self-representation, Ada Overton Walker annihi-
lates the argument that stage life is a disreputable profession.

While one of Ada Overton Walker’s concerns was the relationship between black society people and performers, she also involved herself with working to eradicate white racism. Fighting white racism seems most important to Ada Overton Walker’s project of uplift. She considers that, “In this age we are all fighting the one problem—that is the color problem! I venture to think and dare to state that our profession does more toward the alleviation of color prejudice than any profession among colored people.”

Walker presents performers as freedom fighters whose success challenges racism. She notes that as part of the Williams and Walker Company, she performed and instructed the wealthy white class in the United States and in Europe, including King Edward VII and Lady Constance Mackenzie. Walker asserts, “I can truthfully state that my profession has given me entrée to residences which members of my race in other professions would have a hard task in gaining if ever they did.” By entrée into these circles Walker suggests that she and the Williams and Walker Company raised the level of African Americans to a prominent position through their positive representation of African American performers. Walker in effect transformed attitudes toward the theatrical profession to that of a highly regarded occupation. She contended that African Americans must show that they are as skilled as whites in all arenas, including the stage, and that the theatrical community must train great performers to “demonstrate that our people move along with the progress of the times.” This statement exposes Walker as a progressive and modern theorist concerning African American theater. Ultimately, she holds racism accountable for preventing African American performers from fully “moving along with the progress of the times.” In the end, Walker reveals her idealistic and at the same time pragmatic nature and argues that African American entertainers would succeed fully in theater if given the opportunities.

Ada Overton Walker’s most important intervention in the perceptions of African American women performers included arguing that the stage promoted the uplift of African American women and that their morals remained uncompromised. She asserted that “a woman does not lose her dignity to-day as used to be the case—when she enters upon stage life.” Rather than blaming the “avocation,” one must look at the reasons a woman chooses the stage life. Walker insisted that the quality of the girl rather than the profession mattered, and predicted:

If a girl is gay and easily dazzled by the brilliant side of life on the Stage or off, then I should say to that girl: “Choose some other line of work; look to
some other profession for the Stage is certainly no place for you.” But if she be a girl of good thoughts and habits, and she chooses the stage for the love of the profession and professional work, then I should say to her, “Come, for we need so many earnest workers in this field; and by hard work, I am sure the future will repay you and all of us.”

Ada Overton Walker maintained that the quality of the girl rather than the nature of the profession mattered. Through her writing and her charity work, Ada Overton Walker situated herself at the center of womanhood as a Gibson girl and reinscribed the status of African American women on and off stage.

Taking a page out of Ada Overton Walker’s perception of stage life, Jessie Fauset’s novel *Comedy American Style* (1933) introduces the very respectable, successful actress and dancer Marise Davies to the reader. Fauset portrays the stage as something favorable and emancipatory. The dark-skinned Marise with her “nut-brown skin with its hint of red on the cheek-bones” represents a sophisticate at the height of fashion, desirability, and reputability who took New York by storm as an entertainer. In painting Marise as an extremely successful artist in New York, Fauset upgrades the perceptions of African American women on the stage. Marise in many ways epitomizes Ada Overton Walker. Marise marries the highly successful Nick, and this marriage symbolizes her respectability, middle-class values, and station in life. Fauset, in this way, immortalized Walker. Ada Overton Walker crested as the iconic Gibson Girl; her career stands as a record of her unstinting efforts to exalt African American women and the stage.

**Ada Overton Walker, Abbie Mitchell, and an Audience with the King**

The year 1903 proved pivotal for Ada Overton Walker and Abbie Mitchell, who continued their transformation into Gibson Girls. Their connections with the Williams and Walker production of *In Dahomey* in London allowed them to fully embrace the image of the Gibson Girl as their personas.

The popularity of *In Dahomey* and the adventures of the cast members in Europe caused quite a stir, given the numerous articles written detailing the popularity of the show and the performers’ escapades. The musical offered audiences the story of Shylock Homestead (Bert Williams) and Rareback Pinkerton (George Walker), detectives hired by Mr. Cicero Lightfoot for a reward of $500 to search for his silver box with an etching of a cat. Because
they cannot find the box, Homestead and Pinkerton present Lightfoot with a counterfeit box and collect the reward. With the recompense in hand, the detectives travel to Dahomey with the African Colonization Society. In the end, the original box is recovered, Lightfoot finds a pot of gold and gains wealth, and Pinkerton and Shylock become the kings of Dahomey. Ada Overton Walker portrayed Rosetta Lightfoot and sang “Vassar Girl” and “I Want to Be an Actor Lady” in the show.93

Ada Overton Walker and Abbie Mitchell used the stage to change the perceptions of African American women through their 1903 audience with King Edward VII of England. Walker appeared in Williams and Walker’s *In Dahomey* at the Shaftsbury Theater, while Abbie Mitchell accompanied her husband, Will Marion Cook, the composer of the show.94

Abbie Mitchell remembered her initial exclusion from the performance for the king at Buckingham Palace, but she recalled that “[t]he King’s coat of arms with coachman and footman [arrived] at my home in Regents Park” and “[t]he King held up [the] performance until I arrived.”95 By bestowing on her this grand honor, the king symbolically ennobled Mitchell, and she submerged herself fully in the experience and surfaced graciously to accept the emblematic regal title conferred upon her. Mitchell recalled, “I remembered that I was now a great lady, so I put on all the airs I knew and walked with dignity, I hope to the carriage.”96 Thus the experience transformed Mitchell into a “great lady.” Influenced by the affirming reception and the deference displayed to her by the king, Mitchell constructed a public identity as a lady, by embodying all the attributes of The Cult of True Womanhood and the Gibson Girl: deference, innocence, purity, and virtue.

Abbie Mitchell crafted a majestic persona as a Gibson Girl that forever linked her to the monumental event. She incorporated the audience into her legend as a performer, and her publicity notices and biographies in playbills announced that she sang before King Edward VII and the queen.97 Mitchell also used her status as a lady to advocate for the rights of African American women, by performing in benefit concerts for the White Rose Industrial Home for Colored Girls and participating in the African American Women’s Club movement.98

Jo A. Tanner argues that when Mitchell reached her forties, her training and her uncompromising need for perfection dictated her behavior. Reminiscent of royalty, she did not socialize or form friendship bonds with those she worked with. Similar to the monarchs, she struck fear in both African American and white colleagues; her Mitchellesque persona led her to “possess a sharp tongue, which she wielded like a weapon.”99 Her early life experiences informed her strong personage, which safeguarded her from
harmful outside forces. Abbie Mitchell’s autobiographical notes indicate that at this early point in her life she developed a steely attitude and created a strong mechanism for self-preservation. This indestructible spirit in some respects replicated the image of the aloof Gibson Girl “Waiting for Tables at the Waldorf.” This Gibson Girl who sits demurely, while at the same time looking intently and impassively at the viewer, conveys the traits that Abbie Mitchell adopted at the age of thirteen to fortify and protect herself from hostile forces. This Gibson Girl façade would follow her throughout her life and would dictate her reserved interactions with people she worked with both on Broadway and in Harlem with the Lafayette Players in the 1920s and 1930s.

Ada Overton Walker also discovered that the king and the English treated her deferentially. Walker gained social prominence in the United States and England as a result of her performance in the show In Dahomey at the Shaftsbury, but her performance before the king of England worked to elevate her class position as a lady. Upon their return to the United States, the Williams and Walker Troupe became the toast of New York City as a result of their triumph at the Shaftesbury Theater. Ada Overton Walker learned that some of the white upper classes in the United States considered her a lady and treated her reverentially. One notable example was Walker’s encounter with the white southerner Mr. Robert L. Hargous, who belonged to the upper crust of New York society.

On May 3, 1903, Mr. and Mrs. Robert L. Hargous hired the In Dahomey company, Ada Overton Walker, and her husband, George Walker, to entertain General Sir Arthur Paget and his American-born wife, Lady Paget, at Delmonico’s. To the dismay of some of the guests, Hargous actually introduced Ada Overton Walker, joined her in the cakewalk, and invited her to waltz. Hargous’s treatment of Walker caused a racial incident, with the New York Sun reporting “some of the women guests thought it was time to leave, and the party did break up shortly afterward.” Richard Newman argues that the incident became the talk of the town, and he surmised that Hargous quite possibly “crossed the color line by treating a black woman virtually as a guest and equal.” Newman also suggests that the wives at the event exhibited jealousy and resented the attention their husbands paid to Ada Overton Walker. While Walker promoted her womanhood and middle-class position, the New York Sun maligned her by referring to her in derogatory terms. The members of the white upper class and some of the New York papers disapproved of Hargous’s deference to Walker; the New York Times suggested that Hargous’s behavior “made Mrs. Walker . . . a fad of the season.” Despite the print media and society folk
who attempted to dismiss Ada Overton Walker as unworthy of reverential treatment, the audience with the king repositioned Walker’s place in United States society. The very fact that *The New York Times* referred to her as Mrs. Walker, whether in jest or not, attests to the shift in her rank.

**Conclusion**

Performing in front of the king of England in London reconfigured Ada Overton Walker’s and Abbie Mitchell’s place in U.S. society, and positioned them at the pinnacle of upper middle-class standing, aspiration, and womanhood rights. In addition, performing in front of the king worked to erase the taint associated with the stage and helped to configure theatrical work as respectable. In response to the question of how the king treated her, Walker aptly noted that the king treated her as any king would treat another, which exhibits not only wit, but also her thoughts on her social position.

Influenced by the affirming reception and the deference displayed to them by the king of England, Abbie Mitchell and Ada Overton Walker used their audience to elevate their status in U.S. society and legitimate the African American theatrical woman. Finally, both women successfully constructed an identity which combined all the attributes of the Gibson Girl to demand womanhood rights and respectability as stage performers during a time when U.S. society denied these very rights to African American women. Through the iconic image of the Gibson Girl, the marriage right, the women’s club movement, religion, and education, Abbie Mitchell, Ada Overton Walker, the women of *The Red Moon*, Cole and Johnson, and the African American print media endeavored to glorify African American women. Cole and Johnson reconfigured the Gibson Girl to that of a chorus of Gibson Gals to claim womanhood rights for African American women on and off the stage, while James Weldon Johnson and Grace Nail shaped her public persona into that of the Gibson Girl. Through their public and private personas, Ada Overton Walker and Abbie Mitchell became the agents of their own lives by fully inhabiting the Cult of True Womanhood, molding themselves into quintessential African American women. Through unremitting agency, political activism, and their audience before the king of England they demanded in no uncertain terms the rights of woman for themselves and their sisters. Cole and Johnson infused their musicals and their lives with one of the most essential tropes of uplift—education. They coupled the ideology of Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. Du Bois and set their philosophies firmly into their musicals and their lives. By adopting the ideologies of these
two seemingly discordant figures’ philosophies, the team created musical theater imbued with Du Bois and Washington’s educational goals and those established at Atlanta University, Tuskegee Institute, and Hampton Institute. Because they loved and admired the women in their families, respected theatrical women and those women they met at school, Cole and Johnson easily embraced Washington’s Womanist strategy as their own, and seamlessly weaved African American women into their theatrical, political, and social ideology. By including tropes of masculinity—the iconic Jack Johnson and the hypermasculine übermensch persona, sports, the gallant African American soldiers of the Spanish American war, and the conquest of the West, Cole and Johnson changed the image of African American men. This change resounds into the twenty-first century through champions such as Paul Robeson, Muhammad Ali, and Arthur Ashe.

While Cole and Johnson’s flaws appeared in a number of stereotypical representations of African Americans and Native Americans, they did in fact change the theatrical map for African Americans by incorporating African American, Native American, and Filipino romantic love in their stage presentations; by including the dauntless African American soldiers of the Spanish American War; by infusing education into their musicals; and by humanizing African American men and women through the manliness movement and the iconic Gibson Girl in so many of their characters. These were incredible accomplishments for their historical milieu, so noteworthy in fact that they influenced a generation of African American writers, directors, performers, and producers.