

Introduction: “It’s Getting Dark on Old Broadway”

*It’s getting dark on Old Broadway,
You see the change in ev’ry cabaret;
Just like an eclipse on the moon,
Ev’ry cafe now has the dancing coon.
Pretty choc’late babies
Shake and shimmy ev’rywhere
Real dark-town entertainers hold the stage,
You must black up to be the latest rage.*

—“IT’S GETTING DARK ON OLD BROADWAY”
FROM THE ZIEGFELD FOLLIES OF 1922*

“WHAT IS SHE”

In October 1923, Florence Mills, one of the most famous African American performers of the decade, joined the cast of the *Greenwich Village Follies*, which was playing at the Winter Garden Theatre in New York City. Mills had previously established herself as a performer of considerable talent when she stepped into the hit musical *Shuffle Along* (1921), and her return to Broadway was met with great excitement among the standing-room-only crowd. Performing six numbers in the revue, she confirmed her reputation as one of the shining stars of the era. A. L. Jackson, a columnist for the black newspaper *Chicago Defender*, claimed that with this show Mills had earned a place in the pantheon of black performers, a growing list headlined by Bert Williams, who had broken the all-white color barrier of the *Ziegfeld Follies* thirteen years earlier. Mills was also appearing with a predominantly white company, but what sealed her celebrity status, according to Jackson, was the inclusion of another

act that proved once and for all that Florence Mills had undeniably “arrived.” One of the performers in the *Greenwich Village Follies* was a female impersonator who seemed to perfectly duplicate Mills’s eccentric mannerisms and voice. Perhaps, as the old adage goes, imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, but in show business, impersonation is the surest sign of stardom.

Performances by female impersonators were not uncommon in the revues of the 1920s, but they did not usually include a racial component. Moreover, impersonated celebrities, including easily identifiable stars like Mae West and Gloria Swanson, tended to be white. Combining blackface and drag, the *Greenwich Village Follies* performer took impersonation to a new level in the presentation of a *white* man performing as a *black* woman. “We guarantee that you will have a hard time,” wrote Jackson about the female impersonator’s performance, “in making up your mind not as to ‘her sex,’ but as to ‘what is she’ after that. The wig and complexion cream used by the young gentleman throw all the experts, black and white, who profess the ability to ‘tell ’em anywhere anytime’ into confusion until the final scene.”¹ Will the real Florence Mills please stand up?

In the 1920s and 1930s there was a fair amount of persistence in attempting to define and redefine identity categories—thus the emergence of the “New Negro” and the “Modern Woman.” In fact, the most prominent members of the black intelligentsia, including Alain Locke, W. E. B. Du Bois, and Charles S. Johnson, argued that the theater was a place to resolve once and for all the kind of “confusion” in racial identity with which the *Greenwich Follies* toyed. In 1922, for example, Locke pointed to the success of the Irish theater at the turn of the century and wrote in his essay “Steps toward the Negro Theatre” that a black national drama would help banish stereotypical images from the stage and replace them with positive depictions of black life and people.² Du Bois held a similar belief, but unlike Locke, he advocated an overtly propagandistic form of theater. Arguing for plays written *about* African Americans, *by* African Americans, *for* African Americans, and presented *in* or *near* their communities, Du Bois stressed that theater must be for the express purpose of presenting truthful (and moral) views of the black experience.³ Johnson, on the other hand, rejected the notion of pure propaganda and cultural separatism. He stressed the importance of removing the artistic constraints on black artists, which would in turn allow them to make meaningful contributions to the arts. “What is most important,” he explained, “is that these black artists should be free, not merely to express anything they feel, but to feel the pulsations and rhythms of their own life, philosophy be hanged.”⁴

As evidenced by the appearance and impersonation of Florence Mills in the *Greenwich Village Follies*, however, representations of race and gender in the theaters and nightclubs of the era were often highly ambiguous, ambivalent, and bewildering. This is the central premise of this current study. Set within the social and artistic context of the New York City of the so-called Harlem Renaissance, *Bulldaggers, Pansies, and Chocolate Babies* focuses on the ways in which depictions of blackness and whiteness, male and female, homosexual and heterosexual, highbrow and lowbrow merged and coalesced in the theater and performances of the 1920s and 1930s. While white and black political leaders, social scientists, and artists often attempted to fasten and delineate the divides between these identity qualifiers, a varying number of writers, performers, and producers of different races, economic classes, and sexual orientations were the creators of the popular entertainment of the era. Additionally, contrasted with fixed, unchanging published literary texts, performances and scripts were mutable, depending on individual artists' contributions and the desires of the demographically shifting audiences.

The performances I am drawn to are the ones that teased the limits of social decorum on New York's stages of the 1920s and 1930s, and I want to shed light on controversial artists and productions that have not yet received their due but contributed mightily to the artistic heritage of the United States. This book is not intended to provide a chronological and critical history of theater and identity formations in the Harlem Renaissance, but there is, I hope, enough contextualization of the plays, performers, and performances to convey the richness of the period for readers unfamiliar with its culture, social life, and ideological tensions. This study focuses the spotlight on plays and figures that are often relegated to footnotes or parenthetical statements. Because they carry less weight of representation and overinterpretation, these plays and performers yield valuable insight into the artistic, political, and social collaborations and fissures among Blacks/whites, bourgeoisie / working class, women/men, heterosexuals / sexual nonconformists. The usual stars and leaders of the Harlem Renaissance are, therefore, recast in secondary roles, and in some cases as walk-ons (or less). The exceptions in this book are the aforementioned Florence Mills and the world-famous Ethel Waters, who were truly theatrical superstars (to use a later-twentieth-century appellation) of the era. Coincidentally, they appear in the second-to-last chapter in the book, corresponding with the placement of the "headliner" on a vaudeville bill, but this is not to imply any kind of qualitative assessment. Mills's and Waters's influential and widely discussed personae in the 1920s haunt the study at every turn, so it seems neces-

sary to showcase them in a book about performance in the Harlem Renaissance. Another haunting presence is the fictional figure Lulu Belle, who is the title character of Edward Sheldon and Charles MacArthur's 1926 Broadway play. While largely forgotten today, Lulu Belle became synonymous with any social-climbing black seductress, who left a trail of oversexed, psychologically spent, and pitiful men in her wake.

Within Harlem Renaissance studies, there is some disagreement about periodization, but for the purposes of this study, I define it as loosely beginning in the early 1920s (from a theater perspective, *Shuffle Along* [1921] remains a benchmark) and ending in the mid-1930s (from a social and economic perspective, the Great Depression and the Harlem Riot of 1935 drastically curtailed black performance and idealism in Harlem). I am also aware of the problems of labeling this era the Harlem Renaissance, which has been variously referred to as the Negro Renaissance, the New Negro Movement, the Negro Awakening, and the Jazz Age. As James Hatch explains, none of these titles is completely accurate, for there was nothing "new" about the Negro,⁵ and the sense of a "renaissance" implies "rebirth" (from what?), and "awakening" connotes "sudden awareness" (of what?). And certainly for the millions of blacks who were faced with poverty, enforced segregation, and frequent threats from the Ku Klux Klan, the notion of nonstop music and dance as suggested by the *Jazz Age* terminology would have been highly conjectural. Finally, Harlem was indeed a cultural center, and many of the black artists at the time gravitated to this neighborhood. Some, however, lived in other parts of New York City (e.g., Greenwich Village) or in outlying cities and communities (e.g., Brooklyn). In addition, other urban centers across the country, chiefly Chicago, Baltimore, and Washington, DC, had thriving black social and cultural communities. Yet *Harlem Renaissance* is the term that is most often used in cultural studies and social histories of the era.

Apologia aside, the setting of this book is New York City, and I primarily concentrate on artists who worked at least occasionally in Harlem. There are brief excursions to out-of-town tryouts and an examination of a West Coast television appearance in the 1950s, but the chapters, in the main, traverse between Harlem and midtown Manhattan. Mapping the landscape of black theater and performance in this specific time and place, I examine a variety of venues. I broadly define "theater" as both the place of performance (more often than not in this era, it would have a proscenium stage, as one would see in Broadway or vaudeville houses) and the showcased works (either plot-based,

character-driven dramas or the looser-structured musical revues). By “performance” I mean the dramatic interpretations and musical presentations through song and dance offered in the legitimate theaters as well as in the more intimate and interactive nightclubs, speakeasies, and semiprivate neighborhood parties. My definition of performance also takes in the postmodern idea of an “offstage” expression of identity, the most obvious example being nontheatrical drag.

In recent years, there have been a number of biographies of Harlem Renaissance performers (Paul Robeson, Josephine Baker, Bessie Smith, the Whitman Sisters, Florence Mills, among others, immediately come to mind), but there have been surprisingly few full-length considerations of the performing arts as a vital site of analysis in the history of black theater, American popular culture, and African American studies. The notable exceptions are David Krasner’s *A Beautiful Pageant* (2002) and Paul Allen Anderson’s *Deep River* (2001), which explore, respectively, the multiple aspects of drama and performance (including sports, parades, and pageants) and the importance of music (such as spirituals, jazz, and blues) in the negotiation of social memory within a national identity.⁶ The primary voices of the discourse, however, are those from literary studies.

That said, literature and the performing arts were closely linked during the Harlem Renaissance, and many of the literary luminaries wrote plays or dabbled in the arts in some fashion. Some of these deserve mention. In 1913 W. E. B. Du Bois assembled a cast of 350 for his pageant *The Star of Ethiopia*, which was presented in several cities over the next twelve years.⁷ Langston Hughes wrote several plays, including *Mulatto* (1935), which ran almost four hundred performances on Broadway; and his contentious collaboration on *Mule Bone* (1930; unproduced professionally until 1991) with Zora Neale Hurston is the stuff of theater legend. In addition, Hughes used jazz and blues themes, rhythms, and compositional structures in a number of his poems and helped legitimize these musical forms. Individually, Hurston also had strong connections to the performing arts. Two of her plays, *Color Struck* (1925) and *The First One* (1926), took first prizes in *Opportunity* play competitions, and she contributed sketch material to a Broadway musical revue called *Fast and Furious* (1931).⁸ Anthea Kraut has written about Hurston’s work with Bahamian dancers for a series of dance/music concerts in the early 1930s.⁹ Countee Cullen, who was dubbed the “poet laureate” of the Harlem Renaissance, was working on the book of the musical *St. Louis Woman* when he died in 1946. And Broadway au-

diences of *Porgy* in 1927 probably did not realize that some of the supernumeraries (or “extras”) in the play’s Catfish Row included the prominent writers, Richard Bruce Nugent, Wallace Thurman, and Dorothy West.

The literary criticism of the Harlem Renaissance is also very much inflected by theater and performance discourse. Houston Baker, Jr., Arnold Rampersad, and Michael North, who have offered compelling “modernist” readings of Harlem Renaissance texts, often use theatrical images and metaphors, such as “racial ventriloquism,” “minstrelsy,” and “mimicry,” to probe the construction of an African American identity. Henry Louis Gates’s use of “signifyin(g)” also offers a valuable tool in analyzing the ways in which performers mimicked and sometimes parodied racial stereotypes, potentially evacuating them of their racist meanings.¹⁰ Scholars Hazel Carby, Cheryl Wall, Angela Y. Davis, and Hortense Spillers have provided important (re)readings of Harlem Renaissance texts through a feminist lens, and they have extended their analysis to black performers and lived black experiences of women, especially in a field that was almost entirely male-oriented until the 1980s. Even more recently, scholars such as A. B. Christa Schwarz and Thomas H. Wirth have built on the work of Eric Garber to consider sexual orientation as a fundamental element of lesbian and gay writers and public thinkers in the Harlem Renaissance. It is only fitting that the scholarship reflects the diversity of the voices of the era.

Harlem of the 1920s was itself remarkably diverse, and while its pluralism adds complexity and dynamism, it stymies any attempt to really *know* Harlem. As Wallace Thurman pointed out in 1927, casual observers tended to lump all black people together into the monolithic category “Negro.” While most of the Blacks migrated from other parts of the United States, specifically the South, a good number, about 40 percent according to Thurman, were born elsewhere. Harlem attracted people from the British West Indies, Africa, and South America.¹¹ In addition, the class system was especially knotty because it did not cut down traditional economic lines. The black bourgeoisie, as A. B. Christa Schwarz explains, “included distinctly blue-collar workers like Pullman porters who were often educated but, due to racial discrimination, unable to enter other professions.”¹² Because they were, as Sterling Brown mentioned, “only one remove” from the black masses, the black middle class had little success influencing cultural representations of African Americans.¹³ As George Hutchinson details, Harlem’s recent manifestation as a black bastion meant that “traditional elites,” defined by family wealth and political clout, did not have a stranglehold on black culture, as they did in other major urban centers across the country.

This situation made the community more tolerant, if not accepting, of “the experimental development of new forms of ‘racial’ expression.”¹⁴

As social historians George Chauncey, Lillian Faderman, and Kevin Mumford have shown, the lesbian and gay communities emerging in Harlem and elsewhere in New York City were similarly diverse. The press, gossip sheets, and moralists tended to label all so-called sexual deviants as “sexual inverts” or members of the “third sex,” and to them they were easily discernible. Lesbians, who were referred to as “bulldaggers” and “bulldykes” (or “bulldykers”), were associated with “manliness” and masculine clothing. Gay men, who were called “pansies,” “fairies,” and “fags,” were identified by their “femininity” and their affinity for dresses, makeup, and wigs. Men and women who did not fall into these categories were much more able to experiment with same-sex trysts or establish lasting relationships and avoid being found out, because of “the straight world’s ignorance of the existence of a hidden middle-class gay world.”¹⁵ In the last few decades, social historians and queer theorists have given us finer distinctions in discussing same-sex desire, experimentation, and cross-dressing, thereby providing more complex readings of lived experiences and literary texts of the era.

One must be cautious to avoid a similar kind of lumping of the whites who descended upon Harlem in the 1920s. The white tourists were often referred to as “Downtowners,” implying that all of the people who were part of the “white invasion” lived somewhere below 110th Street. On the one hand, there were a good number of visitors from Greenwich Village and the Upper Westside, and many came from the rich and glamorous set. Carl Van Vechten, the notorious white author of *Nigger Heaven* (1926), had apartments on East Nineteenth Street and then on West Fifty-fifth Street. Cole Porter, who riffed on Van Vechten’s title with his own song lyric, “Happy Heaven of Harlem,” for the musical *Fifty Million Frenchmen* (1929), had an apartment in the Waldorf-Astoria. And stage and screen star Mae West was a habitual Harlem clubgoer and friend to the black artists in Harlem, and she wrote her own novelistic response to Van Vechten in *Babe Gordon* (1930), about a white prostitute in Harlem.¹⁶ Many other white celebrities and socialites who maintained apartments in Midtown and near Central Park also frequented the scene, as evident in gossip sheets and personal diaries. In the smoky speakeasies, one might see people from Greenwich Village bohemia, the Brooklyn working class, and young gay men from Hell’s Kitchen.¹⁷ On the other hand, a sizable number of visitors were from out of town or other countries, which is made clear by the numerous newspaper

reports by people who “experienced” Harlem on their visits and the report of the Committee of Fourteen, a council organized to investigate vice and corruption throughout the city, which stated that taxicab drivers often solicited male tourists, offering to take them to “some nice quiet place” in Harlem and “meet some swell girls.”¹⁸ Some claimed that Van Vechten ran a similar service. In an attempt to drum up business for his book and his pals in Harlem, Van Vechten wrote numerous articles and piloted his non–New York guests to the neighborhood to help spread the word about the neighborhood’s cultural treasures.¹⁹

Not everyone was getting in on the act, though, and it is misleading to assume that all whites had suddenly cast off their Victorian moral restraints. In February 1927, the *New York Times* ran the ominous headline “Hint of Police Raids to Clean the Stage.”²⁰ Through the rest of the decade, the black clergy and bourgeoisie railed against filth in the theaters and streets of Harlem, and white moral watchdogs pressured the police department, the mayor, and the governor to rein in the moral laxity apparent in New York theaters, nightclubs, and speakeasies. New York papers soothed—to a degree—the feeling among some that the city was sinking into a moral abyss with articles about “dirt plays” being censored, actors getting arrested for “indecent” performances, and speakeasies being raided for selling alcohol. In May 1927, for example, the *New York Times* reported that 381 people were arrested in a gentlemen’s smoking club on 125th Street. Of those arrested, 375 were men, and the night court on 123rd Street stayed open past midnight to process all of the male prisoners and the six women performers who were taken in the raid.²¹

The mass of contradictions permeating the Harlem Renaissance—marked by the simultaneous empowerment and oppression of African Americans; titillation and disgust with sexual experimentation; and liberation and anxiety over the era—provides the backdrop for this book. The chapters, which may be viewed as expository snapshots, do not attempt to reconcile these contradictions, but they offer a particular perspective on the social and professional connections between artists, audiences, and critical observers at this crucial historical juncture. It is a truism to state that theater and performance are collaborative, but in the 1920s there were some truly interesting artistic alliances and quite a few very strange bedfellows. Ann Douglas and George Hutchinson have effectively documented and theorized the complicated cross-pollination of black-white culture, and this study extends the discourse to include the participation of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender voices.

The examples and analyses presented here are a highly selective representation of the dramatic literature, musical theater, and performances of the

Harlem Renaissance within the social, political, and cultural context in which they appeared, but they offer a way of exploring performance-related “texts” and their cultural connections. Although I am not a music scholar and must leave the deeper analysis of musical compositions to experts (thereby protecting readers from my critical tone deafness with songs and dance arrangements), I use jazz and blues—which have stalwart social, literary, and theatrical associations—as a guiding motif. Each chapter title derives from a song lyric of the period. The first chapter provides both a sociohistoric and performance criticism foundation for the rest of the book. Harlem parties were often discussed in the black newspapers (on the society page, arrests section, and any page in between), and they offer a site for looking at the emergence of social communities as well as a training ground for developing musicians and performers. On the other hand, while the rent parties of the Harlem working class attracted, according to jazz musician Willie “the Lion” Smith, people from all walks of life, including “formally dressed society folks from downtown, policemen, painters, carpenters, mechanics, truckmen in their workmen’s clothes, gamblers, lesbians, and entertainers of all kinds,”²² these affairs were not as impulsive as the press would have had people believe. These parties were carefully “staged” and could be quite profitable for the “producers.” Furthermore, lesbians and gay men relied on private parties as spaces safe from potential personal and professional scandal and from prosecution, and the chapter focuses on the cultural attitudes toward sexual nonconformists.

The famous dramatization of a rent party in William Jourdan Rapp and Wallace Thurman’s Broadway melodrama *Harlem* (1929) links the second chapter with the first. More importantly, the former focuses on the play as a reflection of the political struggles in defining a black identity in the 1920s. Rapp and Thurman’s *Harlem* is of especial interest here because other plays of the era that treated African American subjects were authored by either white or black playwrights. *Harlem* was cowritten by a white playwright (Rapp) and a black (Thurman). The authorship arrangement embodies Locke’s utopian notion of a convergent black and white modernism to “discover and release the national spirit” in a pluralist, universal art.²³ Locke’s contemporary, George S. Schuyler, was even more radical in saying that there were no cultural distinctions between the races; they were both “plain American.”²⁴ Central to an analysis of the play is sorting through the hodgepodge of theatrical conventions and racial stereotypes to see how the play reflects the fraught political and deeply engrained notions of representation and whether or not it is possible to move beyond them.

The third chapter primarily explores the alliance of the gay subculture and one of the most popular plays of the 1920s, Edward Sheldon and Charles MacArthur's *Lulu Belle* (1926). It has been credited by several Harlem Renaissance scholars as one of the cultural initiators behind the surge of white interest in Harlem, but there has been surprisingly little attention paid to it by theater historians. While I hope to rectify this slight, the chapter will also examine the critical reception of the play in light of the contemporary attitudes toward single black women (whom Lulu Belle, performed in blackface by white actress Lenore Ulric, supposedly represented). Lulu Belle's spirit pervades chapter 4, "'Hottentot Potentates': The Potent and Hot Performances of Florence Mills and Ethel Waters." These two performers were linked in the public and theatrical imaginations with Lulu Belle. This chapter considers the ways in which black women performers, who were variously referred to as "chocolate babies" (as mentioned in the "It's Getting Dark on Old Broadway" lyric), "cuties," and "chocolate drops," worked with white writers, composers, and directors, and in their collaboration they negotiated and contributed to what today would be considered stereotypical and derogatory images. At the time, however, they were considered pioneers and represented racial uplift and progress.

The fifth chapter focuses on Gladys Bentley, one of the most controversial (and underresearched) performers in the Harlem Renaissance. It offers a biographical portrait of this "blueswoman," who was a prominent figure in the Harlem Renaissance but sank into obscurity by the middle of the 1930s. The chapter also concerns the theoretical construction of identity, since Bentley's own persona was greatly influenced by the fictional character Stephen Gordon in Radclyffe Hall's classic novel *The Well of Loneliness* (1928). Customarily, Harlem Renaissance scholars debate the success or failure of the movement to produce lasting cultural traditions. This chapter concludes with an extended postscript on Bentley's reemergence in the 1950s, demonstrating the resilience, artistry, and political commitment of the performers and performances in the Harlem Renaissance. I end the book with a summary of my project, and I leave the reader with a sketch of a black performer, whose transgression of social and cultural borders of race, class, gender, and sexual orientation reflects the need to expand the discourses in Harlem Renaissance studies.