Research Article

Passing Strange: Radical Chic, Race, Sex, Song, and Dance in “Moanin’ Low”

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A consideration of the genesis and performance of the number “Moanin' Low" from the first *Little Show* (1929) reveals an unusually problematic blackface number. Libby Holman and Clifton Webb, two white performers, enacted the roles of African-Americans, a prostitute and a pimp, respectively. Nevertheless, the song and the accompanying dance were ground-breaking for a number of reasons. It is one of, if not, the first instance(s) of characterization achieved exclusively through dance in a revue number. The performance was considered shockingly frank and was a reflection of the ongoing fascination with the otherness of the “New Negro." It signifies a cultural mutation and is a founding text of radical chic. Nevertheless, the black-face aesthetic of this performance signifies post-colonial power that now allows the subaltern free reign overs its presumed cultural imperatives such as ballet, opera, or classical theatre, while denying itself any further hegemony over any aspect of subaltern forms. Such essentializing noblesse oblige is of course patronizing. Reverse false consciousness does not equate to true consciousness, nor does projecting an affection or even adoration for the other completely mask cultural essentialism. It is a cultural product of radical chic.

A consideration of the genesis and performance of the number “Moanin' Low" from the first *Little Show* in 1929[1] reveals an unusually problematic blackface number. In “Moanin’ Low,” Libby Holman and Clifton Webb, two white performers, performed the roles of African-Americans, a prostitute, and a pimp, respectively. Nevertheless, the song and the accompanying dance were ground-breaking for several reasons. Primarily, it is one of, if not, the first instance(s) of characterization achieved exclusively through dance in a revue number. Webb neither sang nor spoke but executed a furiously sexual dance routine. Holman sang the song in her carnal contralto.[2] Webb and Holman's performance was considered shockingly frank and was a reflection of the ongoing fascination with the otherness of

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the “New Negro." Sigmund Spaeth, in his magisterial *History of Popular Music in America*, declares that *The Little Show* was the single most important popular music event of 1929.[3] Finally, a key factor for the white audience was the radical chic appeal of Moanin’ Low” and the concomitant “shock value” of its “African-American” sexuality.

The routine began with only instrumental music. Webb recalled several years later that, “the Sweetback” was discovered sprawled on a sagging bed in a shabby room dressed in the flashiest get-up of the 1920s, an "electric blue suit, orange shirt, green tie, [and] patent leather hair” (an oily pimp's wig with long sideburns).[4] Libby Holman entered, but Webb ignored her; she took this chance to conceal a few bills in her stockings. She handed the rest of her earnings to Webb. Momentarily interested, Webb rose languidly and started to dance with her. As he danced, he pawed her and discovered the hidden cash. He grabbed the money, forced Holman to the bed, throttled her, and then threw her to the floor. Satisfied he has subdued her, he strutted to downstage center. Holman revived and began singing the song. Webb swayed in time to the tune, counting the money in triumph, then began to move his entire body, and it was this part of the number that caused the sensation: he did his own version of Earl Tucker's Snake Hips dance.[6] Facing the audience Webb “writhed in rhythm and tossed his pelvis about in figure-eights like a cowboy's lasso. As the song ended, Webb slithered out, slamming the door as Holman threw herself against it.”[7] After he left, Holman’s reprise brought down the house.

The Illusion of Blackness

How did Webb and Holman believe they achieved their illusion of Blackness? A distinction needs to be made here. From the time of Thomas D. Rice (1808-1860), white performers insisted on their ability to be “Black.” They even “taught” blackface performance.[8] While Webb and Holman are not the first white performers who attempted “authentic” Black performance, their urban characters were something different regarding the blackface aesthetic, previous attempts at “authenticity” harkened back to the plantation South. Brander Matthews, writing in *Scribner’s Magazine* in 1915, had declared this “authenticity” to be the lost “virtue” of the minstrel show. Nevertheless, “Moanin’ Low” was a different world from that of “Mammy” and “Swanee.”

In 1945, sixteen years after the fact, Webb recalled that he had wanted to do a dance number with Libby Holman: “I was inspired by a book I'd been reading... Carl Van Vechten's *Nigger Heaven*.” No

doubt, Webb based his character on Anatole Longfellow the “Scarlet Creeper," the first character to appear in the novel. Webb explained, “I had told Dwight [Dwight Deere Wiman, the producer] I wanted to do a 'high-yaller pimp'... we rehearsed the number in the toilet of the Music Box Theatre because we didn't want anyone to see it until we were finished.”[8] Another consonance was that Webb was aware that Van Vechten sponsored a dance studio catering to African Americans.[9] Webb did not refer to Buddy Bradley the Black dancer who had coached him, and Webb described how he thought up the routine strictly by himself. The Stearns interviewed Bradley in London in 1963 and he said,” Clifton Webb came to me hunting for ideas for himself in *The Little Show*, and I worked up the entire scene for him using Earl Tucker's Snake Hips dance and called it “High Yaller.” The Stearns assert that, “as a result of *The Little Show*, Webb was forthwith regarded, even among Negro dancers, as a highly talented performer.”[10] Bradley was sought after by almost all of the major dancers of the time, Fred and Adele Astaire, Mae West, Ann Pennington, Marilyn Miller, Ed Wynn, Eleanor Powell, and Lucille Ball. Bradley went to London in 1933 and made his career there. He never choreographed a white show in New York, yet was known as the best instructor for established dancers. He was regularly called in to assist with Broadway shows, doing what he did for Webb, creating an individual number, or sometimes devising entire group numbers or just coaching.

Regarding the singing, for her part, Holman was given lessons by the renowned Black singer Edward Boatner, who gave Holman special instructions and tips to accentuate her natural ability to grunt and growl. Webb would later take lessons from him as well, though the few surviving recordings of his singing show no traces of such training. As for Webb, he was thrilled by the attention the number gave him. It paid off more richly than he imagined, winning him, according to the Stearns interviews, the admiration of Black dancers who rated him above Fred Astaire. As noted, he was the most sought-after male revue performer on Broadway after The Little Show. Regarding another Astaire at this time, Cecil Beaton records seeing Adele Astaire, at “the Negro dance school where she was taking lessons... She smiled like a little monkey and said, "Oh, Buddy [Bradley] has taught me such marvellous, new, dirty steps."[11]

As Robinson comments: "For period audiences ‘authentic Blackness’ in jazz dancing likely signified a host of stereotypical notions - naturalness, wildness, exoticism, physicality, and sexuality. Even the white jazz dancers made racialist associations with their routines and teachers.”[12] Robinson offers a careful reading of the issue of appropriation. She is even bold enough to imply that there is a certain lack of understanding of the nature of the professionalism of the time in Bradley’s case. Nevertheless,

we are dealing with a zero-sum aesthetic. Buddy Bradley worked entirely behind the scenes and gave Webb and Holman stardom. After several years of this kind of work he rejected anonymity, left the country, and never looked back. In London, he finally was able to have a complete career as a credited choreographer and dance studio owner. While the particular issue of appropriation is never far from the fore, Webb's claim that he "created" the dance is arguable. He had the original idea for the number. And as Robinson notes, Bradley never said that he choreographed Webb's number. The Stearns seem to have assumed it.[13] Robinson adds that they may simply have taken it for granted that Bradley did so. Webb was satisfied with himself and his performance as his creation.

Variety gave Webb complete vindication: "the Broadway bunch will be dropping in at the Music Box for that gigolo finale by Webb and Miss Holman with its indigo classic. Webb is credited with conceiving the skit and its production, rating a bend on the creation along with the histrionism."[14] On the program though, Danny Dare is listed *The Little Show's* choreographer. In *The Daily News* (5 June 29) describing it as a "song and dance oddity," Richard Lockridge awkwardly adds that "it gets rather realer than one expects into one of those tragic moments which all proper revues have by way of contrast. Webb dances with Holman in mad grotesque."[15] Webb and Holman's hearts must have leapt when "tragic" was applied to their performance. Yet there were contemporary dissenting voices. *The New York World* (28 April 1929) complained that "the brashness of the vulgar finish almost ruins it."[16] And Eudora Garrett perfectly voicing gentility's disgust in the *Herald Tribune* winced:

> And the way Libby Holman moaned and the way Webb turned elastic in this scene caused an uproar out beyond the lights. "Moanin' Low" is a kind of Negro Apache turn which Webb did with the deep-voiced Libby Holman. In this sketch, he does do a sort of male hutchi kutchi in a dim light before his enamoured girl and then after mauling the latter on the bed for a while discovers a roll of bills in her stocking which she has been "holding out on him," he chokes her into semi-consciousness and flings out of the room, evidently after another wench who will be more completely slavish. The trouble with this, as with much of the Congoese [sic] stuff which has been adroitly exploited lately, even with the help of some of the book clubs, is its essential meretriciousness and falsity in the context in which it is put. The erotic dances of a primitive people are one thing in their natural environment, where they have a serious place and meaning, and quite another taken out of it for the mere purpose of giving a sexual "kick" to sedentary and supposedly civilized audiences, too house-broken ever to indulge in these things

themselves and too soft and indolent to take the trouble to travel to the regions and peoples where they naturally, belong.[17]

If one can get past Garrett's hoity-toity colonialist tone, she skewers the number accurately. This is not to deny her "civilized audience" perspective, but what she refuses to accept is the blackface aesthetic that the number represents. Garrett was not opposed to African-American culture, note her use of "exploited." Writing a few months later in the 23 July 1929 issue of the *New York Herald* Tribune, she sang the praises of the Hall Johnson Choir to the skies ("Hall Johnson Choir Singers Meet Encore Storm at Stadium"). What is more, Garrett's casual reference to the Apache dance indicates American familiarity with it. First performed some twenty years earlier in 1908 by Alice Eis and Bert French in a Broadway revue *The Mimic World*, Apache numbers were featured in other revues that season and the next and were widely performed for the next few years. In New York, the Apache dance was ballyhooed as the dance of the underworld direct from Montmartre. Rudolph Valentino was a prominent Apache performer, as were many well-known dancers, including Webb's first partner, Bonnie Glass. The dance was sensationalized by its Montmartre back alley cachet.[18]

By the 1920s, the stage thug and the soubrette smashing each other and the set were already a cliché. So choreographed roughhousing per se was not the primary attraction of "Moanin Low." The impulse behind its performance stemmed from white responses to the cultural moment of the Harlem Renaissance that anticipates radical chic, the ideology behind slumming. This radical chic aspect of the performance crystallizes an aspect of Jürgen Habermas's public space.

Radical Chic and the Blackface Aesthetic

The mediatized public space that Habermas discusses is not, "a passive audience of spectators or listeners, but rather a forum of participants who can answer each other's questions about the event. They take in the information and question it, anticipating answers from one another not the performers."[19] Leading into this point, Habermas discusses "celebrity." Webb and Holman had not yet achieved great celebrity, but there had been publicity about the number and anticipation of it. After the show opened, various media publicized it, including recordings, sheet music, radio performances, newspaper, and magazine articles. The Habermasian mediatized moment is significant, Webb and Holman's self-fashioning of their identities becomes less relevant to themselves, and more important as something for the audience to take in. This is the crux of radical chic. It enacts dominance, and from

the 1920s on this dominance hinges on race. Habermas's forum where "Moanin' Low" takes place is more than a blackface performance. It is the reification of the blackface aesthetic.

In the dense context of "Moanin' Low" and radical chic, this blackface song-and-dance performance is a type of Jürgen Habermas's subjective "products of culture"[20] that are *publikumsbezogen* ("audience-related"). From a microhistorical perspective, this "product of culture" also depends upon perspective. "Moanin' Low" provides us with one of Carlo Ginzburg's skewed "sight lines."[21] It is, therefore, one of Ginzburg's "normal exceptions," an amplified example of what Ginzburg discusses as "anomalous evidence that casts light on a widespread, otherwise undocumented phenomenon.[22] "Moanin Low" seems "anomalous" because blackface performance was "normal" in the 1920s. But Webb and Holman's serious performance affect is an exception. Habermas's forum creates a public space for the participants to embody the blackface aesthetic by absorbing the sensations "Moanin' Low" offers. This is a radical chic experience because it offers them the opportunity to indulge themselves in otherness and question race and sexuality. Also to Ginzburg's point, he argues that literature precedes history. As we know, it was a novel by Carl Van Vechten that inspired "Moanin' Low" in the first place, and Ginzburg's literary-historical sequence is a trajectory for this "product of culture.

Considered as a part of Habermas's "forum of participants" and one of Ginzburg's "normal exceptions," "Moanin' Low" produces a cultural mutation and is a founding text of 20th-century American radical chic; it is a noteworthy incident in 20th-century popular culture. Foregrounding, the unexplored centrality of race to radical chic, the mutation lies with Clifton Webb and Libby Holman taking on the function of blackface performance as a means of overcoming their otherness combined with the illusion that they were creating a "serious" Blackface performance, rather than the conventional comic one. Webb did so to perform heterosexual desire; Holman exhibited her own sexuality while extinguishing her bourgeois Jewishness. Webb was a gay man of self-fashioned background; Holman a Jewish bisexual. They adapted the blackface convention of generic racial presentation to the 1920s "Harlem" vogue, creating a radical chic performance. Radical chic is the social frisson gained by associating with those presumed to be "lower class" or by identifying one's self with "lower class" concerns. It is an amplification of "slumming." The origins of "Moanin' Low" lie in the crucially controversial racist work of the modernist aesthete Carl Van Vechten (1880-1964).[23] The linguistic and figurative deployment of African-American tropes by American modernists is well-known:

> When their movement climaxed with ***The Waste Land*** in 1922, the modernists' linguistic horizon also enclosed "The Day of Atonement," the Newbolt Report, ***The Book of American Negro Poetry***, ***Harlem Shadows***, Clement Wood's ***Nigger***, and Wittgenstein's Tractatus, all of which were published in the same year. And though it may seem that these various linguistic productions have little to do with one another, they are joined by a rather dense network. Brander Matthews, a member of the American Academy... introduced James Weldon Johnson's dialect poetry to the nation. C. K. Ogden, inventor of Basic English and translator of the ***Tractatus***, published two dozen poems by Claude McKay in the same issue of the ***Cambridge Magazine*** that included" The Linguistic Conscience." Eliot stole from Johnson; Johnson advised Van Vechten; Van Vechten introduced Gertrude Stein to Harlem by quoting her in ***Nigger Heaven***.[24]

Brander Matthews (1852-1929), the first professor of drama in the United States, wrote about the minstrel show in 1915.[25] He argued that it had originally enacted the tension between displaced Africans and Europeans in America, but had declined because it was no longer true to life, becoming merely comic and even in that, no longer offering anything unique. Matthews's essay is burdened by casual racism, yet reveals how performance is the most obvious means for the display of the blackface aesthetic: that whites somehow achieve artistic verity by blacking up. Matthews sees something positive in blackface and Black dialect. This paternalistic approach is part of 20th-century usage of race that has been in cultural contention ever since Picasso decided to apply features of African masks to the faces of the white prostitutes of *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* in 1907.[26] In this context, and in this argument, appropriation is crucial. Modernist privileging of primitivism also provides a subtext for the radical chic aesthetic of "Moanin' Low."

Performances such as this are what enable Gayle Wald to describe the 1920s as the moment when "'marginality' itself would become an object of 'mainstream' cultural desire."[27] Nevertheless appropriation predates modernism. The awareness that whites were taking from Black culture is not new. In 1848 Frederick Douglass, outraged by a local judge who complained about the performance of the abolitionist Hutchinson Family Singers, attacked blackface as a cultural crime:

> We believe he does not object to the "Virginia Minstrels," "Christy's Minstrels," the" Ethiopian Serenaders," or any of the filthy scum of white society, who have stolen from

> us a complexion denied to them by nature, in which to make money and pander to the corrupt taste of their white fellow-citizens. [28]

A century and a half later, Eric Lott sums up more recent assessments of appropriation and how blackface performance achieves, "one culture's ventriloquial self-expression through the art forms of someone else's."[29] The discourse around blackface has survived the apologetics of Constance Rourke[30] and Carl Wittke.[31] It must be noted, however, that the contemporary controversy surrounding the performance of "Moanin' Low" centered on its sexual content. The blackface component was accepted. The reverse is, of course, the case today. The dance was at heart an enactment of Van Vechten's decadent aesthetic that liberty is best represented by libertinage; the Black community split over Van Vechten's presence. In an article that offers insights on 1920s racial typology, among other relevant points, Lisa Mendelman distills the Van Vechten problem:

> ***The Crisis's*** well-known 1926 symposium, "The Negro in Art: How Shall He Be Portrayed," provided a coherent public forum for this pervasive line of discussion. The symposium asked participants including Du Bois, Chesnutt, and Hughes to weigh in on "the popular trend in portraying Negro character in the underworld" and concluded with the leading question: "Is not the continual portrayal of the sordid, foolish, and criminal among Negros convincing the world that this and this alone is really and essentially Negroid, and preventing white artists from knowing other types and preventing black artists from daring to paint them?" [32]

Van Vechten authored the questions. Langston Hughes respected Van Vechten's motives; W.E.B. Du Bois held them in contempt. He saw Van Vechten as little more than a poseur, exploiting the "beauty and truth" of the Black experience. After the publication of Van Vechten's notorious novel in 1926, the famous caricaturist Miguel Covarrubias even depicted him in blackface.[33] Van Vechten's wealth, way of life, and sensibility embody radical chic. The term is an anachronism, but it fits him as tightly as the fireman's red shirt he affected. Neither "appropriation" nor "radical chic existed as cultural terms in the 1920s, but one can observe both phenomena. "Moanin' Low" is different because of its seriousness, and its presumption of presenting something "real" and "true" through blackface.

The roots of radical chic may be grounded in the ancient legend of the incognito king who goes "down among the people" to learn *the truth*.[34] Tacitus details the noble general Germanicus disguising

himself to gather intelligence about the feelings of his soldiers. In Western literature, *The Odyssey*, *Henry V*, and *The Prince and the Pauper* provide other

examples. Indian legends of kings joining bandit gangs to bring them to justice are numerous. Yet there is a darker side to this trope. Tacitus also records how Nero went abroad at night in Rome to commit crimes and indulge in anonymous debauchery. Tingsha, one of the last Qing emperors, allegedly died of syphilis contracted during his secret forays into brothels. Politically one can highlight the careers of aristocrats who were class traitors. "Philippe Égalité," Duke of Orléans (1752-85) who, suborned by Rousseau's ideas, voted to execute his cousin, Louis XVI. Carlo Pisacane (1818-1857), Duke of San Giovanni, was one of the first Italian socialists; he popularized the concept of "propaganda by deed," a key tenet of terrorism. Sophia Lorna Perovskaya (1853-1881), a nihilist daughter and granddaughter of Imperial Russian governors was the chief plotter of Czar Alexander II's assassination. Such examples are precursors of the "champagne socialists" of the 20th century, nevertheless, the idea that conventional society must be overturned and that "the revolution" was inevitable was a donnée in the fashionable circles that Webb and Holman ran in. Webb never became political, but later in her life, after becoming a multi-millionaire, Holman was radicalized.

The sincerity of upper-class desires to somehow uplift the lower class is always compromised by variants of thrill-seeking. This is the "slumming" aspect of radical chic. "Slumming" in its original British-English usage, refers to the practice of charity-workers living among the destitute in missions. Recall the Salvation Army scenes in Shaw's *Major Barbara*; such usage has been known since at least 1885. By the 1920s, the sentimental belief that the poor are closer to God, memorialized over a century earlier in what was once the most popular poem in the English language, Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard" (1751), was no longer the concern of "the smart set." They sought excitement and experiences. If there was a mitigating factor, it was political rather than moral. This component combined with slumming mixes the social cocktail of radical chic. The term itself would not come into use until the early 1960s, but the mentalité was budding in the Jazz Age 1920s.

A contemporary commentator, George Jean Nathan inventories the preferences of the mid-1920s sophisticate:

> The smart American drinks St. Emilion, Graves, St. Julien, and Macon, the beverages of French peasants. He plays mah jong, the game of Chinese coolies. He wears, on Sundays,

> a cutaway coat, the garb of English clerks. His melodic taste is for jazz, the music of African niggers. He eats alligator pears, the food of Costa Rican billygoats....[35]

Nathan uses the racist language of the time, but he is a qualified arbiter: he was co-editor of The *Smart Set* and *The American Mercury*, with H. L. Mencken. Both periodicals were major social delineators. He uses these examples to mock his generation's pretensions of social consciousness.

By the late 1920s political poses became all the rage. Dorothy Parker marched in a demonstration against the execution of Sacco and Vanzetti on 23 August 1927, wearing a Hattie Carnegie cloche, an embroidered dress, and white gloves. While singing the "Internationale," she clutched her purse with aplomb and was arrested by the Boston police for "sauntering and loitering." When Sacco and Vanzetti were executed later that day, she avowed, "My heart and soul are with the cause of socialism."[36] At the time, the anarchism of Sacco and Vanzetti had a cachet similar to what the Black Panthers' Black Power offered in the 1960s. One historian describes an exemplar of Sacco and Vanzetti's zealous supporters, Felix Frankfurter's wife, as an organizer of fundraisers among "the 1920s radical chic wealthy."[37] Margaret Mead, another notable woman from the 1920s is relevant here. In her study of immigrant identity, Sarah E. Chinn quotes Mead recalling, "At different times we also made forays into radical activities, walking on a picket line or stuffing envelopes for the Amalgamated Clothing Workers." Chinn explains, "For most of Mead's circle, though, political activity was not a central part of their lives (even in Mead's fond reminiscences, it resembles the radical chic of the early 1970s)." Moreover, involvement with radicalism was not primarily ideological. To Mead political exigencies mattered less than sensual ones, and she remembered that her most radical activity was physical, "Sex was a force that produced aesthetic and spiritual empowerment."[38] Mead's mindset reflects Van Vechten's sensually inclined social consciousness and offers an insight into Webb and Holman's sexualized theatrical ambitions.

An outstanding dramatization of the slumming sensibility is offered by Eugene O'Neill in "The Hairy Ape" (1922). Mildred Douglas, the bored heiress, seeks out the stokers laboring below the decks of her family's luxury liner to savor genuine sensations. O'Neill, politically radical, will show Mildred's punishment for her condescension: she will be assaulted, collapse, and be carried back to the promenade deck. A later, comic example can be found in the film *My Man Godfrey* (1936), written from a politically liberal point of view. Here, the pleasure-seeking, high-society Bullock sisters bring home Godfrey, a "forgotten man," as part of a scavenger hunt. At the film's conclusion Godfrey, the faux-

derelict, opens a nightclub, "The Dump," on the site of a former shanty town, which employs its former denizens. Therein socialites are wined and dined on "rot-gut" and hobo stew in proximity to the downtrodden who wait on them. This is an interesting variation on the script's argument that the unemployed men have valor and virtue, while the wealthy are enervated and egocentric. The fifty men that Godfrey employs will re-enact their former lives for the amusement of café society types, who will feel charitable while being entertained. Each of these are micro-historical dimensions of radical chic.

As Chad Heap and others detail, through the 1920s and 1930s, the combination of gay and Black sexuality was the ultimate "come-on" for bourgeois thrill-seekers. The combination of blackface with their sexual ambiguity made Webb and Holman's performance all the more compelling, especially to the sophisticated audience that would have been drawn to a marginal revue such as the original *Little Show*--"The Broadway bunch" alluded to by the *Variety* reviewer.[39] Webb and Holman brought the allure of the Harlem buffet flat and basement speakeasy to Broadway. Webb went to Harlem and experienced these places while he was preparing the "Moanin' Low" dance. Heap writes:

> White lesbians and gay men echoed earlier white heterosexual slummers from the Negro vogue in equating Blackness with primitivism, sensuality, and hypersexuality. ...A case in point can be found in Carl Van Vechten's many slumming expeditions to Harlem. Never especially reserved..., Van Vechten felt particularly uninhibited when the Black entertainer Louis Cole escorted him and a group of his homosexual friends, including the actor Clifton Webb, to an all-Black basement speakeasy where they were able to "see & do some strange dancing."[40]

An investigation by the Committee of Fourteen, the section of the Anti-Saloon League dedicated to rooting out vice, reported that such speakeasies were sexual playgrounds for women and men. A Black male investigator noted that at the basement speakeasy Van Vechten took Webb to, women were "dancing with one another going through the motions of copulation" and "two men who danced together kiss[ed] while one sucked the other's tongue." Heap explains, "...even the usually well-meaning and socially engaged Carl Van Vechten went to Black-and-tans in part for the cross-racial homosexual opportunities they provided."[41] As noted, Van Vechten is an archetypal radical chic "bohemian." Born to a wealthy Midwestern family he spent his life as a "cultural impresario," determined to show off his belief that African-American culture was the essence of American culture.

Whether Van Vechten was legitimate is a question too complex to deal with here. Whatever his motives, he did use his wealth to patronize the Harlem Renaissance. Both usages of "patronize" sum up the Van Vechten problem. Webb and Holman, "patrons" of Harlem speakeasies, used their thrill-seeking to create an illegitimate, strictly sensational dance number.

Neoplatonic Sweating and Grinding?

Did they think they were doing otherwise? Contemporary reactions indicate this. Now though, we can neither accept Webb and Holman's ambitions nor their pretensions. Regarding this problem, Jacques Rancière puts a sociologic twist on Artaud and postulates what performers should attempt:

> This is what Plato concluded: the theatre is where the ignorant see people suffering. What the theatrical performance offers them is the spectacle...that is to say of the self-compartmentalization which results from ignorance. The theatre's own effect is to transmit this disease by another means: the disease of a perspective under the spell of shadows. It transmits the disease of ignorance which causes the characters to suffer through an ignorance-spreading machine, the optical machine, which creates perspectives of illusion and passivity. It is therefore correct that a community not tolerate theatrical mediation.[42]

Rancière's premise is based on immersion, which is what 1920s slummers sought in their Harlem treks. Drinking and dancing in nightclubs were preludes to more orgiastic basement performances, where the point was "getting bumped" by sweating and grinding Black bodies.[43] It was these underground activities that directly inspired the performance of "Moanin Low," and Webb and Holman's desire to shatter the "compartmentalization of passive spectators" that Rancière indicates. Unfortunately, their desire merely fuelled the "optical machine and "spread ignorance." But as noted earlier, this construction no longer obtains in the public space as defined by Habermas. Webb and Holman attempt to fashion themselves as African-Americans, but in the forum of the mediatized public space, as we have seen, it is not their blackface performance that matters, but the participants before them who want to experience something, not observe it. In this context, Rancière's Platonic conception is more relevant to nocturnal excursions to Harlem than to "Moanin' Low." It does not account for Habermas's "forum of participants."

Going back to the 1920s roots of radical chic allows us to gain perspective on what has been a century-long struggle to elucidate appropriation even when cloaked in an ostensible mantle of "admiration." The fraught relationship between performers' identities and their stage personae blurs as the 20th century progresses. By mid-century, the civil rights movement made blackface repugnant and almost unmentionable, but what might be called aesthetic blackface comes into play in the 1920s and looms today, for even the most earnest supporters of the struggle might inadvertently appropriate. "Moanin' Low" is a case of premeditated appropriation. Clifton Webb and Libby Holman were initially similar in their approach to blackface, neither had any political consciousness in the 1920s; Webb never developed any. Holman is another story. She became a major supporter of Martin Luther King, Jr. and the civil rights movement. Yet, she continued to perform African-American material and, though she stopped appearing in blackface, and she deliberately attempted to sound like a Black woman. As seen, Webb and Holman both were others. In the early part of his career, Webb seems to have tried to pass for straight by floating stories about imminent marriages in the press, including one to Holman. But the only time he played it "straight" in a non-comic turn was in "Moanin' Low." Holman's Jewish background is problematic, and her ecstatic reactions to assumptions that she was Black add to the density of identity issues presented here. She somehow felt validated by Blackness.

In "Moanin' Low," Webb and Holman performed roles that unfortunately not only took them out of themselves but into appropriation and racist stereotyping as well. The confluence of appropriated performance technique and what might be called aesthetic blackface is unique to "Moanin' Low." The blackface aesthetic is that which considers "blacking up" as a means of concealing identity to reveal "primal" truth. The racist condescension inherent in its execution is clear. Considering the cultural moment in which the performance occurred: from the Harlem Renaissance being in full flower when the number was performed originally through Libby Holman's civil rights activism, gives a particular perspective on the peculiar longevity of cultural "slumming" as it evolved from variant tourism to pseudo-Afro-Americanophilia. The blackface aesthetic also may be seen as a white response to the reality of Harlem Renaissance artists, who in the 1920s began a "restoration process by distancing themselves from popularized and institutionalized minstrel personae."[44]

From our perspective, the sexuality that Webb and Holman brought to the performance (neither was exclusively heterosexual) informs a deeper discourse and confronts our perceptions of the presentation of the sexuality of self through dance, movement, and blackface. Webb and Holman's self-expressed desire to present unmediated lust smacks of performers' hubris. Indeed, the few

negative comments that the number elicited challenge its pretensions of documentary physicality--although the *New York Herald Tribune*'s seemingly patronizing dismissal of such faddishness reveals the prejudices of the time as blatantly as Webb's appropriation of "Negro" dance techniques and Holman's appropriation of "Negro" vocalizing techniques.[45] This cultural incident demonstrates an attempt by white performers to reify blackface musical performance. Webb and Holman wanted to transcend minstrel-show hokum and create the illusion of "genuine" African-American performance. This was a delusion, but their pretension is an indicator of how entrenched racist aesthetic privilege can be. Webb and Holman were among scores of white performers who took their pick from Black performers directly, or from their styles. An extended discussion of the ramifications of white assumption of socio-cultural African-American prerogatives can take the example of the ideology behind "Moanin' Low" through to mid-twentieth century American notions of radical chic. The singing and dancing styles that Holman and Webb appropriated nonetheless were part of a bizarre performance technique employed by entertainers from the margins. The abuse of the socio-cultural prerogatives of "complexion" and the "pandering to corrupt tastes" that Douglass accused whites of in 1848 are present in "Moanin' Low."

Jewish and other "ethnic" performers often chose to put on Blackface as a technique to achieve whiteness. Jacobson cites Al Jolson (1886-1950) in *The Jazz Singer* as one of the late examples of this, yet Jolson had been doing so throughout his career. Immigrants from Eastern Europe were not perceived as "quite white" and putting on blackface was an assumption of a "white" perquisite. Sophie Tucker (1886-1966), "the last of the red-hot mammas" spent the first part of her career singing "blacked-up." Masked in blackface, these performers lost their "otherness" and could briefly be generically mainstream, what is more, as is well-known, even African-Americans "blacked up." Jacobson argues that for those of European ancestry, the need to do this was fading by the late 1920s.[46]

By the time of *The Little Show*, Holman's putting on a black face and "voice" had less to do with appearing as a "mainstream" performer than as a representation of the imputed license that African-Americans possessed. Holman's problematic relationship with her Jewishness will be discussed later, but for her looking and sounding like a Black woman was somehow more "authentic." Webb, a gay man whose masculinity was liable to be questioned, saw that taking on the strut and thrust of a Harlem "sweetback" was a way of authenticating his masculinity. The sensationalism of "Moanin' Low" was so successful that it brought Webb and Holman to stardom. They had instinctively

combined the traditional use of blackface masking with modernist implications of privileged primitivism.

Serious Dandyism and Racism

The seriousness of "Moanin' Low" was a radical move. White performers had been adapting or appropriating Black dance routines, steps, and styles for decades. Female dancers such as Ann Pennington, she of "the famous dimpled knees," had become stars performing African-American dances. Pennington is perhaps the outstanding example due to her fame as *the* white "Black Bottom" dancer. Pennington did not "black up"; she was a white woman exuding vigorous sexuality. She even did her own version of the "snake hips."[47] While male dancers had executed comic routines, usually in blackface, no male performer had undertaken a serious "Black" turn on Broadway. Webb had already made his career as an "eccentric" and as a ballroom dancer. As "The Sweetback" in the number that was originally called "High Yaller," he aimed to represent the violent sexuality of a Harlem pimp. Webb was photographed in a feature for *Dance Magazine* intended to let readers savor the movement and practice it at home.[48] Those who know Webb only through film will find it difficult to imagine the waspish Waldo Lydecker from *Laura* (1944) or Lynn Belvedere from *Sitting Pretty* (1948) and its two sequels, as a sexually smoldering and physically threatening street thug. Nonetheless, even critics who disapproved, agreed that Webb was almost offensively, gyratingly sexual. Webb and Holman wanted to be perceived not as "blackface" performers, but as African-Americans. *The New York Telegram* reported: "...the way Webb turned elastic in this scene caused an uproar out beyond the lights.[49] Any dissent was overwhelmed by the ovations the number received; both performers were immediately called out for bows. It made Webb the number one male revue star on Broadway. Holman became a nationally known torch singer, Lucius Beebe the hyper-sophisticated columnist called her "the high priestess of the love-lament."[50] She was already a recording artist, but the hit record she made of "Moanin' Low" confirmed her status as a leading blues singer.

The costume Webb wore is important as it ties into another aspect of the stage and street persona he "played" with, the dandy, which is also a modernist figure. Kirstein relates Van Vechten's dandyism to the establishment of a modernist interracial identity.[51] Throughout his career, Webb was famous for his clothes. He introduced the red carnation as an evening-wear boutonnière, and he was celebrated for his "technicolor" wardrobe. In his films, there were scenes of him dressing or even shopping for clothes. This gave him a certain masculine authority. The dandy was also an important figure in the

Harlem Renaissance.[52] W.E.B. Du Bois, James Weldon Johnson, and others were divided over dandyism and the New Negro's origins.[53] Some slippage lies between the "life lived as a work of art" decorated with the bricolage of haberdashery and the reality of Harlem street life. The Sweetback masks himself through dandification, as Pochmara argues in her chapter "Discontents of the Black Dandy."[54] Webb defines the epicene figure whose cutting remarks are amplified by the cut of his clothes. His taking on the role of the Sweetback enacts the physical forcefulness he could never achieve in his glittering daytime routine. Twisting his body center stage with raw sensuality, he is a brute, feared by women and men. He might wield a razor as well as a nail file. From the street perspective, the Black dandy has the best of all worlds; he is not conventionally masculine, yet he is also threatening. The roots of this figure lie in the minstrel character "Zip Coon," the urban, free Black man caricatured in minstrel shows. The exaggerated dress and posture of this character are reflected in Van Vechten's creation, "The Scarlet Creeper" and Webb's sweetback get-up. Webb's costume is an extension of the blackface aesthetic with implications for street, as well as onstage behavior. Columnists doted on Webb's idiosyncratic wardrobe and it became part of his aura.

This public performance of the blackface aesthetic is reflected in Holman's much more complex life. Holman's embrace of blackness reflects her rejection of her assimilated Jewish bourgeois upbringing in Cincinnati. Almost every choice she made after finishing college is a rejection of the values associated with that milieu. As the prostitute in "Moanin' Low", she is flagrantly sexual, desperate for money, degraded, and debauched, not only complicit in rough sex, she sleeps with a pint of gin under her bed. By taking on the role of a Black woman and failing to disabuse the public, and even some show business professionals, of their assumptions about her origins, Holman could be dangerously and conspicuously exotic: the "chartreuse chanteuse" as Winchell named her.[55] Here we see the link between "liberty" and libertinage, that so many white artists associated with being Black. Moreover, Holman's presumption of Blackness is something for public consumption, assuaging briefly her Jewish self-hatred. Bisexuality was only for her intimate life. In her later life that she was dogged by homicidal rumor and scandal, and was thought to be a "black angel of death" is cruelly ironic. On the whole, "Moanin' Low" represents a presumption of aesthetic privilege for Webb and Holman. Their eager assumption of blackface reveals their confidence as performers who concealed their uncertainty about their identities. Neither were full-fledged stars before *The Little Show*; they came to Broadway through widely different career paths. Webb Parmelee Hollenbeck (1889-1966) had been pushed into the theatre by his legendary stage mother, Mabelle, practically from the cradle. A child and teenage

performer in everything from *Huck Finn* to opera, by age 19 he was working as a ballroom dancer and had taken his stage name of "Clifton Webb." He sang in opera and operetta before debuting on Broadway as Bosco in *The Purple Road*, which opened at the Liberty Theatre in 1913. In that year he attached himself to a trend sweeping the nation and started teaching ballroom dancing.

The noted dancer Bonnie Glass had seen him taxi-dancing at the Jardin de Danse nightclub in New York, where Rudolf Valentino and George Raft were Webb's colleagues. Webb first became known after he partnered with Glass in 1913, and she taught him the latest ballroom dance steps. They became so close that the public thought they were a couple off the floor as well, not the only time Webb would pass for straight. Webb proved fickle and allowed himself to be taken up by Mae Murray for a successful tour on the Keith vaudeville circuit. Webb was adept at all sorts of dances, he could effortlessly waltz or fox trot and also be frenetically "eccentric" doing comic steps. He perfected his comic dancing with Mary Hay and Gloria Goodwin.

By 1915, the famous ballroom choreographer Ned Wayburn featured Webb in his all-star Broadway revue *Town Topics*. Webb shared the stage with many headliners, including Will Rogers, and the show gave Webb enough name recognition to open his own dance studio. Wayburn was a role model; he is representative of the ballroom dance craze of the time that had made its way onto the stage. Wayburn wrote a book called *The Art of Stage Dancing: The Story of a Beautiful and Profitable Profession* that went through six editions from 1923 to 1926. It offers every sort of advice from details of stage makeup to diet. Webb needed a steady income to support himself and his mother. Webb's career follows the trajectory outlined in Wayburn's text. Webb continued to be featured in musicals and revues through the war years. He appeared in Cole Porter's first Broadway show, *See America First* (1916), which flopped, but Webb continued to work steadily. By 1917 he and his partner Gloria Goodwin were billed as "the greatest ballroom dancers of them all" in an advertisement for Doraldina's Montmartre ballroom on Broadway.[56]

While Webb was never as renowned for his singing as his dancing, by the late 1920s he was introducing standards such as Irving Berlin's "Easter Parade," George and Ira Gershwin's "I've Got a Crush on You," and Arthur Schwartz and Howard Dietz's "I Guess I'll Have to Change My Plan," among others. By the 1930s Webb was also staring in non-musical comedies, most notably in plays by Noël Coward (always playing the roles Coward had written for himself) and in the national touring company of Kaufman and Hart's *The Man Who Came to Dinner*. A tremendously successful run in Los Angeles of Coward's *Blithe Spirit* brought him to Hollywood for the second time (MGM had put him

under contract in the early 1930s, but failed to find a use for him). He began his successful movie career with the film *Laura* in 1944.

Libby Holman (1904-1971), who considered herself the first great white torch singer, first found success on Broadway in the 1920s, but later her career would be marred by the scandal of the horrific death of her first husband, tobacco heir Zachary Smith Reynolds, who was found shot to death in her presence in the middle of the night. Holman was arrested but any charges were dropped, as the Reynolds family was more interested in hushing up the story than finding the truth. The attendant scandal, however, damaged her career, and though she continued to perform on stage into the 1960s, she never achieved the level of success she had first enjoyed. Since she was the mother of the next heir to the Reynolds tobacco fortune, Holman became enormously wealthy when her 18-year-old son died in a hiking accident, and she inherited his trust fund. Years earlier, with an eerily prescient snub, Webb cut Holman out of his life after she insulted his mother and took to referring to her as "the Black Angel of Death."[57] Given Holman's latter-day fashion choices and the fact that she was in the proximity of such a large number of terrible deaths, Webb was not merely being vitriolic. Two of Homan's three husbands, her second husband's brother—also her lover, her son, her sister, and her best friend and former lover, Louisa Carpenter, all died violently. Another cultural collision here is the fabricated scandalous nature of Holman's celebrity before her murder trial versus the actual notoriety she suffered afterward. Such a juxtaposition is only possible in the modern media era.

In her later years, Holman devoted herself to leftist causes, particularly the Civil Rights movement. Her foundation underwrote Martin Luther King Jr.'s trip to India to study the legacy of Gandhi's civil disobedience methods. Considering her espousal of King's movement and her early success as a singer of African-American-styled songs, it is troubling to think that her interest in theatre was sparked by seeing a local production of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* when she was a child in Cincinnati.[58] Moreover, the performance that inspired Holman's career would ultimately turn out to be the racist source of her future appropriations.

After years in children's and amateur theatre, and full of artistic ambition, Holman arrived in New York in 1924. She was not the physical type sought by producers of the time; she was too tall, too large, and with a startlingly deep voice. Nonetheless, she landed the role of a streetwalker in the road company of *The Fool.* When she returned to New York her perseverance paid off and she was cast in Rodgers and Hart's first success, *The Garrick Gaieties*, alongside Lee Strasberg, Harold Clurman, Sanford Meisner, and Sterling Holloway in 1925. Rodgers resisted Holman even after she was cast,

cutting her solo, "Black and White," because he was dissatisfied with her voice and deemed her style too "vulgar." Holman went on to appear in the road company of *The Greenwich Village Follies* in 1926. Nevertheless, tastes were changing fast; Rodgers's distaste for Holman's style soon seemed priggish. After other stage successes, she began recording songs; the first release was "Hogan's Alley," her torch song solo from *Merry-Go-Round*. In 1928, the role of Lotta in *Rainbow*, with a score by Vincent Youmans and Oscar Hammerstein made her as famous as Ruth Etting and Helen Morgan. She even performed at the Apollo Theatre in Harlem. In 1929 she became a star in her own right when she appeared with Clifton Webb in *The Little Show*. Here, as noted, she sang her signature song "Moanin' Low" for the first time. Holman's distinctive from-the-back-of-her-throat grunt that she called her "vomit," was at least partly physiological. According to family "legend," a surgeon's slip during a tonsillectomy altered her palate and gave her what would become her trademark sound.[59]

For whatever reason, Holman's voice was a bass contralto. Ned Rorem, especially noted for his classical compositions for voice, was a close friend of Holman's late in her life. He describes her

> boisterous bass whine, lewd intelligence, and a weird knack for elongating consonants and for wringing sense out of even articles and prepositions. She was the first among female pop singers-canaries, as they were called in the Jazz era--to exploit the husky purple depths of her vocal register rather than (like Helen Morgan or Ruth Etting) the squeakily poignant top.[60]

"Purple" was used to describe Holman elsewhere. Commenting on her vocal presence, Brooks Atkinson described her as a "dark purple menace." Holman declared, "After "Moanin' Low, that's when it got around New York and the country that I was a Negro, for which I was very pleased and happy because that's the way I always wanted to sing."[61] Scheper argues that it was her sound more than anything else that gave Holman her "Blackness." She sang with a meticulously crafted ambiguous racial identity. Nevertheless, it is clear that Holman "blacked up" off-stage as well as on. Some of her publicity photos were deliberately underexposed (one of which is dedicated "To Amy: My *white* sister"); she allowed her naturally thick, curly hair to be brushed out and then "lacquered into an imitation conked Afro style."[62]

For his part, Webb seems to have put on blackface only once more in the 1932 revue, *Flying Colors*, singing "Louisiana Hayride" in the guise of an African-American preacher for comic effect. Holman however, spent the rest of her career singing in a voice she hoped would "pass." Scheper argues that

Holman's attempts to sound “Black”, “...should not be read as an entirely negative appropriation for she gave expression on stage to marginalized voices such as those of the mulatto and the prostitute.” This special pleading aside, Scheper argues that it was a physical attribute of Holman's that contributed to her unique sound: “Her vocal palate was an 1/8 of an inch askew; this helped her make her strangely throaty sustained laments and grunts.”[63] Holman’s peculiar palate is always remarked on, whether it was natural or affected by the tonsillectomy. In 1966 Holman herself told an interviewer, “My whole ambition was always to sound like Ethel Waters.”[64] Interestingly, Holman had first heard Waters perform at the insistence of Carl Van Vechten who had become a friend in the summer of 1927.[65]

Ethel Waters' voice has been described as “urban Northern.”[66] Furthermore, in hindsight, Waters' later-day career as a gospel singer with the Billy Graham Crusade and as an apologist for Richard Nixon, would render her beyond the pale of acceptable singers of color to those of Holman’s decidedly radical chic ilk. This tortuous typology is exemplified by the career of the late cabaret performer Bobby Short, whose own career overlaps with Libby Holman’s concertizing. Consider that within one set he might sing a song such as “Gimme a Pigfoot” by Wesley Wilson, made famous by Bessie Smith, followed by a Cole Porter song. Short was from the Midwest, yet cultivated a mid-Atlantic style of speech, and frequently affected a Southern drawl and punctuated his performances with “low-down” patter. He lived for half the year in a suite in the Hotel Carlyle on New York’s Upper East Side, and in a villa on the French Riviera for the other half, favoring andouillettes over chitterlings.

White Passing With Pride

Even before Holman self-consciously styled herself after African-American performers, she was cast as mixed race, Scheper asks the question “Was she passing as Black or was she Black passing as white passing as Black?” Scheper's discussion is theorized, and her primary intention is not to investigate the lengths to which Holman "learned” how to sound and move “Black.” Scheper queries the meaning of what she did more than how she did it but does offer startling evidence from a contemporary observer, the Black director of the revue *Rang Tang* who admonished the white director of *The Little Show*, “She may have told you [that she was white] but she's passed.”[67] He was trying to cast her in his all-Black show. Holman gloried in this anecdote concluding her retelling of it with the words “Well, nothing could have pleased me more. In my whole life, nothing could have pleased me more."[68] Holman’s relationship to her identity is echoed by the Jewish jazz musician Mezz Mezzrow (1899-

1972) who convinced himself he was Black. In 1929, in a Harlem club, he once called out two Black women for passing as white. Mezzrow recalled, "To this day those girls probably believe that I was passing. 'If you ain't one of us,' they argued, 'how in hell could you play that horn the way you do?' How I wished that they were right."[69] One of the young women was wearing a star of David trying to pass as Jewish. Mezzrow went so far as to identify himself as a "Negro" when he was arrested for drug-dealing. The prevalence of the blackface aesthetic is evidence that "everybody wants the insurgence of Blackness" as Lauren Michele Jackson argues.[70]

Cultural appropriation is endemic to the popular culture industry. From the beginnings of Tin Pan Alley, or even before if one considers Stephen Foster, modern "pop" in all its incarnations relies on Black culture. Scott Joplin, Bert Williams, and Blake, among others were Black performers or composers whose work was manipulated by Eddie Cantor, Jimmy Durante, George Gershwin, and many others. It is a dense cultural "confluence" though as more recent studies have shown.[71] Holman's milieu was full of instances of intended or unintended white-to-Black passing. Jewish performers and composers were particularly prone to this characterization:

> Irving Berlin signed himself "Cooney" and was rumored to have a "little colored boy" write all his songs; Sophie Tucker was taken by Europeans as Black based on her voice alone; Harold Arlen was supposedly called by Ethel Waters the "Negro-ist" white man she had ever known, and a song-writing colleague claimed Arlen was "really one of them."[72]

Why are certain white persons so taken with the thought of being mistaken for a Black person? Why is it reprehensible the other way around? Or is it? This is dangerous territory.

Consider the notorious case of Nkechi Amare Diallo a.k.a. Rachel Anne Dolezal, president of the Spokane chapter of the N.A.A.C.P., until she was revealed to be a white woman passing as Black. When her heritage was revealed in 2015, Diallo/Dolezal was fired and her life collapsed. In literary history, the example of Jean Toomer (1894-1967) pertains. Henry Louis Gates and Richard Byrd's scornful treatment of Jean Toomer amounts to official censure.[73]

Gates is quite concerned with this issue. In a profile of noted *New York Times* book reviewer Anatole Broyard (1920-1990), who had been revealed as passing for white, Gates scrutinizes that writer's life lies, arguing throughout that race is essential to one's identity, and that identity is fixed. Gates

maintains that passing stifled Broyard's creativity.[74] Throughout both essays one senses that Gates deems it profoundly wrong to "pass."

> Broyard was a connoisseur of the liminal—of crossing over, and in the familiar phrase, getting over. But the ideologies of modernism have a kicker, which is they permit no exit. Racial recusal is a forlorn hope. In a system where whiteness is the default, gracelessness is never a possibility. You cannot opt-out; you can only opt in.[75]

In light of Gates's pronouncement, Dawkins's comments on Toomer address the complexity of Holman and Webb's performances in the context of whites passing as Blacks:

> We also need to question whether passing as white is the only or most meaningful type of racial passing. If Toomer sometimes passed as white, then logic dictates that he also sometimes passed as Black. But that is not what Byrd and Gates propose when they acknowledge his multiracial perspective. They maintain that Toomer "fled his identity" simply to further his career. Ironically, Byrd and Gates do not entertain the possibility that Toomer presents so eloquently in his writing and his life: a way of identifying as not-only-Black and not-passing.[76]

Reviewing Gates' formalist approach to race brings up questions of traditional categorization. Van Vechten's narcissistic vision of race is exemplified by his story of passing as Black while a student at the University of Chicago, which is probably his own fantasy.[77] Rather than being satisfied with the 20th and 21st century's aversion to passing, going beyond essentialism allows us to comprehend better the patronizing complexity that underpins Van Vechten's work and "Moanin' Low."[78]

Two "passing" episodes from the beginning and end of the 1920s also allow us to further question essentialist commentary and situate "Moanin' Low" in the modernist artistic context. When Jean Toomer took the journalist Waldo Frank (1889-1967), on a tour of the South in 1920, Frank was accepted as a Black man, and he was struck by the absurdity of this as Toomer appeared to have lighter skin than he did. It also caused him anxiety; he was already nervous about being a Jewish traveler in the realm of the Ku Klux Klan: now as a de facto Black man, he would have even more reason to fear assault, or worse.[79] Ten years later George Gershwin and Todd Duncan, who would create the role of "Porgy" in *Porgy and Bess,* went on a research trip together to Charleston, South Carolina to gain exposure to the music and speech patterns of the Deep South. Like "Moanin' Low," *Porgy and Bess* was

inspired by another 1925 novel about Black life written by a white man, *Porgy* by Dubose Heyward. It has been controversial since its first production. Virgil Thomson dismissed it; Duke Ellington exalted it. Gershwin and Duncan wanted to hear genuine music from the South, rather than Tin Pan Alley stuff, though ironically "Swanee" was the most successful song Gershwin would ever write. Duncan was an opera singer with a master's degree from Columbia. After they arrived in Charleston, Duncan "teased" Gershwin for being "Blacker" than he was; Gershwin "retorted only that Duncan was more Jewish than he was himself."[80]

Regarding Holman, Jewish identity can be as complex an issue as African-American identity, for as much as Holman was flattered to be thought "Black", she sometimes seemed to hate the fact that she was Jewish, writing to Jane Bowles when the writer was ill, "Please don't die and leave me alone in the hell of my Jewishness."[81] Holman was born "Holzman," but her family did not practice Judaism, her father converted to Christian Science and changed the family name. Holman's memorial service was a Quaker one.[82] When Holman married into the Reynolds family her Jewishness was an explicit cause for her to be shunned, as opposed to the mere rumors of her being mixed race. It was even said that Reynolds killed himself when he found out that Holman was Jewish. She may have displayed conventional Jewish self-hatred, nevertheless, with the rise of Hitler, she had a change of heart. Late in life she even displayed Zionist sympathies, when Teddy Kollek requested that she perform at the first anniversary of the establishment of the Jerusalem Museum she did so. She also used mangled Yiddish expressions throughout her life and when her son named his cat after Shirley Temple, Holman insisted on renaming her "Shirley Rosenbaum," since she detested the child star.[83] After her early stage success and subsequent infamy, Holman lived the balance of her life on a Connecticut estate called "Treetops," where she was very much lady-of-the-manor. And in her later-day concerts entitled "Blues, Ballads and Sin Songs," she wore a notorious Mainbocher creation, incongruously called a "peasant-style evening gown." Atkinson called it "Mainbocher in a democratic mood."[84] Holman never failed to take advantage of her wealth and what she could do with it.

Challenging Holman and Webb's public presentation of race is not a matter of ex post facto white guilt-induced attitudinizing. Again, one must recall Habermas's "forum of participants." Both Webb and Holman left clear evidence of their cultural depredations. What is of interest here is not merely the appropriation, but the self-congratulatory air that surrounds the enterprise. With Webb the conditions are those of the rough Black trade besotted aristo who dares to "out" himself as a "snake-hipped" Black stud, acting out the object of his desire as himself. Webb's performance was more about

passing for straight on stage. Leonard Leff makes an elaborate argument about Webb's usual stage persona, which was known for decidedly foppish fussiness. Leff takes this to be a "queer" performance.[85] Leff in particular draws on the descriptions of columnist, O. O. McIntyre, whom he refers to as a "reviewer."[86] McIntyre was a Missouri-born columnist whose "New York: Day by Day" gazetted metropolitan foibles for the folks back home. Leff overlooks that Webb made no effort off-stage to behave differently. In one interview he brazenly retails anecdotes of camping it up with his Black dresser who also massaged him between acts. Columnist Sidney Skolsky wrote that Webb, "calls his colored valet 'Ramona' and fires him almost weekly. 'Ramona' has been with him for three years."[87] Leff devotes only a paragraph to "Moanin' Low," calling it "maleness mocked." If Leff's analysis is accurate then Webb's performance was a failure; Webb's great success in *The Little Show* and afterward, belies this, not to mention the respect he earned from Black dancers. It is the "Sweetback" that is the calculated performance, not Webb's other roles.

Van Vechten, Race, and Radical Chic

Nevertheless, in "Moanin' Low" Webb is only interested in playing at race, though he is doing so to make a potent sexual point. Holman's performance given her later-day social activism and outspoken support of civil rights, smacks of being in deadly earnest. All of which queries white guilt, limousine liberalism, and their artistic offshoot: the aesthetic of radical chic. The white intelligentsia's embrace of African-American culture in the 1920s is the foundation for this social phenomenon in the United States. By 1929 after Webb had read Van Vechten's novel and his notion of executing a "sweetback" dance turn blossomed, the white-bourgeois celebration of Black culture in certain chic nooks was redounding. The exemplar of this was the self-anointed Great White Father of the "New Negro," the flamboyant enthusiast for all things outré or African-American, Carl Van Vechten, whose novel *Nigger Heaven* inspired the "Moanin' Low" dance routine. Van Vechten projected himself as having greater insight into African-American culture than even Alain Locke who had successfully popularized the term, "New Negro" in essays and his 1925 eponymous anthology. An unsatisfactory outgrowth of the Harlem Renaissance is the emergence of figures such as Van Vechten, the self-styled white ambassador of Black culture.[88] Furthermore, Van Vechten's refusal to change the title of his novel in the face of opposition even from his family, reveals his aesthetic narcissism. Locke's polite term would be overwhelmed by the sensation caused by Van Vechten's title. Webb's "snake-hips" moment

is a close-up that Kracauer would have us recognize as an insight into the sensation sought by the radically chic.[89]

The term "radical chic" was not in use in the 1920s, but the top-down approach of the blackface aesthetic defines it. It is no coincidence that the circumstance that brought the phrase "radical chic" to prominence was a soirée organized to raise money for the Black Panthers by the most prominent American musician, Leonard Bernstein (1918-1990). Bernstein was a veteran cultural explainer. His musical *West Side Story* (1957) was in its time regarded as an "authentic" depiction of the ethnic struggles underlying New York City gang life, though now it seems more like an update of *Abie's Irish Rose* (1922).[89] Bernstein's final musical, *1600 Pennsylvania Avenue* (1976) tried to encapsulate the history of the White House through vignettes of historical Black and white encounters there. It was a flop, though Bernstein's music was praised.

If only Van Vechten had lived four more years, he no doubt would have been center stage chez Bernstein, feasting with Black Panthers. The after-midnight Harlem odysseys that Van Vechten sponsored presage the *nostalgie de la boue* that Tom Wolfe describes in his famous essay "Radical Chic: That Party at Lenny's."[90] Wolfe did not coin the term "radical chic," but he made it part of the socio-political lexicon. Seymour Krim first used the phrase in a 1962 essay "Who's Afraid of *The New Yorker* Now?" in which he chided the magazine for extravagantly praising James Baldwin's criticism of White America.[91] Krim excoriates the magazine for self-consciously abjuring its genteel haut-bourgeois stance, hanging its head in shame yet keeping Eustace Tilley's monocle in place. He accuses it of "stretching its now rubber conscience to include tokens of radical chic and impressiveness on top but not at the bottom where it counts...."[92] Krim also uses "desk liberalism"[93] a less-famous phrase to describe *The New Yorker's* mind-set that equally applies to the sensibility behind "Moanin' Low." Krim has no patience with white guilt or the preciousness of Upper-East-Side noblesse oblige that deigns to bestir itself above 110th St. James Baldwin himself vindicated Krim's asperity by admiring his writing.[94] Krim's revulsion extended to the impulses that drove Norman Mailer to write the still cringe-worthy "The White Negro," and all of this may be summed up by Ralph Ellison's reaction to Mailer when he wrote to Albert Murray, saying it was "the same old primitivism crap in a new package"[95] This is pretty much what the critic Eudora Garrett said about "Moanin' Low" in 1929. To turn Krim's phrase, Webb and Holman are "tokens" of cultural "topping." Gazing through the lens of their cultural privilege, Webb and Holman saw themselves as artists refining the "raw material" they had discovered in Harlem. The patronizing valorization of "Blackness" did not begin in the 1960s.

"Moanin' Low" allows us Kracauer's micro-dimensional perspective of the reach of radical chic through the century.[96]

Forty years earlier, Van Vechten had desired to be the radical race advocate—the original of Norman Mailer's "white negro"—a threat to all things pale and passionless. In Van Vechten's mind, he effected the appropriation of the "New Negro" and even had delusions of *affecting* Du Bois's double consciousness, one may attempt to excuse some of this posturing as stemming from his living as a gay man in a homophobic culture. Irrespective of his marriages to women, Van Vechten seems to have lived as he pleased. For us, he is not only a "bohemian ambassador," to use Savran's term[97], but an aesthetic tour guide for the jaded: the people who would have given "Moanin' Low" ovations.

Not that Van Vechten lacked defenders in the Black community, and in that community, his novel was more popular than those by African-American authors. James Weldon Johnson, Zora Neal Hurston, and Langston Hughes supported Van Vechten, but as much of a poseur as Van Vechten seems today, it is equally inappropriate to write him out of the history of the Harlem Renaissance. Emily Bernard even uses the term "segregated" in her discussion of the novel's place in critical discussions of the Harlem Renaissance.[98] Nevertheless, I submit that Van Vechten, Webb, and Holman were at heart racist figures determined to somehow privilege their ownership of perceived cultural initiatives and imperatives. They took from Black men and women even as they assumed themselves to be giving their white audiences an actual Black performance. In so doing they are part of the cultural continuity of American race relations. Webb and Holman's performance is different from its predecessors in that it is not intended as any kind of mockery. Indeed, the blackface aesthetic purports to be respectful. Within a few years, the Hollywood musical would take on this bizarre notion and pay "tribute" to minstrel shows and blackface in bloated production numbers. *Dimples* (1936), a Shirley Temple film, is true to the "Tomming" tradition of adaptation by grafting a minstrel performance onto the supposed New York City premiere of *Uncle Tom's Cabin.* The film doubles the fiction by claiming that this is the first such performance outside of the South. *Dixie* (1943) starring Bing Crosby is prefaced by a title card memorializing the minstrel shows as a great American tradition. Webb and Holman are part of a permutation in Blackface performance. Holman's later-day civil rights activism enhances Rogin's argument about the changing use of blackface performance that he dates from the late 1920s.[99] In an earlier article he outlines the particular issues of Jewish performance and blackface, which is also relevant to Holman. Together they sum up some presuppositions of modernist usage of Black culture.[100]

Alleged respectfulness was not enough though. African-American objections to Van Vechten's pretentions are well-known, Du Bois in particular abhorred him, but even among whites there was opposition. As noted, the most important drama critic of the time, George Jean Nathan was not impressed by whites finding cultural fulfillment by putting on aesthetic blackface. Nathan had the conventional prejudices of his time and used offensive language, but he praised Thurman and Rapp's play *Harlem* (1929) for its "sharp reality" in contrast to the "promiscuous fakery" of so many other plays about Black life. Nathan argued at length for recognizing the genuineness of Thurman and Rapp's drama and other such plays by Black playwrights.[101] He also championed Paul Robeson at the beginning of his stage career. Nathan was a frequent guest of Walter and Gladys White and escorted Florence Mills to public events. Nathan was never caught up in the Harlem vogue; he was dissatisfied with Orson Welles's 1941 stage production of Richard Wright's *Native Son*, referring to it as "a throwback to the old order of Uncle Toms, low comedians, and rapists."[102] Toward the end of his career he gave significant encouragement to the late Diahann Carroll at the onset of her career, as a 1954 letter from Carroll to the critic attests.[103] Nathan was skeptical of café society types who had their chauffeurs take them up Broadway to Harlem. He loved musicals and the popular songs of his time, but he mocked the idea that jazz was somehow salvific.[104] And for someone whose knowledge of theatrical esoterica was unmatched, he would have no truck with intellectuals who privileged "primitivism." "Primitivism" is clearly what Webb knew his audience was after.

Noël Coward strenuously supported Webb in this because he shared his desire for commercial success. Webb enlisted Coward's aid in convincing the wary producers to keep the number as red, hot, and Black as possible. After Webb and Holman performed it for him, Coward was dazzled and insisted, "If even a soupçon is changed, the producers would be quite, quite mad."[105] Coward's notable success as a creator of popular and profitable entertainment gave him important authority in this regard. He was an expert at sensation-drama. His career-making 1924 play *The Vortex* featured a finale in which a young man bursts into his mother's bedroom to hysterically confront her about her young lover. They wrestle on the bed, and he produces a confession of his own: "a little gold box" clearly intended to be full of cocaine.

The play made Coward a star and five years later he was one of the most important figures in trans-Atlantic theatre. It is possible that without Coward's assertiveness, the number would have been altered. Coward was himself influenced by this experience. In 1931 he would give Helen Morgan a "blues" number for *The Ziegfeld Follies* that traded on Morgan's ambiguous heritage: "Half-caste

Woman." Morgan who was born of either Irish or French Canadian parents, was assumed by many to be of either partly Jewish or African-American heritage because of the songs she sang, and the way she sang them. In short, to her audience, she must have really been "Julie La Verne," the mixed-race *Showboat* character, which role she created. Stratton comments on this.[106] Lockridge, the critic who found something "tragic" in "Moanin' Low" seconds this attitude. Did Coward read that review and did Lockridge's opinion percolate through his consciousness? The song, "Half-caste Woman" includes the lyric, "Is there something strange and tragic/Deep, deep, down." Long before, and ever since Ruth stood weeping midst the alien corn, the other has been a figure of pity. The Black dandy that Webb danced and the "purple" whore that Holman's voice and body conjured are emblems of the modernist assault on bourgeois culture.[107]

What would one say to Praxiteles if he had appeared in Florence and accused Michelangelo, whom he would no doubt have considered an "Italian barbarian," of "appropriating" his sculptural style? Is it an ironic function of post-colonial power that it now allows the subaltern free rein over its presumed cultural imperatives such as ballet, opera, and classical theatre, while denying itself any further hegemony over any aspect of subaltern forms? Guilt is a powerful force and it has warped this discussion to the point that one can barely even conduct it. Colin Grant argues that historical guilt not only sustains a patronizing culture that stifles artists of color by coddling them to death but also silences any substantive discussions about race.[108] Indeed, it is a reflection of the sort of attenuated social consciousness exemplified by Libby Holman's latter-day career.[109] What is more, this manner of cultural *noblesse oblige* patronizes. Reverse false consciousness does not equate to true consciousness, nor can projecting an affection or even adoration of the other completely mask cultural essentialism.

Endnotes

[1] Opened 30 April 11929 at the Music Box Theatre; ran through February 1930.

[2] Libby Holman sings "Moanin' Low." https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Flo2pcFQKfQ

[3] Seymour Spaeth, *History of Popular Music in America* (Random House, 1948): 472.

[4] Ray Moses. "High Yaller: A Blues Number from *The Little Show* Conceived and Danced by Clifton Webb." *Dance Magazine* (October 1929): 30-31.

[5] Mary Morris, "Song-Dance-and-Dance Party Man" *PM*, 11 Nov. 1945. Clipping file, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, n.p.

[6]A performance may be viewed here, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zVrwDOQ6jSE

[7] Marshall and Jean Stearns, *Jazz Dance: The Story of American Vernacular Dance*. 2nd ed. (Da Capo 1994): 160.

[8] Amma Y. Ghartey-Tagoe Kootin, *Lessons in Blackbody Minstrelsy: Old Plantation and the Manufacture of Black Authenticity. TDR* 57, No. 2 (2013): 102-122.

[9] Marshall and Jean Stearns, *Jazz Dance: The Story of American Vernacular Dance*. 2nd ed. (Da Capo 1994): 134.

[10] Marshall and Jean Stearns, *Jazz Dance: The Story of American Vernacular Dance*. 2nd ed. (Da Capo 1994): 134.

[11] Marshall and Jean Stearns, *Jazz Dance: The Story of American Vernacular Dance*. 2nd ed. (Da Capo 1994): 164, 385 note 9.

[12] Danielle Robinson, "' Oh, You Black Bottom!' Appropriation, Authenticity, and Opportunity in the Jazz Dance Teaching of 1920s New York." *Dance Research Journal* 38. Nos. 1-2 (2006): 19-42 at 36. doi:10.1017/S0149767700007312.

[13] Danielle Robinson, "' Oh, You Black Bottom!' Appropriation, Authenticity, and Opportunity in the Jazz Dance Teaching of 1920s New York." *Dance Research Journal* 38. Nos. 1-2 (2006): 19-42 at 36. doi:10.1017/S0149767700007312.

[14] Undated clipping, Clifton Webb file New York Public Library Collection. N.p.

[15] Undated clipping, Clifton Webb file New York Public Library Collection. N.p.

[16] Undated clipping, Clifton Webb file New York Public Library Collection. N.p.

[17] Clipping file, "The Little Show," Harvard Theatre Collection. (1 May 1929): n. p.

[18] Julie Malnig. *Dancing Till Dawn: A Century of Exhibition Ballroom Dance* (NYU Press, 1995): 39.

[19] Jürgen Habermas, *Zwischen Naturalismus und Religion: philosophische Aufsätze* (1. Aufl. Edn., Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2005): 15. Author's translation.

[20] Habermas, Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger and Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press 1989): 29.

[21] Carlo Ginzburg, *Myths, Emblems, Clues (*London: Hutchinson Radius, 1990: (ix). Ginzburg adapts Edoardo Grendi's term "exceptional 'normal.'"

[22] Carlo Ginzburg, *The Night Battles: Witchcraft and Agrarian Cults in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, trans. John and Anne C. Tedeschi (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013: xi.

[23] Carl Van Vechten, *Nigger Heaven*. Alfred A. Knopf, 1926.

[23] Michael North. *The Dialect of Modernism: Race, Language, and Twentieth-century Literature.* (Oxford University Press, 1998): 25.

[24] Brander Matthews, "The Rise and Fall of Negro Minstrelsy." *Scribner's Magazine* 57 (June 1915): 754-59.

[25] Adele Heller and Lois Rudnick, eds. *1915, The Cultural Moment: The New Politics, The New Woman, The New Psychology, The New Art & The New Theatre in America*. (Rutgers University Press, 1991).

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[32] Lisa Mendelman. "Character Defects: The Racialized Addict and Nella Larsen's Passing" Modernism/*modernity* 26, no. 4 (2019): 727-752 at 748. doi:10.1353/mod.2019.0056.

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[34] Benjamin Jasnow, "Germanicus, Nero and the Incognito King in Tacitus' Annals 2.13 and 13.25." *The Classical Journal* 110, no. 3 (2015): 313-31. doi:10.5184/classicalj.110.3.0313.

[35] George Jean Nathan, *The Autobiography of an Attitude*. (Alfred A. Knopf, 1925): 89. Later in the same book, Nathan takes down the Ku Klux Klan: 174-181.

[36] Marion Meade. *Dorothy Parker: What Fresh Hell is This?* (New York: Villard Books, 1988): 181, 186.

[37] John F. Neville. *Twentieth Century Cause Célèbre Sacco and Vanzetti and the Press 1920- 1927.* (Greenwood Press, 2004): 66.

[38] Sarah E. Chinn. *Inventing Adolescence: The Children of Immigrants in Turn-of-the-Century America.* (Rutgers University Press, 2009): 143-144

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[40] Chad Heap. *Slumming: Sexual and Racial Encounters in American Nightlife, 1885-1940.* (University of Chicago Press, 2009): 272-273.

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[42] Jacques Rancière. *Le spectateur émancipé.* (Paris: La Fabrique éd., 2013): 3-4. Author's translation.

[43] Chloë Rae Edmonson "The Aristocrat of Harlem." *Performance Research*, 22:6. (2017): 3-12 at 8. DOI: 10.1080/13528165.2017.1412620.

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[46] Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Colour*. (Harvard University Press, 1999): 121-122.

[47] A performance may be viewed here, (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8t0aS2dgzWY).

[48] Ray Moses. "High Yaller: A Blues Number from *The Little Show* Conceived and Danced by Clifton Webb." *Dance Magazine* (October 1929): 30-31.

[49] *The Little Show*, file. Unidentified clipping. Harvard Theatre Collection. (1 May 1929), n.p.

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[51] Lincoln Kirstein, "Carl Van Vechten (1880-1964)." *The Yale University Library Gazette*, Vol. 39, No. 4 (1965): 158.

[52] Anna Pochmara, *The Making of the New Negro Black Authorship, Masculinity, and Sexuality in the Harlem Renaissance.* (Amsterdam University Press, 2011): 141-178 at 143-145. [53] Monica L. Miller, *Slaves to Fashion: Black Dandyism and the Styling of Black Diaspora Identity*. (Duke University Press, 2009): chaps. 3-4.

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[63]Jeanne Scheper, *Moving Performances: Divas, Iconicity, and Remembering the Modern Stage* (Rutgers University Press, 2016): 98.

[64] Libby Holman qtd. in Jeanne Scheper, *Moving Performances: Divas, Iconicity, and Remembering the Modern Stage* (Rutgers University Press, 2016): 104-05.

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[66] J. Ronald Green, *Straight Lick: The Cinema of Oscar Micheaux.* (Indiana University Press, 2000), 115. Green quotes Bessie Smith calling Ethel Waters, "a Northern bitch."

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[71] Richard Middleton, *Studying Popular Music.* (Open University Press, 2010): 111-12.

[72] Baz Dreisinger, *Near Black: White to Black Passing in American Culture*. (University of Massachusetts Press, 2011): 111.

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[85]Leonard J. Leff, "Representing Queerness: Clifton Webb on the American Stage." *Journal of American Studies* 45, no. 3 (2011): 539-558 at 553.

[86] Leonard J. Leff, "Representing Queerness: Clifton Webb on the American Stage." *Journal of American Studies* 45, no. 3 (2011): 539-558 at 546.

[87] Leonard J. Leff, "Representing Queerness: Clifton Webb on the American Stage." *Journal of American Studies* 45, no. 3 (2011): 539-558 at 547. www.jstor.org/stable/23016788.

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[93] Seymour Krim, *Shake it for the World, Smartass*. (New York Dial Press 1971):184.

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