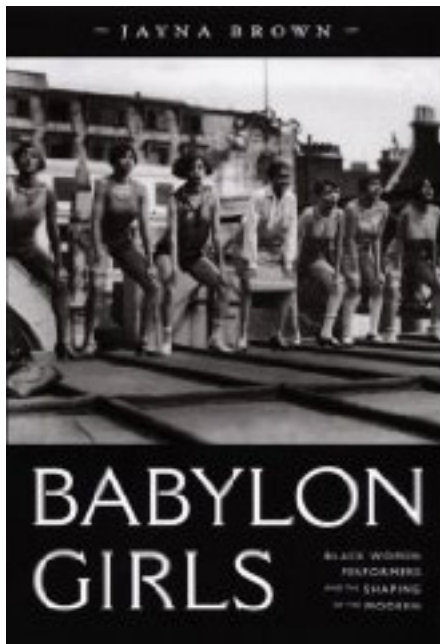


## Jayna Brown's *Babylon Girls*

melissa blanco borelli | University of surrey, united kingdom

Brown, Jayna. *Babylon Girls: Black Women Performers and the Shaping of the Modern*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2008. 339 pages. \$23.95 paper.



Jayna Brown's excellent monograph tackles the concept of transatlantic modernity through the traveling, singing, and dancing bodies of black women performers in the early twentieth century. Brown's extensive research frames these women's bodies against literature and drama, European primitivism, and colonialism (2). In so doing, Brown resists offering a recuperative history of these performing black women's bodies. Instead, she troubles the epistemologies that situate the body and performance outside of history-making. Ultimately, Brown demonstrates how the transatlantic movement of black expressive cultures undergirds any discussion of modernity.

In her groundbreaking study, Brown carefully demonstrates how these black women performers reclaimed their bodies through performance and mobility—bodies that were ideologically, historically, and often physically ravaged by racist thinking, the legacies of slavery, imperialism, and patriarchy. Although marginalized, these black women's performances came to represent American ideals. As Brown clearly states, “the creative artistry of a nation's most beleaguered and disenfranchised citizens came to represent that nation's most prized claims to freedom, equality, and opportunity”(8). Through an examination of a broad range of vernacular forms--including vaudeville, minstrelsy, musicals, burlesque, and cabaret--Brown shows how such performances speak to the constructed and negotiated nature of race, issues about racial

# EMISFÉRICA

---

or cultural authenticity, subjectivity, and individual agency. Within the book's pages lie the performances and transnational choreographies of Ada Overton Walker, Florence Mills, Josephine Baker, Valaida Snow, Belle Davis, Ida Forsythe and other women whose work articulated ways to consider how subjectivity is inextricably linked to raced and gendered embodied experiences.

Brown's book reads as a cultural history, each chapter providing a detailed glimpse into these rich performance moments and the bodies enlivening them. I say glimpse, because the author herself admits to not providing "linear, complete, and seamless biographies" in order to allow for more scholarly work to be done, not only on these performers but "on performance, dance, and racialized bodies in resistance to oppressive social regimes"(1). The ensuing chapters offer nuanced, thorough and robust histories, biographies, performances, and critical analyses. *Babylon Girls* works interdisciplinarily, moving through literature, history, performance studies, black feminism, and critical race theory to render these black bodies as modern subjects.

Chapter one examines the traveling picaninny choruses where many of the black performers of the early twentieth century started their careers. Brown provides a genealogy of the picaninny from the plantation to cultural imaginaries in the United States, Europe and Russia, and to their representations on these respective stages. Brown engages with the physicality of the dancing children to demonstrate how they mediated their experiences corporeally. Here, Brown furthers critical dance studies' claims that a moving, gesturing, and dancing body articulates and theorizes the socio-culturo-historical space in which it is situated. Chapter two investigates the most well known picaninny, the character of Topsy in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and the performances of Topsy made famous by Ida Forsythe at the Palace Theatre in London. Brown eloquently materializes Topsy as a resistant figure twisting concepts of time and hegemonic power. Topsy's inability to visibly express pain, but to keep dancing despite the oppression and violence committed onto her body, suggests a new way to conceive of black female resilience. Similarly, Topsy's improvisations that play with time assert her inability to be contained. As Brown claims, "Topsy signifies an anarchic moment in which the working black woman transforms herself in the space of labor, reclaims her body in the place of work" (91). Chapter three takes the reader to the Creole shows of the late nineteenth centuries where light-skinned black women engaged in performances of race and gender within a libidinal economy that rendered them as desirable objects of colonialism and empire. Brown, however, complicates the spectacularity of these women by considering how their shows "celebrated and called into question the boundaries between colonies and metropole and drew parallels between geographies of imperial annexation and the sexualized, racialized zoning of city spaces" (95).

Chapters four, five, and six deal with social dances: the cakewalk, burlesque, chorus line dancing, and veil dancing. Herein we learn about the Charleston dance lessons Ethel Williams gave to Irene Castle; the rooftop dance parties of a modernizing New York City;

# EMISFÉRICA

---

Ada Overton's cakewalking; and the chorus line girls from shows such as *Shuffle Along*, *Darktown Follies*, and *Chocolate Dandies*. Chapter seven provides three compelling case studies on the transnational careers of Florence Mills, Josephine Baker, and Valaida Snow. The book culminates with extraordinary details about jazz trumpeter Snow, further demonstrating how these women fashioned a cosmopolitan transnational existence despite the perils of global racism, segregation, and in Snow's case, World War II.

Jayna Brown's book is exceptional. The research is thorough and meticulous, and the archival photographs interspersed throughout further enrich the transatlantic stories. History weaves throughout this important book without crystallizing into a neat, linear, all-encompassing framework. Bodies are alive and (re)acting in its pages. They dance about their realities, but they also resist, reinterpret, and reposition blackness as something mobile, material, and modern.

---

**Melissa Blanco Borelli** ensina dança e cinema na Universidade de Surrey. Antes disso, ela foi Professora Visitante no MIT, departamento de Música e Arte Teatral. Borelli está trabalhando atualmente num manuscrito que examina corporalidade mulata e história comparada da dança social em Cuba e Nova Orleans. Ela tem artigos publicados no *Dance Chronicle* e *Women & Performance: a Journal of Feminist Theory*, além de um artigo no prelo pela revista *International Journal of Performing Arts and Digital Media*.