MASKING MODERNITY: BLACK PERFORMANCE AND THE STRUGGLE FOR A MODERN IDENTITY IN THE PROGRESSIVE ERA SOUTH

by

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ABSTRACT

EMILY JANE TAYLOR. Masking modernity: black performance and the struggle for a modern identity in the Progressive Era South. (Under the direction of DR. KAREN L. COX)

Centering on the concept of dual identity, my thesis examines how the larger black community in the South adjusted to modernity through acts of masking. More specifically, this work analyzes minstrelsy and jubilee spirituals in an effort to explain what these performances meant for African Americans' perceptions of modernity in the Progressive Era South. While previous scholars have tended to narrow their focus on the artistic productions of blacks in northern metropolises, I argue that southern blacks did not merely ride the coattails of northern artists, but took an active role in producing, negotiating, and responding to their own cultural representations.

DEDICATION

To my grandfather, Dr. Robert V. Wood (1931-2014), who would have been the first to read my work and the most eager to discuss it. I love you and think of you every day.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am indebted to many people who helped make this thesis project a reality. First and foremost, I would like to recognize my thesis committee: Dr. Karen Cox, Dr. John David Smith, and Dr. Cheryl Hicks for their guidance, support, and patience. I am especially grateful to have had Dr. Cox as my thesis chair and graduate mentor. Her dedication to my project and belief in my capabilities were an invaluable source of support that helped me grow as a scholar and a person. Two of my undergraduate advisors at Cumberland University, Dr. Mark Cheathem and Dr. Natalie Inman, were also instrumental to this project because they encouraged me to pursue a graduate education and gave my work careful attention before I had confidence in my own scholarship.

The collections I accessed at the David M. Rubenstein Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Duke University and the Franklin Library Special Collections and Archives at Fisk University were essential to my thesis. I appreciate the archivists and library staff who offered valuable counsel and pulled countless materials for me throughout my research process.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES

LIST OF TABLES

PROLOGUE: LESSONS FROM A SOUTHERN ODYSSEY

We were going to our native South which we left before memory begins, which had come to mean, through parental reminiscences, a place of sun, chivalry, romance, and Uncle Remus.

-Mildred Cram, *Old Seaport Town,* 1917

Mildred Cram had more than a few expectations when she loaded her suitcase into the back of a New York taxi cab to catch the six o'clock southbound train to the land of "Uncle Remus." Though she had spent the first few years of her life in the South, those memories had all but faded, save a particular taste for hot breads and the smell of incense. Mildred's vision of the South was purely constructed by word of mouth and images ingrained in popular culture. Holding fast to doctored truths and grand exaggerations, Mildred—an affluent white woman from the big city— anticipated a romantic southern odyssey, complete with chivalric men, simple-minded manners, and mint juleps served under cypress trees to stave off the humidity.[1]

Though these idyllic images may appear harmless, one expectation that Mildred carried with her had a more serious implication—her presumption that black southerners were a deferential people, trained into submission by a sordid past of slavery. Mildred's views about race were hardly subtle, as she freely admitted the pleasure she found in the "picturesque ignorance" and "martyrdom" of the blacks she encountered in the South.[2] In her view, an essential part of her experience as a southern tourist was to witness the

[1] My introductory narrative is based on Mildred Cram's travel journal, *Old Seaport Towns of the South*. She does not include specific dates for her travels, but it is reasonable to deduct that her southern tour occurred in the mid to late 1910s as her narrative was published in 1917. Most supporting details of this narrative can be found in her chapter specific to her stop in Savannah, Georgia, entitled "A Confession of Laziness in Savannah and a Step Further South to 'Jax,'" 132-158.

[2] Mildred Cram, *Old Seaport Towns of the South* (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company), 154.

barefooted pickaninnies, the smiling Uncle Toms, and the do-ragged Aunt Jemimas. But what Mildred encountered on her southern tour did not satisfy these expectations. Constant rainfall squelched the southern sun in Baltimore. Norfolk, the land of mint juleps, had gone dry due to state prohibition laws, and the roaches scattered about the French Quarter in Louisiana tarnished her fantasy of southern charm. Yet, the most jarring violation of Mildred's expectations took the form of a man whom she simply referred to as "her chocolate chauffeur."[3]

As a guest at Hotel Savannah, Mildred called upon the hospitality desk to supply her with a driver to "skip lightly" over the sites of Savannah, Georgia, the fifth stop on her pilgrimage. The man who arrived to escort Mildred was not as polite as she had anticipated, but he obliged her request and drove her to one of the city's most prized attractions: the Hermitage Plantation. As the driver approached the "Big House", Mildred swooned, her mind abuzz with romantic imagery rooted in her favorite "befo' the wah" literature. Yet, as he continued past the house and parked in front of the plantation's former slave quarters, the mood shifted.

The chauffeur shouted for Molly, a former slave who was reportedly "the oldest col'ud lady in Savannah." As Molly emerged from her cabin, Mildred stared in awe at this "astounding freak of nature"—a relic of a bygone era in the flesh. The driver implored Molly to entertain his patron with plantation stories, but she remained silent. Sensing the cause of Molly's resistance, he offered a suggestion: "Give her a qut'tah and *she'll* find her tongue." Mildred slipped Molly a quarter, but having acquired her prize, she became disinterested in indulging Mildred's curiosities further and retreated.

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[3] Ibid., 147. All subsequent direct quotation from Mildred's narrative can be found on pages 150-154.

Figure 1: Path of oak trees leading to the Hermitage Plantation, c. 1907.
Hermitage, Oak Avenue vista, Savannah, Ga., The. Dry plate negative. Detroit: Detroit Publishing Co., c. 1907. From Library of Congress: *Detroit Publishing Company Photograph Collection*.

Figure 2: Slave cabins at the Hermitage Plantation, c. 1900-1910.
Slave quarters, the Hermitage. Dry plate negative.
Detroit: Detroit Publishing Co., c. 1900-1910. From Library of Congress: *Detroit Publishing Company Photograph Collection*.

Following the exchange with Molly, Mildred returned to the car with the intention of continuing to sight-see, but the driver had a different plan. Opting to speed past the live oaks and hanging Spanish moss, he took Mildred through the "new negro quarters" of Savannah, featuring neatly ordered brick homes. Slowing his pace as he weaved through the narrow streets, he took particular care to acknowledge a young black girl wearing nice white shoes, tipping his hat to her as they passed.

The chauffeur did not tell Mildred why he chose to drive through this neighborhood, but she understood his intention. He was showing Mildred, an outsider from New York, what modernity looked like for Savannah's black community at the turn of the century. Though subtle in delivery, he offered Mildred a corrective to the Lost Cause myth that essentialized southern blacks as subdued, simple creatures who lacked the capacity of self-improvement. Coming to this realization, Mildred confessed with a tinge of shame that she "had been demanding an eternal raggedness and poverty and picturesque ignorance for her own purely aesthetic enjoyment."[4]

Mildred's story is revealing in a number of ways, but the chapters that follow are not about her. Nor are they a broader cultural study about how her thoughts and perceptions came into being, as this ground has been explored in depth by Lost Cause historians. This study, instead, is more concerned with Mildred's nameless chauffeur, or rather, what we can learn from the paradox he presented as he taxied Mildred through the streets of Savannah, Georgia. Though dismissed as simple-minded and poor mannered in Mildred's travel narrative, he demonstrated a keen understanding of the duality in which southern blacks lived their lives: one defined by masks and modernity. Mildred's chauffeur donned a mask of performance as he guided her through her plantation tour.

[4] Ibid., 154.

Though Mildred sensed an air of antipathy beneath the veneer, he begrudgingly played into her desire for an "authentic" plantation experience. So, too, did Molly, though her willingness to perform the role of ragged slave woman expired abruptly once she was rendered payment. In spite of the chauffeur's compliance, it is clear that his performance for Mildred also had limits as he ventured to show her the man behind the mask: a man who took quiet pride in the progress of Savannah's up-and-coming black neighborhood—even if that progress was simply a young black girl wearing a nice pair of Sunday shoes.

Figure 3: Girls jumping rope in a black neighborhood in Savannah, Georgia. *Jumping Rope.* Photograph, n.d. Courtesy of the Georgia Historical Society: *Collection of Photographs 1870- 1960.*

Though Mildred's chauffeur remains nameless, his act of subversion provides a point of departure for this study. Centering on the concept of dual identity, my thesis examines how the larger black community in the South adjusted to modernity through acts of masking. More specifically, the following chapters analyze minstrelsy and jubilee

spirituals in an effort to explain what these performances meant for African Americans' perceptions of modernity in the Progressive Era South. While previous scholars have tended to narrow their focus on the artistic productions of blacks in northern metropolises, I argue that southern blacks did not merely ride the coattails of northern artists, but took an active role in producing, negotiating, and responding to their own cultural representations.

Historians who study popular art as a medium of race construction are deeply invested in the cultural implications of black performance. Early contributors to this body of scholarship maintained that minstrelsy and other forms of racialized stage performances were purely instruments of dominance designed to reaffirm whiteness by vulgarizing blackness. In the view of these scholars, black participation in minstrelsy fed an incessant Euro-American need to ridicule blacks in an effort to validate white supremacy.[5] This strictly exploitive depiction of minstrelsy is less persuasive in light of recent advancements in race theory. The majority of current scholarship now promotes the deconstruction of racial binaries in support of a more fluid conception of race as a social negotiation guided by human impulses that are never monolithic, ahistorical or fully conscious. Historian Eric Lott, a leading critic of univocal minstrel scholarship, introduced this intellectual shift in his seminal work, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class*: "The minstrel show was less the incarnation

[5] Ralph Ellison's 1958 essay "Change the Joke and Slip the Joke" was the first scholarly treatment of minstrelsy that suggested that blackface was chiefly about the affirmation of whiteness. This idea was alluded to in LeRoi Jones's *Blues People* (1963) and again in Nathan Huggins chapter on minstrelsy in *Harlem Renaissance* (1971), but it did not come into full fruition until 1974 with Robert Toll's monograph, *Blacking Up: The Minstrel Show in Nineteenth Century America*.

of an age-old racism than an emergent social semantic figure highly responsive to the emotional demands and troubled fantasies of its audience."[6]

Initially, historians that reevaluated racialized stage performance as a means of trans-cultural exchange centered their studies on white spectatorship and offered theories as to why white audiences found such systemic pleasure in viewing exaggerated displays of black culture.[7] While white spectators continue to be a subject of academic interest, contemporary scholarship also recognizes the need to examine black performance art from the perspective of black consumers. This progression allows for a more nuanced analysis of black performance as it acknowledges that minstrelsy, though rooted in racial stereotyping, cannot be fully defined by it. Scholars ascribing to this approach do not view black stage performances as a crude form of racial degradation, but rather a deliberate critique of American racism. By wielding the tools of the oppressor to meet their own ends, black performers are recast as architects of a communal space in which black audience members and performers bonded over a shared experience of racism.[8]

My study owes much to the work of previous scholars who questioned the cultural meaning of black performance. However, my research departs from current scholarship in a fundamental way. Historians who study black stage performance almost exclusively fixate on the urban North as the wellspring of artistic creation, thus characterizing southern blacks as passive bystanders or peripheral participants in the

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[6] Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 6.

[7] Notable works of minstrelsy scholarship that focus on white audiences include: Eric Lott's *Love and Theft* (1993), William J. Mahar's *Behind the Burnt Cork Mask: Early Blackface Minstrelsy and Antebellum American Popular Culture* (1999) and W. T. Lhamon's *Raising Cain: Blackface Performance from Jim Crow to Hip Hop* (1998).

[8] Formative works devoted to black perceptions of black minstrelsy are David Krasner's *Resistance, Parody, and Double Consciousness in African American Theater, 1895- 1910* (1997) and Karen Sotiropoulos's *Staging Race: Black Performers in Turn of the Century America* (2006).

politics of black theatre. In contrast to this scholarship, I argue that southern blacks should not only be fully included in the broader conversation of black performance art, but also recognized as creators of a modern identity organic to their experiences as southerners. While black artists in northern cities certainly challenged racial boundaries through stage performance, they did so by engaging theatrical tropes inspired by the antics of "plantation darkies." These regional caricatures cannot and should not be separated from the lived experience of southern blacks who engaged these distorted representations on a daily basis—both in formal stage productions and in less prescribed performances like the one delivered by Mildred's "chocolate chauffeur" at the Hermitage Plantation.

My use of the concept of dual identity is also greatly indebted to the work of another scholar, W.E.B. Du Bois. Coming into intellectual maturity during the age of Jim Crow, Du Bois offered his most evocative commentary on the state of post-emancipation race relations in his collection of essays, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903). In this text, Du Bois used the metaphor of double consciousness to describe the way black Americans experienced the world. "It is a peculiar sensation," he lamented, "this double consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideas in one dark body."[9] From Du Bois's perspective, this internal sense of "twoness" was tragic. Because whites repudiated black culture, blacks felt estranged from mainstream society and often fell victim to assessing

[9] W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, ed. David W. Blight and Robert Gooding-Williams (Boston: Bedford Books, 1997), 38.

themselves by the standards of the oppressor, obstructing self-awareness. This persistent struggle between two irreconcilable selves: one American, the other Negro, resulted in an endless cycle of frustration, disillusionment, and shame.[10]

Du Bois made no explicit ties between double consciousness and black theatrical performance, but his metaphor is a useful approach to understanding the duality that underpinned black stage performance at the turn of the twentieth century. Black performers, particularly those residing in the South, maintained a Negro identity by keeping up the "darky" facade to appease formal and informal white spectators. Yet, beyond the shucking and painted smiles, black performers concurrently strove to solidify a modern identity by engaging the black community in ways that were independent of white interpretation. Though closely tied to Du Bois's conception of double consciousness, my application is a departure from Du Bois as he strictly viewed the duality of black identity as a burden to racial progress. The only solution he foresaw for the black man's fractured identity was "to merge his double self into a better and truer self."[11] While I certainly do not disparage this solution, I do suggest that amidst the tragedy of "twoness" lied a spark of human ingenuity that *encouraged* modernity.

The term modernity begs further explanation as it is a complex, multi-layered, and admittedly problematic word. Modernity is most often used to reference a state of being in which one's behavior, appearance, and worldview reflect "the now"— a clear break from traditional, particularly agrarian, ways of life. For Americans at the dawn of the twentieth century, material markers of modernity included increased access to technological advances in travel, communication, and domestic goods. Additionally,

[10] David W. Blight and Robert Gooding-Williams eds., "Introduction: The Strange Meaning of Being Black: Du Bois's American Tragedy," in *The Souls of Black Folk* (Boston: Bedford Books, 1997), 11-12.

[11] Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 39.

rising levels of education and literacy, rapid urbanization, and the proliferation of mass culture all contributed to what contemporaries would have conceived as "modern life." Yet, for the purpose of my study, this definition is not fully satisfactory. While I am concerned with the tangible elements of modernity and how they developed in southern black communities, I am also interested in the conception of modernity as an evolution of consciousness that occurs through social experiences. In this context, modernity is just as dependent on the material changes in society as the social consciousness that beget these changes.

While American modernity, as a force of consciousness, transpired without racial boundaries, opportunities to express modernity were different for black and white communities, particularly in the South. On a fiscal level, political and social power structures restricted the majority of southern blacks' access to the purchasing power needed to obtain the material innovations of modern living. On a deeper, more abstract level, southern whites' refusal to validate black culture or embrace blacks as part of mainstream culture, placed restrictions of what sort of behaviors were acceptable for blacks to display in public. It is this tension held in tandem—the yearning for a modern identity, coupled with restricted access to both capital and freedom of expression—that guides the inquiry of this study. I am interested in how southern blacks coped with the challenge of creating a modern identity in the face of the obstacles leveled against them. Performance art offers one window into this process.

The act of performance and its communal reception is a useful tool as it is based on both construction and reality. Though entertainers and audiences are aware that a certain degree of fabrication is present during a performance, an exchange of ideas,

values, and knowledge is ever present. In the words of Diana Taylor, a leading performance theorist: "Performances function as vital acts of transfer, transmitting social knowledge, memory, and a sense of identity through reiterated behavior."[12] For southern black living in the age of Jim Crow "progressivism," live staged performances served as a medium of cultural exchange to express a modern identity in a space that was more easily penetrable for blacks than other sectors of southern society.

While the term performance art can be extended to a number of creative outlets, the entirely of this study is limited two: black minstrel shows and plantation spirituals. These forms of art, while certainly not representative of all modes of performance, offer a distinctly popular perspective as they are closely tied to the general public, both in terms of production and consumption. My discussion roughly spans the Progressive Era (1870-1920), making a few allowances for acts performed in the early 1920s. I chose this timeframe because it is situated within a particular set of challenges for black southerners following emancipation through the adolescent years of Jim Crow. Though black men were nominally considered part of the American citizenry by way of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments, strategic racialized barriers in the South prevented their realization of full citizenship. Caught in a liminal space between freedman and citizen, southern blacks developed a dual identity that can be observed through public performance.

There is, of course, variation in the ways in which black southerners engaged modernity through performance art—more than what even the most ambitious author could hope to account for in a single study. Recognizing this limitation, my research

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[12] Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 2.

takes a case study approach. Chapter one begins with an analysis of the production and reception of black minstrelsy and vaudeville in Savannah, Georgia.[13] The relationship between black performers and the black consumers they entertained illustrate southern blacks' engagement with representations of race at the local level. The study transitions thereafter to an examination of the Fisk University Jubilee singers. The Jubilee Singers, though not minstrel performers, did capitalize on white perceptions of slavery through live "slave song" performances in an effort to fund black higher education. Chapter two examines how the Jubilee Singers utilized race performance as an instrument of modernity, highlighting both the opportunities and limitations of this masking strategy. Finally, my thesis closes with a discussion of how minstrelsy and jubilee music intersected in the early twentieth century, examining the ways in which these art forms both challenged and reinforced one another. Together, these chapters sketch the story of masks and modernity across time, space, and medium, validating the argument that southern blacks actively shaped the contours of a dual identity.

[13] While there is an important distinction between minstrel shows and vaudeville, I am studying a period in which these two modes of performance were very much intertwined. When blacks first took to the stage, they followed the traditional pattern established by white blackface actors. After establishing a substantial presence in minstrelsy, black performers began to deviate from previous patterns and offer comical variety shows. Though this transition is significant, it was not fully linear in Savannah. Vaudeville productions recycled and repurposed traditional elements of minstrelsy that were still dependent on black caricature. For this reason, minstrelsy and early vaudeville are assessed together for the purpose of this study. When referencing specific shows, the distinction will be noted in the text.

ACT ONE: BLACKING UP DOWN SOUTH

Southern city dwellers at the turn of the twentieth century rarely needed to venture far to cure the doldrums of ordinary life with a night of theatrical amusement. And while there were certainly a variety of performances to meet the sophistication of one's artistic palate, nothing quite satiated America's yearning for entertainment like the minstrel show. American minstrel productions featured comical caricatures of black stock characters that encouraged patrons to laugh at the buffoonery of simple plantation slaves and the posturing of urban freedmen who failed miserably to adjust to the fruits of liberty. A typical minstrel production included an appearance from Jim Crow—the quintessential "plantation darky"—and Zip Coon, his fumbling free-black counterpart. The juxtaposition of these stereotypical tropes reinforced the notion that African Americans were not suited to participate on an equal footing with whites in modern society. By masking anxieties about race with song, dance, and foolery, white audiences emphasized their position of superiority while temporarily transcending the reality that they shared legal citizenship with a race of people that previous generations of white southerners had owned, bought, and sold.[14]

[14] Karen Sotiropoulos, *Staging Race: Black Performers in Turn of the Century America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press: 2006), 20-21.

Figure 4: Jim Crow
Jim Crow. Etching. London, New York and Philadelphia: Hodgson, 111 Fleet Street & Turner & Fisher, c.1835. From Library of Congress: *Prints and Photographs Division*.

Figure 5: Zip Coon
Thos. Birch. *Zip Coon*. Notated Music. New York: Thos. Birth, 1834. From Library of Congress: *Music Division*.

Despite the obvious shortcomings of these derogatory representations, it would be a mistake to characterize blacks as purely passive victims of a racist art form. Minstrelsy was not an exclusively white enterprise, nor was it only created for white audiences. African Americans were involved as actors, producers, and consumers of minstrel art. To recognize black involvement in minstrel productions is not to suggest that they accepted the way they were typified as accurate or that they were merely willing to be exploited for profit. On the contrary, analyzing African American engagement with minstrel troupes allows for a more complicated history—one in which black performers are

recognized as dynamic actors using the stage to experiment with questions of race and modernity.[15]

The period surrounding the turn of the twentieth century witnessed an influx of black performers into minstrelsy and racially charged vaudeville productions. Historian David Krasner attributes this shift to the contemporary trend to exalt "the real" over exaggerated imitation. Occurring in conjunction with a strong preference for realism in art, literature, and music, minstrel routines performed by white men began to reek of phoniness when compared to black actors who had the ability to convey the "authentic" experience of plantation life.[16] Turn-of-the-century broadside advertisements and leaflets featuring bi-racial and all-black casts illustrated the changing complexion of blackface. The Rabbit's Foot Company, a Florida-based troupe originally owned and managed by black southerner, Pat Chappelle, touted in an ad that patrons who attended the show would experience the "Greatest Riot of Novelty and Fun" through the "Most Elaborate Show ever presented by an all Colored Company" (see figure 6). With similar zeal, The Smart Set Minstrels claimed to be "The Supreme Colored Show of the World" and promised to deliver "America's greatest singing and dancing chorus with the most wonderful costumes the city has ever seen" (see figure 7).

Theatrical renditions of Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* presented black actors with a particularly lucrative niche. Theatre-goers felt a more authentic connection with a black Uncle Tom than with a white actor emoting through burnt cork or greasepaint. In addition to the title role, companies running *Uncle Tom's Cabin* also

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[15] David Krasner, *Resistance, Parody, and Double Consciousness in African American Theater, 1895- 1910* (New York: St. Martin's Press) 11-12.
[16] David, Krasner, "The Real Thing" in *Beyond Blackface African Americans and the Creation of American Popular Culture, 1890-1930*, ed. Fitzhugh Brundage (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 100.

casted black jubilee choruses to liven up the plantation drama.[17] One traveling company, Anthony and Ellis, enlisted the vocal accompaniment of the Memphis University Students—"the finest colored singers in the country"—to augment their production of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (see figure 8). While these and numerous other black theatre companies utilized various commercial tactics to entice customers, racial authenticity was their primary gimmick. Catering to the shifting tastes of the American consumer, minstrelsy in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was no longer strictly a white man's business.

The commercial strategies of all white blackface companies reflected the growing presence of black performers in the theatre industry. While there was no need to delineate the race of troupes prior to blacks' mass entry into show business, referencing race became a common feature of minstrel show ads after all-black troupes gained traction in the theatre circuit. The HI. Henry Company, for example, attempted to attract customers to its show by including "All White Minstrels" in the headline of its ad. The broadside further detailed that patrons could expect to be entertained by "10 cultivated singers" (see figure 9). This minstrel company's attempt to distinguish its show by linking whiteness with "cultivated" art demonstrates the threat "authentic" black performers posed to white minstrels. Because white men in blackface could not compete with black actors in the contest for realness, they attempted to appeal to potential consumer's perception of refinement.

[17] Errol G. Hill and James V. Hatch, A *History of African American Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 55.

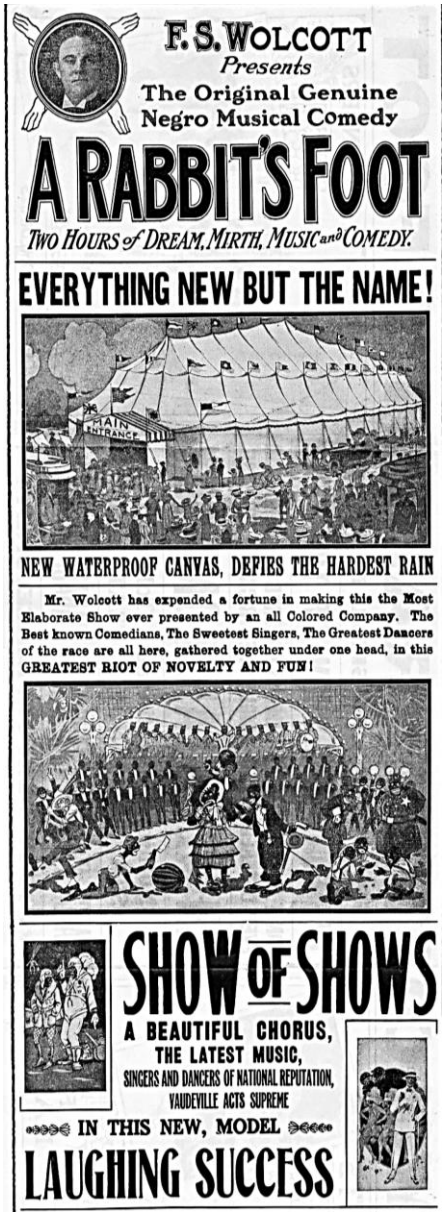

Figure 6: Rabbit Foot Minstrel Company broadside African American Theater and Minstrel Show Advertisements, 1888 and n.d., David Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Duke University.

Figure 7: Smart Set Minstrels broadside African American Theater and Minstrel Show Advertisements, 1888 and n.d., David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Duke University.

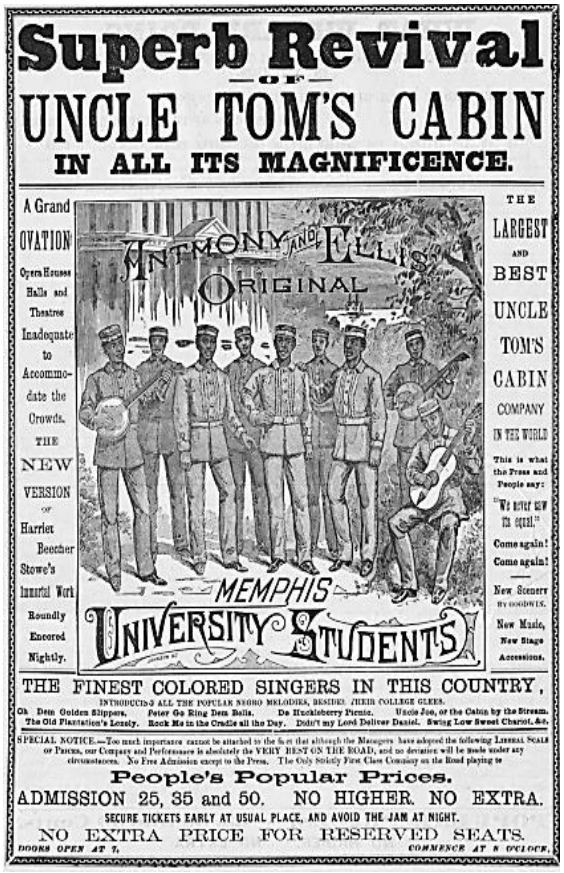

Figure 8: Uncle Tom's Cabin Leaflet
African American Theater and Minstrel Show Advertisements, 1888 and n.d., David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Duke University.

Figure 9: All White Minstrels broadside
African American Theater and Minstrel Show Advertisements, 1888 and n.d., David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Duke University.

The commercialization of authenticity in stage productions presented an opportunity for black performers to secure gainful employment outside of their typical vocations. At the turn of the century, nine out of ten black Americans still lived in the South working menial agricultural jobs on land they did not own. Census data indicated

that an estimated 75.3 percent of southern blacks identified as sharecroppers or tenant farmers in 1900.[18] In this difficult economic climate, a wage earned through show business represented a step towards autonomy for many performers. In addition to being an alternative to manual labor, black minstrel performances are significant in their own right as they provided an artistic outlet for blacks to engage both white and black audiences at a time when forms of "high cultural" expression were not readily available to them. In short, minstrelsy, despite its clear limitations, provided a way for blacks to market their authenticity to earn money, produce art, and chip away at ties that bound them to agricultural drudgery.[19]

Scholars studying the entry of blacks into entertainment industries tend to focus on the draw of major cultural hubs north of the Mason Dixon Line. New York and Chicago are presented as artistic Meccas siphoning talented blacks from a southern wasteland of poverty, ignorance, and stagnation. While the out-migration of southern blacks to northern and western metropolises was a very real phenomenon, this movement did not diminish the proliferation of black performance in the South. In fact, the distribution of theatres owned and operated by blacks from 1910 to 1930 indicates that the South presented the most favorable ground for black entrepreneurial ambition in show business (see table 1). Southern states, which I have defined as states belonging to the former Confederacy, housed a clear majority of black theatres under black proprietorship and management over all regions outside the South combined.[20]

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[18] Leon F. Litwack, *Trouble in the Mind: Black Southerners in the Age of Jim Crow* (New York: Knofp, Inc.), 122.
[19] Sotiropoulos, *Staging Race*, 3.
[20] Defining the "South" is a challenge for all scholars studying southern history. For this study, I chose to identify the former Confederate states as the South because I am most interested in examining the development of black performance in regions that were most connected to the institution of slavery.

Table 1: Black owned and operated theatres, 1910-1930 [a]

Confederate States	No.	Border States	No.	Union States	No.
Alabama	1	Kentucky	5	Illinois	3
Arkansas	2	Missouri	2	Indiana	4
Florida	4	West Virginia	1	Michigan	2
Georgia	13			Nebraska	1
Louisiana	1			New York	1
Mississippi	2			Ohio	3
North Carolina	5			Pennsylvania	5
South Carolina	4			Wisconsin	1
Tennessee	6			District of Columbia	5
Texas	9			Oklahoma [b]	5
Virginia	7				
Total	54		8		30

Source: Data adapted from Henry T. Sampson, *Blacks in Blackface: A Source Book on Early Black Musical Shows* (Lanham, Maryland: The Scarecrow Press, 2014), appendix D, 1489-1493.

[a] Theatres listed featured minstrel acts, vaudeville, and road shows from 1910 to 1930. It should be noted that theatres that transitioned from hosting live performances to showing pictures before 1910 are not represented in this data set.

[b] Oklahoma is included under the "union states" category though it was American Indian territory during the Civil War.

The distribution of black theatres is logical considering the simple fact that the vast majority of African Americans lived in the South at the turn of the century. While some actors and producers were drawn to the bright lights of the "Big City," most were content to capitalize on the regional market for entertainment in the urban South. Ironically, the institution of Jim Crow supported the development and success of southern black theatres. Because whites relegated blacks to balcony seating in segregated white theatres, the demand for black shows by black audiences could rarely be met in larger

southern cities. Black entrepreneurs recognized the potential of meeting this unsatisfied demand and oversaw the construction of new theatres and the renovations of old ones throughout the region. In 1903, only a scattering of honky-tonk playhouses hosted black acts in Georgia, Kentucky, Texas and Florida. By 1920, a black theatrical circuit endorsed by the Theatre Owners and Booking Association weaved throughout a multitude of southern and midwestern cities, peaking at over eighty stops along its route.[21] As theatres devoted to black acts rapidly expanded in southern cities, resident black communities had to reconcile the exploitive elements of minstrel shows with the new opportunities they presented. On one hand, these theatres showcased black talent and enterprise—hallmarks of the "New Negro". Yet, on the other hand, black performers still donned the mask that perpetuated racial tropes and reinforced black inferiority to spectators. How, then, was this paradox resolved in the minds of black consumers?

While it would be impossible to interpret how *all* black southerners responded to the paradox of black minstrelsy with any depth, a localized study can effectively illustrate how popular audiences engaged racialized stage productions during a specific time and place. Savannah, Georgia, a city that sustained a sizable black population since the early nineteenth century, presents a particularly revealing case. As the table on page 20 illustrates, Georgia supported thirteen black-owned theatre houses from 1910 to 1930, more than any other state in the country. The first and most successful venue catering exclusively to black audiences in Savannah was the Pekin Theatre.[22]

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[21] Henry T. Sampson, *Blacks in Blackface*, 9-10.

[22] At least eight black theatres took up the name "Pekin" in early 1900s/1910s. These theatres pay homage to the original Pekin Theatre in Chicago, the first black stock theatre in the United States . Bernard L. Peterson, *The African American Theatre Directory, 1816-1960: A Comprehensive Guide to Early Black Theatre Organizations, Companies, Theatres, and Performing Groups* (Westport: Greenwood Press),164.

Owned and operated by a black divorcée and her son, The Pekin opened its doors to a crowd of eager patrons on Thanksgiving Day of 1909, only to turn hundreds away due to lack of seating capacity.[23] Throughout its twenty years of operation, the Pekin increased its number of seats from 300 to 1,100 while undertaking a series of attractive additions: 350 electric lights, a steam heating system, a 20 foot iceless soda fountain, and a cigar stand adjoining the lobby.[24] In addition to earning a reputation as being "one of the prettiest Negro play houses in the country"—as one admirer observed, the Pekin was also praised for providing blacks with quality entertainment and new employment opportunities.[25] One contributor to the *Savannah Tribune*, the city's premier black newspaper, claimed that the Pekin showcased "the best Negro talent obtainable" in addition to providing "the entering wedge for Negros in show business in Georgia."[26] While the Pekin's ability to draw and sustain patronage illustrates its value to the black community, the theatre's success did not occur in a vacuum. It is situated within a broader trend of black entrepreneurship in Savannah. An examination of the social and economic shifts that shaped Savannah's black community during the Progressive Era is necessary to fully understand why the Pekin emerged as an outlet for black Savannahians to express modernity through performance.

Black Savannah

The history of Savannah, Georgia, during the Progressive Era is not a white man's history. By 1900, nearly 28,000 blacks called Savannah home, representing just over half

[23] "Still Another Enterprise," *The Savannah Tribune*, November 27, 1909.
[24] "Pekin Theatre Fountain Opens," *The Savannah Tribune*, January 30, 1915.
[25] "Pekin to Celebrate Anniversary," *The Savannah Tribune*, November 21, 1914.
[26] Ibid.

of the city's total population.[27] And while it was certainly true that blacks were rarely the intended recipients of progress in the minds of the southern policy makers, the black half of Savannah was not untouched by modernity during the long tenure of Jim Crow. This is not to suggest that Jim Crow customs and laws had less a grievous effect on the development of Savannah's black community than other southern cities. The rise of racially segregated residential patterns, mass black disenfranchisement, and urban renewal projects targeting black neighborhoods speak to the contrary. It was *in spite* of these challenges that black enterprise in Savannah survived and flourished.

The spatial distribution of Savannah's black community from the immediate post war period through the Progressive Era reveals a history of gradual exclusion. Consistent with Savannah's long tradition of racial paternalism, enslaved Savannahians typically lived in shacks or cabins within close proximity to their masters. This pattern continued after emancipation and endured well into the 1870s. Black laborers and domestics generally lived in the same locales, and oftentimes in the very same residences, that they had occupied before the war. Many of these neighborhoods became increasingly integrated as the post-war period brought an influx of poor white laborers to Savannah from the surrounding countryside. Meanwhile, more affluent blacks lived in middle class, white neighborhoods specked throughout the city. This class-dependent system would not prove sustainable, however, as white Savannahians abandoned the philosophy of racial paternalism for an equally noxious philosophy of scientific racism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Seeking separation in both public and private spaces, white residents advocated for racially exclusive neighborhoods, pushing black residents out to

[27] U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Negro Population in the United States, 1790-1915* (Washington D.C.: 1918), 36, 43.

the periphery of the city. Because blacks rarely had access to enough capital to purchase their own homes—only 6 percent of the city's blacks were homeowners in 1909—white landlords simply refused to rent property to blacks and restricted their access to areas that whites found most desirable. By the turn of the century, the inner city of Savannah was occupied by whites while black residents encircled the city, prompting W.E.B. Du Bois to refer to the distribution of the population as "a great O, with whites in the center and blacks in the circle around."[28]

Data compiled from Savannah city directories from the years 1890, 1900, 1910, and 1920 demonstrates the spatial pattern that took form as blacks were displaced from the center city. The map illustrated in figure 10 traces this evolution by plotting points of cultural and civic importance to Savannah's black community over the thirty year period. The institutions represented in this map include: public and private schools, hospitals and asylums, churches, cemeteries, libraries, theatres, parks, newspaper presses, and spaces for social gatherings. It should be noted that these points do not represent the layout of Savannah's black community in its entirety—only those institutions that reported their addresses to city officials gathering data for the directory. Additionally, more informal venues of cultural exchange, such as barber shops or personal residences of prominent community members are not represented. Though the picture is a limited one, it is a revealing depiction of the pattern of segregation that solidified in Savannah throughout the Progressive Era—one that devolved from a color line into what historian John Dittmer refers to as "a color wall, thick, high, almost impenetrable."[29]

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[28] John Dittmer, *Black Georgia in the Progressive Era 1900-1920* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press), 9-10; W.E.B. Du Bois, "The Negro South and North," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 62 (July, 1905): 504.
[29] Dittmer, *Black Georgia*, 21.

Distribution of Savannah's Black Institutions as Reported in Savannah City Directories

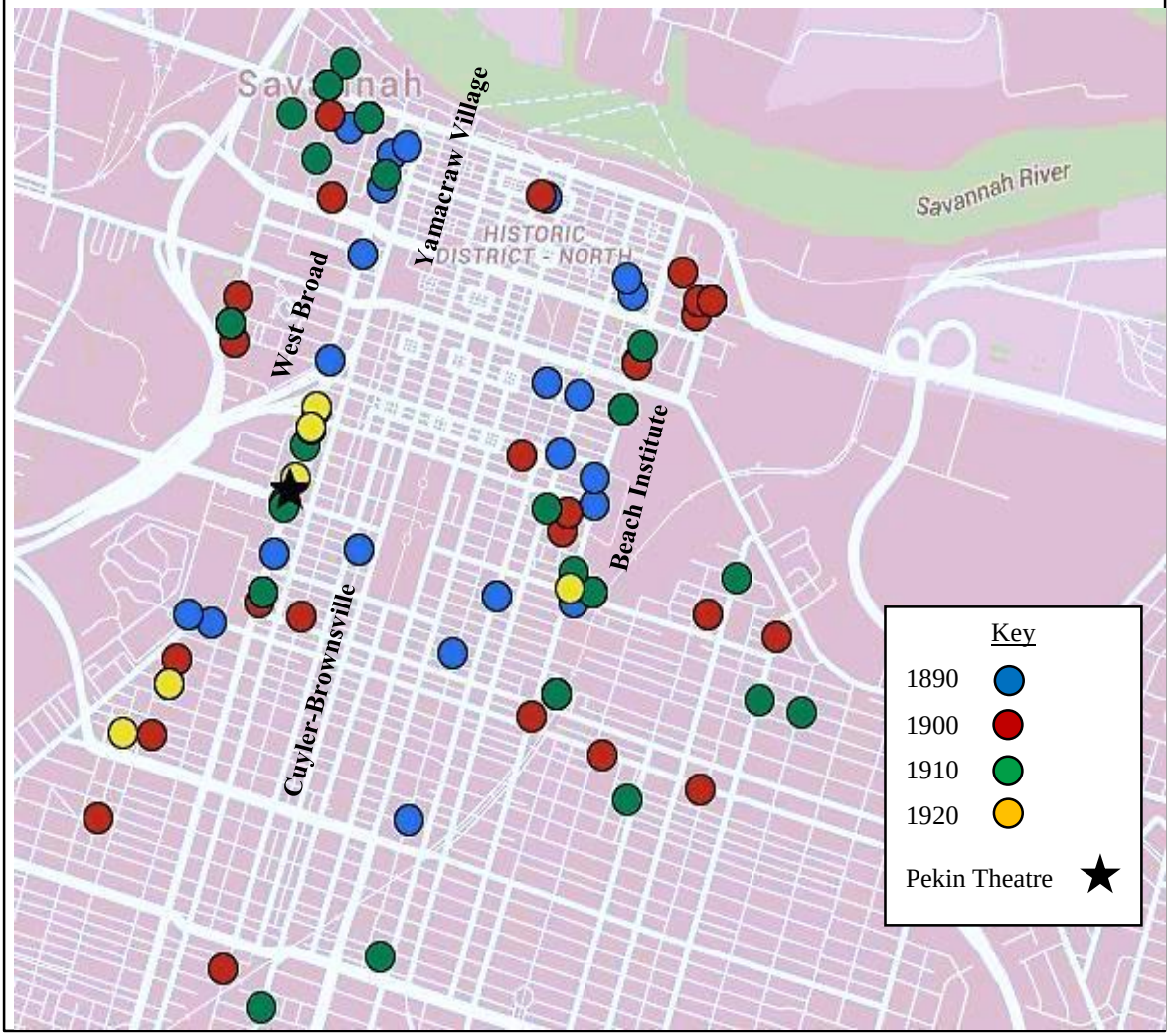

Figure 10: Distribution of Savannah's black institutions as reported in Savannah city directories
Source: Data compiled from Savannah city directories: 1890, 1900, 1910, and 1920;
Map created through Google Engine Lite

Note: African American churches are not represented in the data set for 1920 as Savannah directories discontinued including a complete list of churches in the city by this year.

Though perhaps not quite as simplistic as Du Bois's "great O" description, it is evident that black cultural centers lied on the periphery of the city, not the center. Moreover, the institutions closest to the core of the city were listed in the 1890 directory. Black institutions in the following decades were more restricted from the center and

tended to be concentrated in racially identifiable neighborhoods—the names of which are bolded on the map.

As one might suspect, Savannah's black neighborhoods bore the brunt of the city's problems associated with rapid urbanization. Congested housing, poverty, and disease were a common fact of life for many residents in these communities, so much so, that Savannah's slums maintained one of the highest mortality rates in the country by the close of the First World War. Savannah's mortality statistics can be partially attributed to the high number of waterborne illnesses that disproportionately affected blacks because access to Savannah's sewer system was limited on the outskirts of the city. Relief only came when local officials took a belated interest in extending the sewer lines to black neighborhoods for fear that a disease ridden "O" would entrap the white residents.[30] In addition to inequities in housing and public health, the *Plessy vs. Ferguson* ruling of 1896 ushered in more direct legal action against racial co-mingling in Savannah. Blacks who ventured into parks or playgrounds reserved for whites could face hefty fines in upwards of 100 dollars or could serve two months on the local chain gang.[31]

There is no question that black Savannahians suffered many negative byproducts of segregation and that the ever extending reach of Jim Crow robbed them of many opportunities for advancement. Yet, even though opportunities were not racially equitable, this does not negate the existence of progress. Blacks in Savannah's segregated neighborhoods sought access to services and facilities to improve their quality of life and solutions to these needs would be addressed internally by enterprising men and women invested in their community.

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[30] Ibid, 10; Werner Troesken, *Water, Race, and Disease* (Cambridge: MIT Press), 78.
[31] Dittmer, *Black Georgia,* 20.

Occupational data derived from Savannah's city directories from the years 1890, 1900, 1910, and 1920, the same period that witnessed an increase in segregated black institutions, also demonstrates a steady increase of black operated businesses that catered to a black cliental. Black Savannahians initially found success as artisans, utilizing skills that were traditionally associated with slave crafts such as blacksmithing and shoemaking. These jobs gradually thinned out, however, as new technologies in manufacturing displaced these trades.[32] This trend is illustrated in the graph pictured in figure 11 which shows a modest increase in production-oriented jobs—including skilled crafts—from 1890 to 1900, followed by a near plateauing in 1910 and a sharp decline in 1920.

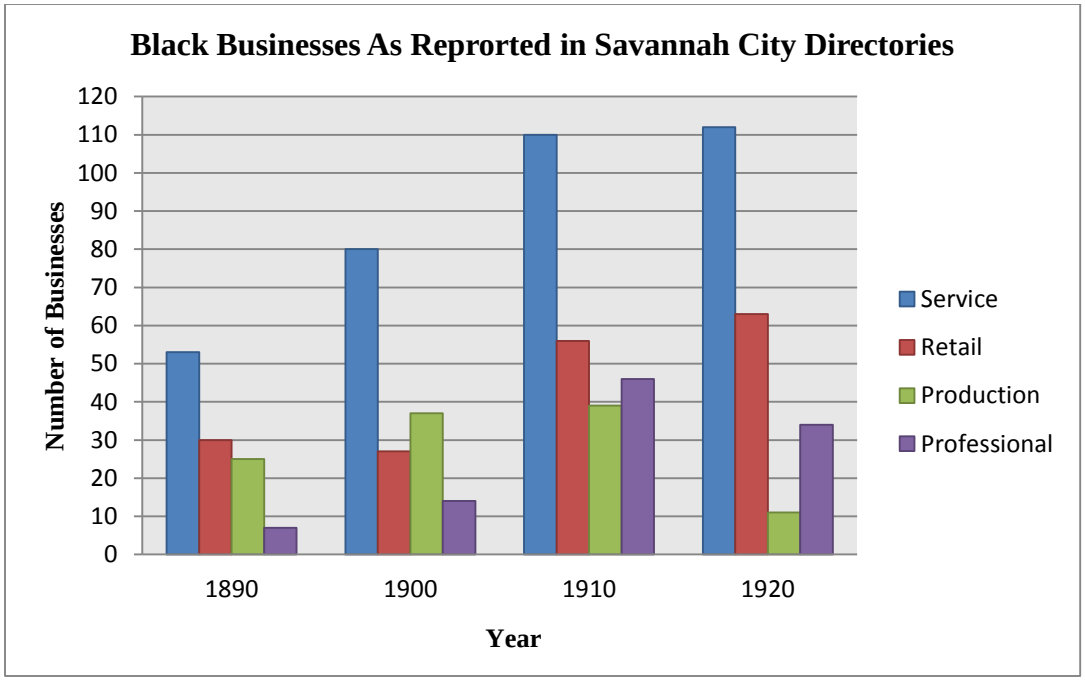

Figure 11: Black businesses as reported by Savannah city directories
Source: Data compiled from Savannah city directories: 1890, 1900, 1910, and 1920.

Note: The data presented does not purport to give an accurate count of all black businesses in the years represented. It only includes those listed in the directories. Outside variables can and did affect whether business reported their addresses to city officials. The businesses that were published provide a reliable data set to trace general changes in the character of black business ownership over time.

[32] Dittmer, *Black Georgia*, 29.

Though the waning of trade crafts was a serious setback for black workers, this loss of opportunity inspired alternative means of enterprise. Over the thirty year span, black businesses in the service sector experienced a twofold increase accompanied by steady growth in the retail sector. This increase speaks to the role segregated neighborhoods played in prompting black entrepreneurs to provide services to members of their own community. Barbering was the leading service-oriented business listed in the directories, followed by clothing repair and pressing, while the largest retail businesses listed were groceries and confectionary shops. These entrepreneurs capitalized on the reality that services involving intimate contact with bodies or food were not services white business owners were willing to provide to black patrons. By filling this niche, a sense of reciprocity developed between black business owners and black consumers, allowing Savannah's black community to become more insular and self-sustaining.

Perhaps the most telling development of black industry in Savannah was the modest, but growing, class of black professionals. Only seven black businesses offered professional services in the 1890 directory as compared to 46 listings twenty years later. The medical field offered ample employment opportunities for black professionals who could afford the training. The number of physicians, dentists, nurses*, pharmacists and morticians all experienced a growing presence in the directories over the thirty year period with the number of physicians, alone, rising from two in 1890 to 14 in 1920.[33] The growth of other professional services, such as insurance and realty companies, law firms,

[33] The number of nurses in the directories peaks at 23 in 1910 but drops to 5 in 1920. This drop is likely a reflection of the trend for nurses to work in hospital settings rather than private homes. Savannah's primary black hospital, The Charity Hospital and Training School, actively trained and graduated black nurses throughout this period, indicating that the number of nurses listed in the directory in1920 is likely an underrepresentation.

and banks, highlights the growing tendency of black professionals to "take care of their own."[34]

The trend of black owned businesses is a progressive one, but the barriers to entrepreneurship should not be understated. Capital was hard to come by and blacks were often denied loans by white lenders or forced to borrow money from whites at inflated rates. Black owned financial institutions, such as the Wage Earners' Savings Bank and the Savannah Savings and Real Estate Corps, did ameliorate this obstacle to some degree by helping pool funds together to provide modest loans, but these institutions were small and often undercapitalized. The fact remained that opening a black enterprise was a high risk venture that could drain a businessman or woman's already precarious savings. Most businesses represented in the city directories were single person operations offering a service or "Mom and Pop" shops that relied on family resources and long hours to survive. The growth of black enterprise under such trying circumstances is a testament to the resiliency of Savannah's business owners and the loyalty of their patrons.[35]

It was within this twin climate of constraint and possibility that Josephine Stiles opened the Pekin Theatre in 1909. Born in 1871, the 38 year old proprietress came of age during the tightening of Jim Crow regulations and the advance of black enterprise.[36] Josephine's employment history and personal life reveal a journey of increased financial gain and independence—a trend tied to her ability to tap into the market demands of Savannah's black community.

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[34] Savannah city directories, 1890, 1900, 1910, 1920.
[35] Dittmer, *Black Georgia*, 40-41; Savannah city directory, 1920.
[36] U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Twelfth Census of the United States, 1900* (Washington, 1900), 205.

In 1886, Josephine was fifteen, newly married, and preparing to give birth to her first and only child, Willie Stiles. A year prior to her marriage, Josephine was listed in the Savannah city directory as a dressmaker, but after 1888, she worked in retail positions at grocery stores, confectionery shops, and bars. Between 1895 and 1900, Josephine's marriage ended in divorce, and she became the sole provider for herself and her adolescent son. Josephine continued to support her family as a grocer into the early years of the twentieth century, earning enough money to own $12,300 worth of real estate in 1904 (see figure 12).[37]

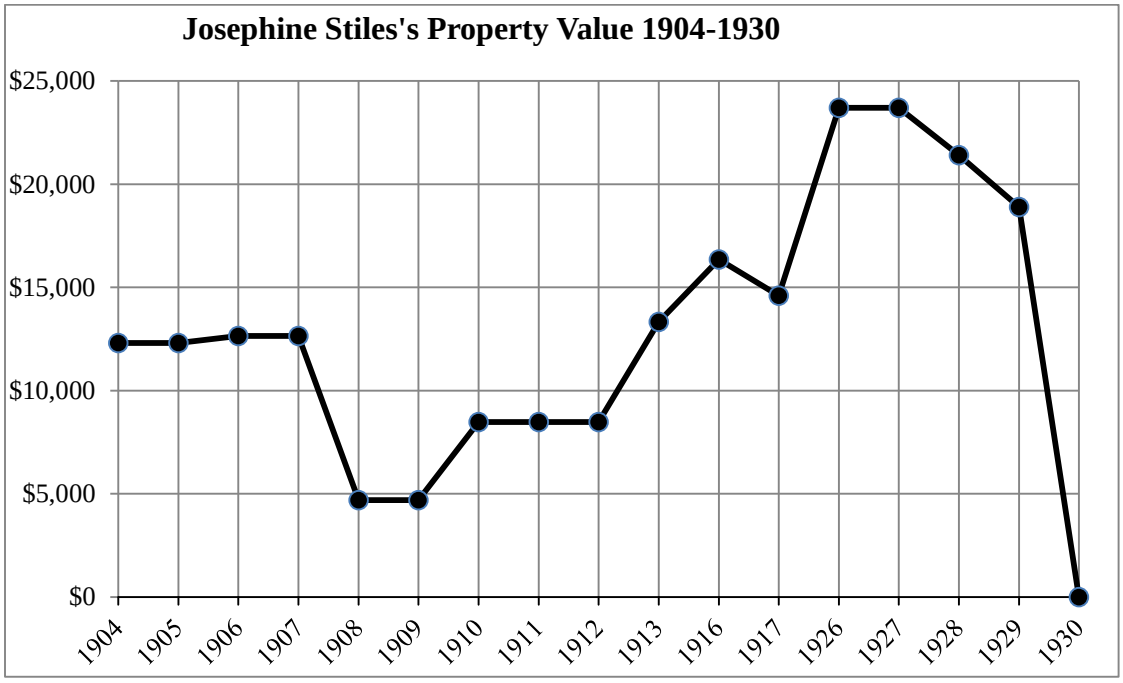

Figure 12: Josephine Stiles's property value, 1904-1930
Source: Data compiled from *Real Estate/Personal Cash Book*, 1904-1930, Research Library and Municipal Archives, Savannah, Georgia.

Note: No data on Josephine's taxable property could be recovered for years 1918-1926.

[37] Ibid.; Savannah city directories, 1885-1905; *Real Estate/Personal Cash Book, 1904*, Research Library and Municipal Archives, Savannah, Georgia. $12,300 in 1904 roughly translates to $337,000 of purchasing power in 2014 (configured by an online consumer price index: http://www.measuringworth.com).

As the graph illustrates, Josephine's success as a business woman was not entirely linear. City tax records indicate a substantial drop in the value of her property from $12,650 in 1907 to $4,700 in 1908. While there is no direct evidence to support a reason for this decline, Savannah court records offer a clue. Josephine was successfully sued for defaulting on loans in 1903 for the sum $309.55, plus interest, and charged again by a different plaintiff in 1905 for $660.05, plus $69.84 in interest, and $12.50 in court fees. While these rulings occurred a few years prior to the tax records that reported her considerable property loss, it is probable that her inability to pay debts and court mandated restitutions placed a financial stress on Josephine that prompted her to sell her home and move into one of lesser value in 1908.[38]

Whatever the ultimate cause for her lapse in financial gain in 1908, there is no question that Josephine's decision to invest in the Pekin paved her path to economic security. At the peak of her career in 1927, Josephine owned $23,700 worth of property—a five-fold increase in value since she opened the Pekin. The theatre's twenty years of service to Savannah's black community afforded Josephine and her son a lifestyle that she could not have maintained as a dressmaker or barmaid. The centrality of the Pekin to Josephine's commercial success is made all the more apparent by the dramatic fall of her taxable property in 1930 after the economic pressures of the Great Depression forced the Pekin, like many leisure-oriented businesses, to close. After losing the Pekin at age 57, Josephine found work at a neighborhood deli and was reported as owning no real estate and only $300 in personal cash.[39] Unfortunately, tax records and employment data for Josephine did not survive past 1930, but if her past record of

[38] *Real Estate/Personal Cash Book, 1907, 1908; Savannah Georgia Court Records*, Research Library & Municipal Archives, Savannah, Georgia.
[39] *Real Estate/Personal Cash Book, 1930*; Savannah city directory, 1930.

adaptation and resiliency is any indication of her life after the Pekin, it is likely that she found a way to make do with the support of the community she served in earnest for a great portion of her life.

Performance at the Pekin

Josephine's ability to address the social and economic shifts shaping the lives of black Savannahians at the turn of the century proved to be beneficial not only for her family, but also for Savannah's black community at large. Located on 625 West Broad, a street known for its thriving strip of black businesses, the Pekin satisfied black Savannahians' desire for leisure and entertainment.[40] Unlike the city's white theatres that forced blacks into cramped "peanut galleries," the Pekin offered evenings of amusement in the company of peers with comfortable accommodations and friendly management. One regular patron of the theatre reported to the *Savannah Tribune* that the Pekin was "the only playhouse where our people can attend without becoming conscious of the fact that their presence is undesired."[41] This resident recognized that the theatre was more than just a space for blacks to be entertained. For him and countless others, it was a space of belonging—a brief reprieve from the Jim Crowism that restricted the everyday lives of black southerners.

Performances hosted by the Pekin greatly varied, ranging from traditional minstrelsy, "coon" songs, comedy routines, burlesque, cakewalks and buck dancing, to more specialized stage acts such as ventriloquism, acrobatics, magic and fortune telling. Though some of these performances relied upon crude racial caricature more than others, it was not uncommon for minstrels and "coon" song artists to share the stage with higher

[40] Refer back to the map on page 25 to see where in the Pekin is located in relation to other black institutions.
[41] "Pekin Theatre," *Savannah Tribune*, December 10, 1910.

class acts. For instance, an advertisement listing the Pekin's upcoming shows featured Billy Kersands, a minstrel celebrity, alongside "world famous eccentric dancers," a "petite comedienne," a "dainty soubrette" and a "champion trap drummer." Kersands gained popularity in the theatre circuit for dancing and physical comedy, but his most notorious act involved stuffing two billiard balls in his cheeks and delivering a monologue with his signature line: "If God had made my mouth any bigger, he would have had to move my ears." Though Kersands's act was likely less sophisticated than his fellow performers, this did not exempt him from a warm reception or a favorable acknowledgement from the editor of the *Savannah Tribune*.[42]

As Kersands's performance illustrates, the transition from minstrelsy to vaudeville was not rigidly defined in Savannah. Though minstrel acts did thin out by the close of first quarter of the twentieth century, the Pekin still booked blackface performers as late as 1922.[43] The Pekin's attempt to solicit black business through print ads reflected the fluid relationship between "high art" aspiration and "low art" tradition in Savannah. The ad pictured on the following page typifies the language the Pekin used to attract patrons (see figure 13). The Russell and Owens Stock Company promised to dazzle the audience with "Plenty of singing, dancing, and original jokes. Grand and elaborate settings. Introducing eight blackfaced End Men." Yet, the crowning jewel of the performance was an operatic number entitled "The Crawfish Man." The ad boasted that "this is positively the first time in the history of the theatre that a colored company has ever attempted a

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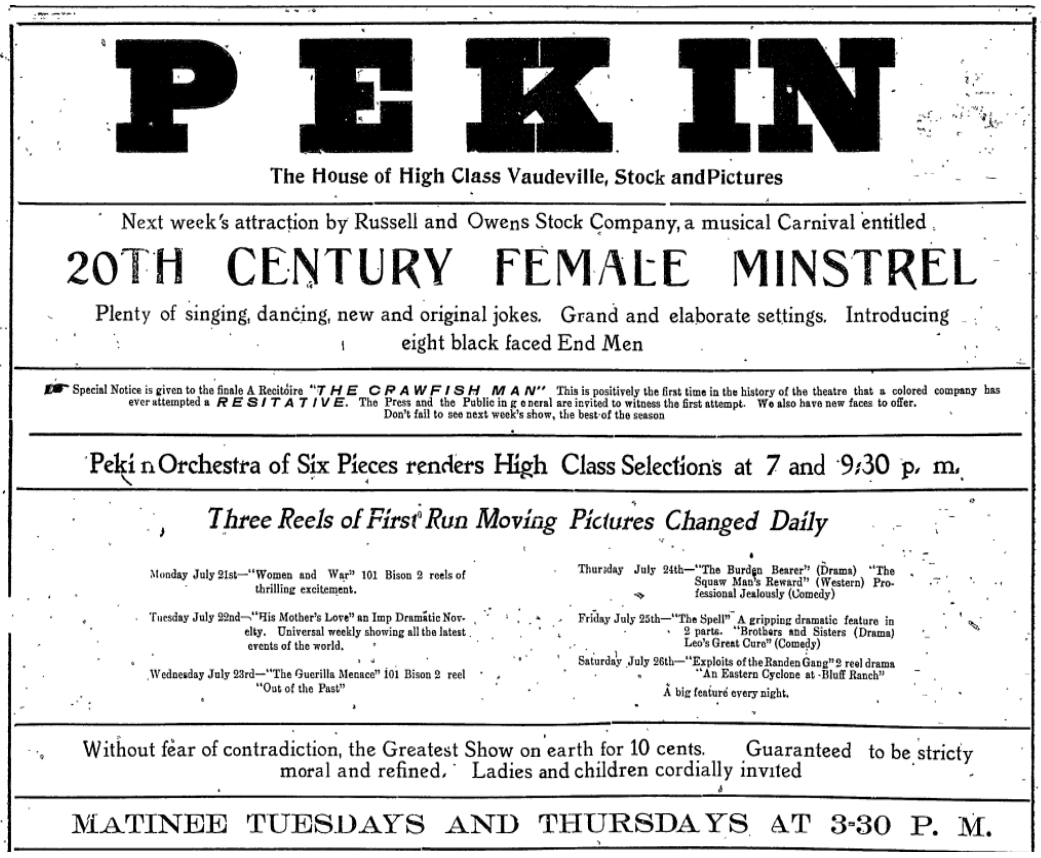
[42] "This Week Billy Kersands," *Savanah Tribune*, December 18, 1909; "Still Another Enterprise," *Savannah Tribune*, November 27, 1909; Frank Cullen, Florence Hackman, and Donald McNeilly, *Vaudeville Old and New: An Encyclopedia of Variety Performers in America*, vol. 1 (New York: Routledge, 2007), 633.

[43] "At the Pekin" *Savannah Tribune*, February 16, 1922. This article features a vaudeville act with a blackface sketch.

RESITATIVE." The producer further noted that the environment was safe for women and children, assuring potential customers that the show "[g]uaranteed to be strictly moral and refined."[44]



PEKIN

The House of High Class Vaudeville, Stock and Pictures

Next week's attraction by Russell and Owens Stock Company, a musical Carnival entitled

20TH CENTURY FEMALE MINSTREL

Plenty of singing, dancing, new and original jokes. Grand and elaborate settings. Introducing eight black faced End Men

Special Notice is given to the finale A Recitoire "THE CRAWFISH MAN" This is positively the first time in the history of the theatre that a colored company has ever attempted a RESITATIVE. The Press and the Public in general are invited to witness the first attempt. We also have new faces to offer. Don't fail to see next week's show, the best of the season

Pekin Orchestra of Six Pieces renders High Class Selections at 7 and 9:30 p. m.

Three Reels of First Run Moving Pictures Changed Daily

Monday July 21st—"Women and War" 101 Bison 2 reels of thrilling excitement.

Tuesday July 22nd—"His Mother's Love" an Imp Dramatic Novelty. Universal weekly showing all the latest events of the world.

Wednesday July 23rd—"The Guerilla Menace" 101 Bison 2 reel "Out of the Past"

Thursday July 24th—"The Burden Bearer" (Drama) "The Squaw Man's Reward" (Western) Professional Jealously (Comedy)

Friday July 25th—"The Spell" A gripping dramatic feature in 2 parts. "Brothers and Sisters (Drama) Leo's Great Cure" (Comedy)

Saturday July 26th—"Exploits of the Randen Gang" 2 reel drama "An Eastern Cyclone at Bluff Ranch"

A big feature every night.

Without fear of contradiction, the Greatest Show on earth for 10 cents. Guaranteed to be stricty moral and refined. Ladies and children cordially invited

MATINEE TUESDAYS AND THURSDAYS AT 3:30 P. M.

Figure 13: Pekin Advertisement
Source: *Savannah Tribune*, July 19, 1913

This advertisement is telling in its strategy to entice black Savannahians. The minstrel troupe marketed itself as a band of talented black performers producing high class art worthy of a respectable reception in Savannah's black community. Although it may be tempting to dismiss the company's attempt to produce high art through "The Crawfish Man" as simple parody, it would be shortsighted to do so. The ad, designed to

[44] "Pekin: The House of High Class Vaudeville, Stock and Pictures," *Savannah Tribune*, July 19, 1913.

attract a black audience to a black minstrel show, advertised the performance on its artistic merit rather than simple black caricature. Yet, in spite of this, the performance included "blackfaced End Men" as a point of attraction. Endmen, often referred to separately as Tambo and Bones, were minstrel stock characters that played the role of jokester and rabble-rouser in between musical numbers.[45] It was a minstrel tradition for endmen to perform in blackface. Thus in keeping with this tradition, the Russell and Owens Stock Company, an "all colored troupe," blackened their faces to perform for a black audience. While the dual presentation of "high art" and blackface appears counterintuitive, their co-existence exemplifies how minstrelsy, though handicapped by themes of black exploitation, was not solely defined by it. For southern black audiences in Savannah, the donning of blackface was a routine part of performance that did not detract from true talent. The blackface mask served as a means to an end—a traditional tool used to showcase modern talent.

The staging of racial tropes at the Pekin did not appear to be inconsistent with the expectations of black audiences or the theatre's mission "to gain the favor, merit, the confidence, and earn the esteem of a discriminating, critical and appreciative public."[46] Moreover, minstrelsy and other forms of racialized stage productions did not undermine the management's attempt to foster an atmosphere of racial pride and uplift at the Pekin. Willie Stiles, who took an increasingly public role as the manager of the Pekin alongside his mother, made it clear that the Pekin was created for and by black people. In an excerpt from a letter printed in the *Savannah Tribune,* Willie affirmed that at the Pekin, "the pictures are hand colored, the performers, the patrons, the proprietor, are so by

[45] Sotiropoulos, *Staging Race*, 21.
[46] "Pekin Theatre," *Savannah Tribune,* April 5, 1912.

nature. Glad of it, aren't you?" [47] Willie's remark that he was not only glad the theatre served "colored" patrons, but he was also glad to be "colored" himself, boldly highlights the role black performance venues played in cultivating a sense of identity that was independent of white perception.

Theatre owners and producers were not the only voices engaged in a dialogue about black performance in Savannah. Patrons of the Pekin published critiques in the *Savannah Tribune* to alert the black community to shows of high regard or ill repute. One such review spotlighted the Pekin Dots troupe and reported that the first part of their performance "made a tremendous hit" that "kept the audience in an uproar with their witticisms." The reviewer took a particular liking to the musical renderings of the night which included the popular tune "Alabama coon shuffle."[48] Another entertainer hosted at the Pekin, Miss Theresa Burroughs, received even higher compliments from the *Tribune* which claimed that "her magnetic voice and ability to captivate an audience… brings prestige to her class."[49]

Black theatre-goers also voiced disdain for acts that did not meet the community's standard of talent. A *Savannah Tribune* reviewer dismissed Mamie Smith and her Jazz Hounds as "unnecessarily coarse and rough." The act did not live up to communal expectations, having "but few features which in any respect came up to the highly colored press dispatches which preceded the show here."[50] Another contributor wrote a scathing review directed at the low quality of talent and moral respectability he perceived among the artists at the Pekin. He scolded the management for letting "whiskey

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[47] Ibid.
[48] "Pekin Dots," *Savannah Tribune*, May 13, 1911.
[49] "Pekin Theatre, Savannah Georgia," *Savannah Tribune*, January 1, 1910.
[50] "Mamie Smith Plays to Capacity House," *Savannah Tribune*, February 12, 1921.

heads and cocaine fiends run the Pekin" and for booking low-class "ham fats" that "have not yet shaken the mud out of [their] feet."[51] Josephine Stiles came under personal censure by another disgruntled patron. In an article published in the *Indianapolis Freedman*, titled "Don't Think the Management Considerate—The Pekin Theatre," the subscriber informed readers that "The Madame sits there getting the nickels and dimes. She doesn't seem to remember that the show is drawing the people, not her because she is sitting in the ticket booth." The patron further added, "Now if Jos. Stiles would try to operate a house in Chicago with that noise we'd turn her over to the 'Goats.' So, 'Sis,' you stick down in [the] Barn."[52]

While the negative reviews written about Josephine and "hamfat" performers appeared to be a matter of questioning the management's decorum and the artists' talent, a few editorial and opinion pieces printed in the *Savannah Tribune* struck a deeper chord of discontent. One unnamed contributor cautioned fellow Savannahians about the demeaning nature of the "coon songs" that were routinely performed as part of minstrel and vaudeville shows.[53] He warned: "The music of 'coon' songs is catchy and many a person who protests against it invariably finds themselves whistling or humming an air. While the music is catchy, the words are detestable and should not be sung in any intelligent home."[54] In this case, the reviewer recognized the skill of "coon" musicians, but did not condone the racial degradation present in the lyrics.

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[51] "The Pekin Theatre, Savannah Georgia," *The Freedman*," 1909. "Hamfat" was an insult used to describe mediocre black musicians in the early twentieth century.
[52] "Don't Think the Management Considerate—The Pekin Theatre," *The Freedman,"* October 14, 1911.
[53] "Coon songs" refer to a specific genre of music that rose to popularity in 1890s. The songs perpetuate the "coon image" of African Americans as uneducated, rowdy, and unpredictable. See James M. Salem, "African American Songwriters and Performers in the Coon Song Era: Black Innovation and American Popular Music," *Columbia Journal of American Studies*, www.columbia.edu/cu/cjas/salem1.html (accessed December 7, 2014).
[54] "Coon Song," *Savannah Tribune*, December 14, 1901.

The *Savannah Tribune* published what is perhaps its most pointed criticism of how artists portrayed blacks on stage in an article entitled, "Race Pride and Consciousness," in July 26, 1913. An excerpt from this article reads:

> The theatre is an educator and stands side by side with the church, school, press, and platform in its influence on determining the predominant sentiment of the community…. The time has come for the advanced Negro to organize against the "niggerisms" on the stage, against the coon songs, against the ragged acting, against the Negro never appearing on the stage except as something grotesque and absurd… we are tired of seeing the flat-footed, long-heeled, big-mouthed gorilla-looking fellow on the stage calling himself a Negro. The effect of such acting on the mind of the white auditor is to sink the Negro lower in his estimation; upon the colored auditor its effect is to teach no lesson at all, but to start on the road young Negros to sing "coon songs" and do "monkey business."[55]

This powerful critique of black show business calls for black performers and patrons to consider the role they play in constructing negative popular images of blacks—claiming that "out of the lions of these cogitations spring the whelps [of] industrial ostracism, Jim Crowism and segregation."[56]

This type of keen intellectual criticism was present in Savannah, but does not reflect the general attitude of black theatre-goers. One was much more likely to find a review praising a performance of the "Alabama coon shuffle" or "King Jung-a-Boo," than an appeal to the black community to abandon racial caricature as a form of entertainment.[57] This does not suggest that the average patron was unaware that many black performers perpetuated unflattering stereotypes, but it does indicate that most black Savannahians believed that showcasing talent through caricature was not necessarily a burden to racial progress or engaging in so called "monkey business."

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[55] "Race Pride and Consciousness," *Savannah Tribune,* July 26, 1913.
[56] Ibid.
[57] "New Stock Company at Pekin Delights Crowds," *Savannah Tribune,* December 27, 1913.

Whether patrons gave glowing or scathing reviews to local theatre productions, the community's discerning taste has a twofold implication. First, it illustrates that black southerners in Savannah were not passive victims or ideal viewers of minstrel shows. With the exception of a few vocal critics, the black community of Savannah viewed minstrelsy as a legitimate form of entertainment and subjected it to criticism based on how well the performers executed their art. Professional black actors, producers, and theatre owners knew they were beholden to their community to represent the race within the bounds of communal expectations and fashioned their performances accordingly. Secondly, the community response demonstrates, on a local scale, how performance art provided a medium for southern blacks to engage their own representations—not just as producers of art, but also as consumers.

Black Savannahians connection to performance art did not only extend to commercial acts housed in theatres. Ads and amusement announcements posted in the *Savannah Tribune* in the late nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries reveal several cases of community participation in amateur minstrelsy. St. Benedict's Catholic Church, for instance, was transformed into a minstrel stage on at least two recorded occasions. First, the church hosted the Forest City Minstrels in 1897 who were reportedly greeted "by a large and enthusiastic audience which testified their appreciation by applause and laughter."[58] Next, over twenty years later, the Benedict altar boys devised to "divert their musical proclivities… from the sacred altar music to that which is heard in blackface minstrelsy" in an effort to raise funds for church operations.[59] It was common for amateur troupes in Savannah to put on performances in support of charities or churches that

[58] "Forrest City Minstrels," *Savannah Tribune*, July 5, 1897.
[59] "St. Benedict's Alter Boys to Give Minstrel Show," *Savannah Tribune,* April 4, 1921.

serviced the local black community. One such charity troupe, the Little Folks Minstrels Company, volunteered its musical talents to fund the Charity Hospital—the first hospital in Savannah chartered to train black nurses. This act of charity, one of many, illustrates a tangible instance when money collected from black minstrelsy was directly funneled back into the local community.[60]

In addition to amateur minstrelsy, the relationship between performance art and Savannah's black community is evidenced by the Pekin's involvement in activities outside of commercial performances. As one of the largest and nicest venues available to blacks, Josephine and Willie Stiles allowed free access to their theatre for memorials, school athletic events and various civic meetings. An awards ceremony for an annual athletic competition among local black high schools was "witnessed by a packed house" at the Pekin which provided orchestral selections to entertain the amassed crowd.[61] The local chapter of the National League on Urban Conditions among Negroes, an organization dedicated to black poverty relief, also made use of the Pekin for meetings, lectures, and fundraising events on numerous occasions.[62]

Coda

Black Savannahians' use of civic spaces as amateur stages, coupled with the Pekin's transformation from a professional stage into a civic venue, highlights the interconnections between performance and communal engagement in Savannah. These connections suggest that local blacks patronized black theatres for reasons that ran deeper than a simple desire for entertainment. In a post-Reconstruction metropolis where

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[60] "Thanks Extended," *Savannah Tribune,* March 10, 1906.
[61] "School Children Races a Success," *Savannah Tribune,* May 25, 1912.
[62] "Urban League Public Meeting Tomorrow Afternoon at 4 O'clock," *Savannah Tribune*, December 11, 1915.

Jim Crow abated opportunities at every corner, a show of support for black performing arts in Savannah also meant an endorsement of black talent, black business, black charity, and black community—all factors that promoted racial uplift and modernity. This support, however, was not extended blindly. Black Savannahians expected performers to demonstrate a sophistication of talent and decorum that presented the black race in a way they deemed appropriate. This reciprocal relationship between performance and community offers an explanation for how black Savannahians addressed the paradoxical tension inherent to minstrel art. For most blacks in Savannah, supporting minstrel acts and other racialized forms of stage performance did not compromise their dignity because it was not tied to the racial tropes displayed on stage. Patronizing black performance was not succumbing to racial degradation because black consumers maintained a self-awareness that the mask did not define them as individuals or as a community.

The production and consumption of black performance in Savannah illustrates that acts of masking and modernity were not mutually exclusive within the black community. Far from being antithetical, masks provided a medium for black Savannahians to express a modern identity. Mildred Cram learned this lesson from the "chocolate chauffeur" who chose to disrupt her southern fantasy by driving through Savannah's bourgeoning "new negro quarters." Josephine Stiles capitalized on the dual power of the masks and modernity when she invested in black performing arts to support her family as a single woman. Yet, the ultimate feat of masking modernity belongs to the black community of Savannah as a whole who, even under the most oppressive circumstances, successfully transformed the minstrel stage into a space of communal

engagement that allowed blacks to produce, negotiate, and respond to questions of race and modernity on their own terms.

ACT TWO: "'O' THEM GREAT TRIALS": JUBILEE IN THE MODERN AGE

Black performers venturing into southern show business after emancipation were not restricted to minstrelsy and vaudeville. Jubilee choruses also found commercial success by invoking the "authentic" black experience. But, unlike the performances staged by traditional minstrels or variety performers, Jubilee singers tapped into spectators' capacity for sympathy and compassion rather than humor. Jubilee performers marketed their music as antebellum spirituals that replicated the soundscape of the southern plantation. Singers claimed to channel the melodies of slaves who turned to God and eternal salvation to ease the sorrows inherent to a life of bondage. By staging these intimate spiritual outpourings, jubilee performers offered white and black audiences a constructed view of the southern black experience that, though a clear departure from minstrelsy, remained dependent on racial caricature to provide commercial entertainment. Jubilee performers donned a mask of a different guise than minstrels, but both artists employed masking strategies to advance modernity in the South.

The Jubilee Singers of Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee, provide a particularly strong case for analyzing how jubilee music perpetrated old racial tropes for new ends. The original singing troupe was composed of eleven students and directed by Fisk professor and treasurer, George White.[63] Recognizing that the school was in dire

[63] Names of the original singers are as follows: Ella Sheppard, Maggie Porter, Jennie Jackson, Minnie Tate, Eliza Walker, Thomas Rutling, Benjamin Holmes, Isaac Dickerson, Georgia Gordon, Mable Lewis and

financial straits, White persuaded Fisk's best choral students to perform his personal arrangements of Negro spirituals to fund the ailing institution. By taking what were typically private spiritual expressions to the public stage, the Fisk Jubilees attracted a captive audience willing to pay to witness the students' novel talents. From 1871 to 1878, the singers performed in venues across the United States and Europe, securing a collective sum of $150,000 for the university.[64] In addition to keeping their school in operation, the singers gained rich cultural experiences, attained a celebrity status at home and abroad, and served as a popular embodiment of black artistry during the precarious age of emancipation.[65]

After the original troupe disbanded in 1878, White took a private company of singers on the road for another three years. Though this group was not officially endorsed by the university, it maintained the name "Fisk Jubilee Singers." Several original members continued to tour with White's revamped troupe and launched professional careers in show business after White gave up the enterprise in 1882. Fisk Presidents continued to send choral students on national and international tours from 1891 to 1925 to fund university operations. These performances, though sporadic and under inconsistent management, were generally met with a warm reception.[66]

By the mid-1880s, "the jubilee craze" pioneered by Fisk was in full swing, permanently shaping what would be considered black American music for years to come.

Fredrick J. Loudin. J.B.T. Marsh, *The Story of the Jubilee Singers; With Their Songs* (Boston: Houghton, Osgood and Company, 1880), viii.

[64] $150,000 in 1878 translates to $3,670,000 of purchasing power in 2014 (Configured with an online consumer price index: http: //www. measuringworth.com).

[65] Marsh, *The Story of the Jubilee Singers,* 16, 46; Sandra J. Graham, "The Fisk Jubilee Singers and the Concert Spiritual: The Beginnings of an American Tradition," (PhD diss., New York University, 2001), 2, 5-6, 301.

[66] Joe Richardson, *A History of Fisk University, 1865-1946* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1980), 80-81.

Other artists, both black and white, began to mimic the singers' diction and style. These imitators ranged from other black university singers, who performed similar spiritual numbers, to minstrels who capitalized on the singers' popularity by lampooning jubilee performance.[67] While it must be recognized that the music performed by the singers was *not* purely representative of slave songs, the Fisk Jubilees *did* transform black spirituals into a profitable enterprise. The opportunities and limitations spawned from commercializing black spiritual performance, as evidenced by the Fisk Jubilees, is the focus of this chapter.

Existing scholarship centered on the Fisk Jubilee Singers is restricted to a small collection of articles, a handful of dissertation chapters, two full-length dissertation studies, and two monographs. Though the majority of this scholarship is narrowly focused, it is possible to detect historiographic shifts within this body of work. Critical studies of the Fisk Jubilees did not surface until the late 1990s and early 2000s—prior to this period, only romanticized biographies, fictional accounts, and children's books profiled the singers.[68] These early studies primarily focused on the reception of the troupe, highlighting the singers' role as race visionaries. Doug Seroff's 2001 article, "'A Voice in the Wilderness': The Fisk Jubilee Singers' Civil Rights Tours of1879-1882," best represents this vein of scholarship. The article's title alone demonstrates that Seroff viewed the singers' campaign as a form of political activism. His study focused on the transformative effect touring had on the troupe, claiming: "the Fisk Jubilee Singers came into being as a naïve, itinerate band of young student singers. During their first eight

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[67] Graham, "The Fisk Jubilee Singers and the Concert Spiritual," 309; Kip Lornell, "Black American Music Since Reconstruction: An Overview," in *Form Jubilee to Hip Hop: Readings in African American Music*, ed. Kip Lornell (Upper Saddle River: Prentice Hall, 2010), xx.

[68] See Arna Bontemp's *Chariot in the Sky: a Story of the Jubilee Singers* (1951) for an example of a juvenile fiction account.

years of concertizing they enjoyed unprecedented success and international acclaim. Members developed professional temperaments and political agendas."[69] Seroff's article is a notable contribution to jubilee scholarship, but his depiction of the singers as a "naïve band" that only became aware of their capacity to be political after their exposure to experiences outside of the South denies the Jubilee's full agency over their actions. Evidence presented in this chapter reinforces the singers' position as political actors, but further suggests that this activism was a conscious choice, not strictly the result of a metamorphic experience.

More recent scholars have called attention to the role Christian evangelism played in shaping the public careers and private lives of the singers. Fisk was one of seven institutions of higher learning established by the American Missionary Association (AMA) from 1866 to 1869. Founded by New England abolitionists in 1846, the AMA was initially dedicated to exposing the horrors of slavery, but the organization shifted its focus to addressing the spiritual and educational needs of freedmen after emancipation.[70] Under the watchful eye of AMA benefactors, Fisk students and faculty were expected to model Protestant missionary ideals. This standard of behavior was especially impressed upon the Jubilee Singers whose iconic image represented the moral character of Fisk on both the national and international stage. Toni Anderson's 2010 book, *"Tell Them We're Singing for Jesus," the Original Fisk Jubilee Singers and Christian Reconstruction*, examined how the AMA's showcased the singers as living testimonies of Christian Reconstruction—a term Anderson applied to the organization's "large-scale liberation

[69] Doug Seroff, "'A Voice in the Wilderness': The Fisk Jubilee Singers; Civil Rights Tours of 1879-1882," Popular Music & Society 25, no. 1/2 (Spring/Summer 2001): 132.
[70] Marsh, *The Story of the Jubilee Singers*, 6-7.

effort" to "free the mind[s] and soul[s]" of black southerners.[71] Anderson depicted the connection between the Jubilees and the missionaries as a mutually beneficial partnership that promoted the wellbeing of the singers and the southern black community at large. While she admitted that AMA agents used racist rhetoric at times, Anderson maintained that the missionaries were inspired by "good intentions, though not always perfect practice," and that they should be recognized "as one of the most progressive voices for social equality of its time."[72]

Scholars do not universally support the argument that a symbiotic relationship existed between the Fisk Jubilees and the AMA. Musicologist, Sandra Graham, took this interpretation to task in her 2007 article, "On the Road to Freedom: the Contracts of the Jubilee Singers." Graham argued that the singers' success came at a steep price of personal autonomy. Drawing upon the legal contracts that bound the Fisk Jubilees to AMA officials, Graham emphasized a relationship of dependence in which "the sounds coming from the students' lips, their manner of dress, their personal and professional conduct—all were controlled by white male northerners for institutional gain."[73] Though Graham and Anderson presented conflicting analyses, their focus on the influence of Christian mission, for better or worse, enriched the history of the singers. Considering these works in tandem, it is possible to see how underlying themes of exploitation shaped the experiences of the Fisk Jubilees, but did not necessarily negate the possibility of progress.

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[71] Toni P. Anderson, "*Tell Them We Are Singing for Jesus": The Original Fisk Jubilee Singers and Christian Reconstruction, 1871-1878* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 2010), xii.
[72] Ibid., 17.
[73] Sandra Graham, "On the Road to Freedom: The Contracts of the Fisk Jubilee Singers," *American Music* 24, no. 1(Spring, 2006): 21.

Historian Gabriel Farren Milner's 2013 dissertation, "American Vernacular: Popular Culture, Performance, and the Question of National Identity, 1871- 1915," is the most recent scholarly publication related to the Jubilees and the most significant historiographic development in terms of my own research. Milner's study examined how public performances by historically marginalized peoples "recuperate the vernacular as a counterweight to modern existence."[74] Though the Jubilees are only the focus of one chapter in the scope of her larger project, Milner's insight into how nostalgic "slave songs" filled a void of national estrangement caused by modernity is a guiding theme of my analysis.

This chapter weaves these fragmented threads of existing scholarship together and integrates them with my own archival findings at Fisk University to create a more balanced narrative of the Jubilees and their legacy. I seek to give a fair representation of the constraints imposed upon the singers, while also demonstrating instances when they consciously forged a path toward modernity that was not predetermined by white management or audience appeasement. The chapter opens with a historical account of the founding of Fisk University and the surrounding community that supported it. Next, the study examines the commercialization of slave songs by the Jubilees, considering both the public persona of the troupe and the private choices that guided their actions on tour. Finally, an epilogue following the chapter considers the ways in which the jubilee movement intersected minstrelsy and variety performance— similar acts to the ones hosted by the Pekin Theatre in Savannah.

[74] Gabriel Farren Miner, "American Vernacular: Popular Culture, Performance, and the Question of National History, 1871-1915" (PhD diss., University of California, Berkeley, 2013), 4.

Founding Fisk

In 1865, two AMA officials, Reverend E. P. Smith and Reverend E. M. Cravath, met in Nashville, Tennessee, to secure a plot of land "where a permanent university ought to be planted for the higher education of the freedmen." [75] Both men were white, hailed from northern cities, had served in the Union army, and felt passionate about providing freedmen with a Christian education.[76] After surveying the city for a suitable location, the men settled on a piece of property located in the northwest corner of Nashville that was previously the site of a Union hospital. Though the buildings remaining on the property were abandoned and tattered, they provided ready structures for student instruction at no additional cost. With the aid of two other investors, Professor Ogden and General Clinton B. Fisk, the reverends purchased the $16,000 plot that would become the site of Fisk University the following year.[77]

AMA officials were attracted to Nashville for a few core reasons. First, and most simply, Tennessee bordered eight of the former slave-holding states and thus served as a natural converging point for freedmen education.[78] While investors chose Tennessee for its proximity to potential pupils, the city of Nashville was selected for motives that ran deeper than geography. As a private institution, Fisk depended entirely on philanthropy and student tuition to operate.[79] The AMA recognized that in order to stay afloat, Fisk

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[75] Marsh, *The Story of the Jubilee Singers*, 8.
[76] Rev. Smith served as the Field Agent of the United States Christian Commission during the war and became the Secretary of the AMA at Cincinnati in 1865. Rev. Cravath served the Union as an army chaplain and became Fisk's first president in 1875—a position he maintained for twenty five years.
[77] Ibid.
[78] Ibid., 9-10.
[79] In its first year of operation, Fisk did not require students to pay tuition and offered only remedial education centered on basic reading, writing, and arithmetic. By 1867, Fisk obtained a university charter and began to cater its curriculum to higher education. Dormitories were built and students were expected to pay fees toward tuition and housing. Rates of tuition varied based on the course of study. See Joe

must retain students that could not only devote time and energy to higher education, but ones that could also pay tuition fees. With a long standing history of supporting a black elite class, Nashville had the capacity to send a number of relatively affluent pupils to Fisk to offset institutional costs. These students, though a minority of the total student body as a whole, were typically the children of black Nashvillians who had not experienced life as a slave or the emancipated mulatto children of local southern planters. Without the financial support and leadership of these more privileged black families, it is unlikely that Fisk could have survived off northern philanthropy alone. [80]

Beyond monetary aid, elite black Nashvillians contributed to the success of the university by maintaining a cooperative relationship with northern missionaries. Oftentimes, this cooperation hinged on black urbanites' willingness to allow missionaries to assume the role of paternal deliverers, redeeming black students from a life of moral and intellectual degradation. Ironically, this type of working paternal relationship was familiar to Nashville's black elites, as they had forged similar connections to southern planters under the system of slavery. Historian Bobby L. Lovett describes these antebellum relationships as a delicate power play between the "benevolent master" and his "Sambo, stepchildren." The elite blacks—typically of a free or quasi-independent slave status—reluctantly played into a passive, childlike, role to reinforce the authority slaveholders held over yeoman farmers. In return, privileged blacks gained economic advantage, protection, and class distinction from the "Negro masses." Lovett further contends that this unspoken alliance between the "pre-Emancipation Negro elite" and

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Richardson's *A History of Fisk University, 1865-1946* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press), 11, 16-17.

[80] Bobby L. Lovett, *The African-American History of Nashville, 1780- 1930: Elites and Dilemmas*, (Fayetteville: The University of Arkansas Press, 1999), 159.

white elites fractured during the Civil War, creating an opportunity for blacks to withdraw their silent cooperation in favor of abolition.[81]

Following emancipation, Nashville's black elites entered into another unequal power relationship with whites to achieve personal gain. This time, however, the alliance centered on racial uplift and higher education funding. Though glaring differences existed between AMA missionaries and antebellum white elites in terms of ideology and intentions, a continuous thread of paternal benevolence shaped both of these partnerships. AMA accounts of the immediate Reconstruction period reflected the continuation of this patronizing attitude. In a description of southern blacks following Confederate defeat, AMA agent Marsh wrote: "They were homeless, penniless, ignorant, improvident—unprepared in every way for the dangers as well as the duties of freedom. Self-reliance they had never had the opportunity to learn… They had been kept all their lives in a school of immorality, and even church membership was no evidence that one was not a thief, a liar, or a libertine."[82] Marsh clearly had little faith that black southerners could achieve a life of respectability without outside intervention. Moreover, he found local white elites, so impoverished by the emancipation of their property, ill-equipped to provide appropriate aid to freedmen. He concluded that the moral responsibility of educating blacks "laid mainly, therefore, upon the Christian people of the North."[83]

According to later passages in Marsh's account, blacks embraced the educational opportunities provided by the AMA with unparalleled enthusiasm. Describing their eagerness to learn as a "consuming fire," Marsh professed that "families pinched with hunger asked more eagerly for school than bread" and that "their gratitude for instruction

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[81] Ibid., xiii-xiv,7
[82] Marsh, *The Story of the Jubilee Singers*, 4
[83] Ibid.

was as fervent as their desire, for it was ravenous, and their attachment to their teachers was most devoted."[84] While Marsh's observation that southern blacks were more concerned with learning than receiving nourishment is likely an exaggeration, his portrayal of blacks as willing students who adored their doting teachers reveals the paternalistic lens through which the AMA viewed the students they served.

Marsh's romantic narrative of white benevolence is overwrought and altruistic, but not without a degree of credence. Many students at AMA sponsored schools, including Fisk, were profoundly poor following emancipation and struggled to afford the cost of attendance. Reports of students dropping out of school due to family illness or farming obligations during bad crop seasons were not uncommon—particularly during the early years of Fisk's operation.[85] However, challenges inherent to poverty were not exclusive to Nashville's black population. Laboring white families also struggled to provide their children with secondary or collegiate education in the immediate post-war years. For a number of poor whites, education was unattainable due to time demands and costs, but others were simply apathetic to the prospect of formal schooling. A large proportion of Nashville's white masses upheld a traditional agrarian ethic that did not place much cultural value on education beyond basic reading and writing skills. They viewed poorly funded public schooling as a stigmatizing handout and private schooling as an unmanageable or unnecessary expense.[86]

Moreover, while issues of poverty were pervasive throughout the South, not all of Fisk's students fit Marsh's depiction of being "pinched with hunger" or "unprepared in

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[84] Ibid., 6.
[85] Joe Richardson, *A History of Fisk University, 1865-1946* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press), 17-18.
[86] Stephen V. Ash, *Middle Tennessee Transformed* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1988), 232.

every way for the duties of freedom." On the contrary, prosperous black families that had not experienced slavery for generations comprised the core of local support for Fisk. Though these elites did not represent the majority of students in terms of enrollment, their ties to the Fisk did color the way the institution was perceived by the Nashville community. Students attending Fisk, regardless of their socioeconomic backgrounds, acquired a nickname, "Fiskites," that distinguished them from the general black population. This elitist distinction led to a sense of estrangement between the students and the surrounding black community as "Fiskites" reported being teased and bullied by local blacks for their assumed position of privilege.[87]

Several factors contributed to this perception, the first of which was the location of Fisk in relation to Nashville's predominantly black neighborhoods. Much like the city of Savannah, Nashville's antebellum racial distribution reflected a spatial pattern of paternalism. Slaves resided close to the masters that attempted to control them, and free blacks were integrated amongst the white population. Yet, unlike Savannah, racially identifiable neighborhoods took shape immediately after emancipation. This phenomenon has a simple explanation. As soon as Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation, slaves in Tennessee and surrounding regions flooded the city. Though Lincoln's proclamation did not apply to Tennessee because it fell to the Union eight months prior, slaves were nonetheless aware that the possibility of freedom loomed near and took flight to Nashville—the center of Union occupation in the state. With this sudden influx of fugitive slaves, Union officers utilized the runaways as army laborers, housing them in three makeshift contraband camps. After Union forces withdrew from Nashville following Confederate defeat, blacks began to settle permanently in these

[87] Bobby L. Lovett, *The African-American History of Nashville*, 161-62.

camps, establishing neighborhoods. By 1866, Nashville was home to five distinct black areas: the contraband camps of Edgefield, Edgehill, and Northwest, as well as, Trimble Bottom, Black Bottom, and a small black enclave concentrated near the city capital.[88]

Fisk's original site rested on the edge of the former Northwest contraband camp. Though this neighborhood was not the poorest region of the city—a distinction reserved for the inner-city slum of Black Bottom—the Northwest region was heavily populated with the newly emancipated urban poor. This location would only service Fisk students for seven years. After the Jubilees completed their first two national tours in 1873 and funneled nearly $60,000 into the university, AMA administrators purchased a twenty-five acre tract and broke ground on a new, permanent campus. This site was located on the outskirts of city, roughly eight blocks north from the first campus (see map in figure 14). The relative isolation of this new suburban locality, outlined by neat landscaping and attractive homes, gave the appearance that Fisk was an ivory tower, untouched by the hunger, disease, and poverty that afflicted Nashville's black slums.[89]

[88] Ibid., 72-73.
[89] Ibid, 73-74; Marsh, *The Story of the Jubilee Singers*, 46.

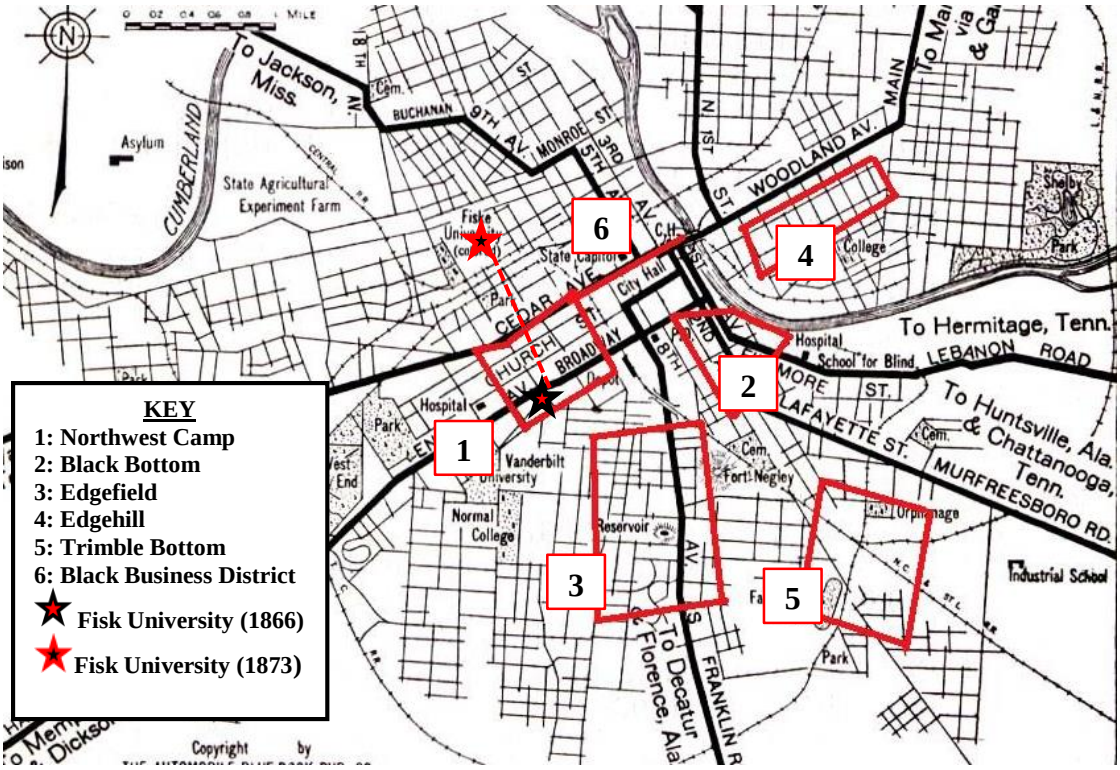

Figure 14: Spatial distribution of black neighborhoods in Nashville, Tennessee after emancipation
Source: Base map copied from the *Automobile Blue Book*, 1919, Vol. 6; Additional content about the geographic layout of black neighborhoods was adapted from Lovett's, *The African-American History of Nashville*, 73-77.

Figure 15: Jubilee Hall, c.1900
The first permanent structure erected on Fisk's new campus was named "Jubilee Hall" to honor the singers whose performances funded its construction. The cornerstone of the building was laid on October 23, 1873, but the building officially opened for student occupation on January 1, 1876. *Jubilee Hall, Fisk University, Nashville, Tenn*. Dry Plate Negative. Detroit: Detroit Publishing Co., c. 1900. From Library of Congress: *Detroit Publishing Company Photograph Collection*.

Figure 16: Little Eb. Snow, c. 1901
Two children, one likely named Eb Snow, posing outside their home in Nashville, TN. *Little Eb. Snow*. Dry Plate Negative. Detroit: Detroit Publishing Co., c. 1901. From Library of Congress: *Detroit Publishing Company Photograph Collection*.

Figure 17: Fisk's junior normal class, c. 1890
Junior normal class of Fisk University, Nashville, Tennessee, seating on steps outside of building]. Photograph. From Library of Congress: *Prints and Photograph Division*.

In addition to Fisk's physical separation from the black masses, the curriculum offered at the university also contributed to its elite reputation. While the majority of black institutes of higher learning oriented their studies toward agricultural and mechanical trades, Fisk took pride in offering black students a liberal arts education. By 1869, Fisk offered courses of study in education, theology, music, college preparatory classes, and liberal arts. Students enrolled in the college program typically underwent eight semesters of instruction, completing courses in, but not limited to: Latin, Greek, French, mathematics, natural science, botany, natural philosophy, history, English, astronomy, and political science. Additionally, students in every department attended weekly bible studies.[90]

Fisk's intellectually rigorous curriculum was a source of distinction for students and faculty, but it incited disapproval amongst whites and blacks who viewed the purpose of black education differently. Critics thought it was impractical to train blacks to reason at a higher level before they gained industrial independence. Alternatively, they suggested that manual trades would allow blacks to achieve economic prosperity which would, in turn, inspire the white majority to award social and political rights to blacks. This philosophy, though popularly linked to Booker T. Washington in the 1890s, began to take shape during the waning years of Reconstruction. [91]

Debates over the curricula in black colleges abounded amongst AMA administrators during the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Some argued that the best way to achieve racial uplift was to model black collegiate institutions after white

[90] Richardson, *A History of Fisk,* 15
[91] Ibid., 55.

universities rooted in classic European pedagogy. [92] Fisk University clearly aligned with this approach as it emphasized liberal arts that included instruction in western philosophy and classical languages. Other administrators pushed for a curriculum centered on promoting industrial trades. These agents were of a similar mind as AMA Superintendent, Albert Salisbury, who maintained that blacks "need the practical assistance of industrial training for the great transition which they must speedily undergo from their old condition to that of self-support, settled habits, and peaceful citizenship." [93] Salisbury cut to the core of the contemporary debate when he addressed his rivals who feared that training in manual labor would stunt the intellectual growth of blacks and relegate them to the substratum of the labor caste system: "The objections urged against industrial education are here reduced to a minimum…. The Negro's right hand is not so 'near the brain' as to call for any caution lest it get too near; he has little mechanical or inventive tendency and needs to be stimulated on that side."[94]

In Salisbury's view, a balance of intelligence and manual labor was of key importance. Labor without any intellectual stimulation would allow whites to monopolize skilled jobs and leave only menial occupations for blacks—a situation little better than slavery. But what troubled Salisbury even more acutely was his fear of intelligent blacks that had no aptitude for physical labor. For it was these "more intelligent ones" that he warned would become "a restless, dangerous, idle class [of] loafers, politicians, [or] worse."[95]

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[92] Lovett, *America's Historically Black Colleges and Universities: A Narrative History 1837-2009* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 2011), 22.
[93] Albert Salisbury, "Industrial Education," *The American Missionary* 38 (1884): 340.
[94] Ibid., 339-340.
[95] Ibid., 339

Thus, when Booker T. Washington took the stage in 1895 at the Atlanta Exposition to deliver his famed address regarding race and education, he gave voice to a sentiment that had been building for decades. This sentiment was intimately tied to institutions like Fisk that faced growing pressure to center their curriculum on industrial education. In addressing the segregated crowd, Washington called for his southern brethren to: "Cast down your bucket where you are… Cast it down in agriculture, in domestic service, and in the professions," claiming that "no race can prosper till it learns that there is as much dignity in tilling a field as in writing a poem."[96] The bi-racial audience received Washington's "compromise" speech warmly. He appeased white southerners who had grown increasingly wary of black intellectuals while also validating the respectability of the black working class. The public attention generated by Washington's speech solidified his position as the leading spokesmen for industrial education on the national stage. The Tuskegee Normal and Industrial Institute—Washington's pet project—stood in stark contrast to Fisk, which held fast to its founding pedagogy.

W.E.B. Du Bois, an intellectual adversary of Washington and a Fisk University graduate, spoke out in favor of a liberal arts education for blacks. In spite of the growing number of intellectuals and educators who professed the moral and economic benefits of applied sciences, Du Bois maintained that traditional academic training was the cornerstone of black leadership and progress. In Du Bois's view, courses of study in agriculture, animal husbandry, mechanical arts, and the domestic sciences had a legitimate place in higher education, but not at a university like Fisk. Believing Fisk to be

[96] Booker T. Washington, *Up from Slavery* (Norwood, Mass.: Norwood Press, 1901), 219-220.

an institution that served a higher purpose, he claimed that industrializing Fisk's curriculum would be a waste of natural aptitude, similar to "using a surgeon's knife for chopping wood."[97]

When Du Bois addressed Fisk's graduating class of 1908, he emphasized the harrowing task that would befall "Fiskites" as they struggled to prove the merit their classical education in a modern world that pushed blacks to bend to the demands of industry:

> Today, and on us, the pressures are tremendous. What is the world, cries the present Philosophy? It is the growing of grain and the weaving of cloth, the moving of wheels and the building of walls; it is the ability to do, the earning of livelihood, the creation of wealth…. It is certain that in the University of tomorrow, the field of knowledge will include knowledge of what the present world has done and is doing with its physical resources… but this does not mean a stampede to industry as a substitute for life—to machines as an antidote for thought, or to technique in place of Reason.[98]

In the same speech, Du Bois referred to the graduates of Fisk as "the watchmen on the outer wall," charged with the duty to reject "the bribe of public opinion and private wealth" to maintain the integrity of higher education. He further warned the students that "if this republic of letters suffers harm, the guilt lies on us and on our children's children."[99]

Du Bois delivered his speech to a group of graduates in 1908—twenty years after his own graduation from Fisk and nearly forty years after the AMA established the institution— but his words spoke to a tradition that guided Fisk since its inception. Though it was stunted by the paternalistic fantasies of AMA leaders, Fisk upheld its mission to offer blacks a better future through higher education centered on intellectual

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[97] W.E.B. Du Bois, "Galileo Galilei," in *The Education of Black People: Ten Critiques, 1906-1960*, ed. Herbert Aptheker (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1973), 28.
[98] Ibid., 25-26.
[99] Ibid., 27.

development. By 1900, over 400 students graduated from Fisk securing employment as professors, principals, teachers, ministers, business men, government agents, and in other professional sectors. Several graduates from Fisk's education department took teaching jobs at rival vocational schools. While 400 graduates may appear to be a modest number, it is quite remarkable considering that only 1 percent of blacks had professional occupations in 1900.[100]

Of course, the progress of Fisk throughout the last quarter of the nineteenth century was not linear or unchallenged. With every school year, administrators, faculty, and students faced a new set of circumstances and problems. Internal conflicts and financial strain accounted for some these issues. Disputes about poor food, inadequate housing, and low wages were common during the early 1870s, and several instructors blamed administrators for the sub-standard working conditions.

External forces also shaped life at Fisk as national economic shifts not only affected the student's ability to pay tuition, but the amount of money the university received from philanthropists. Philanthropy was also subject to dry up if the institution did not adhere to the ideology of those willing to give. For instance, after vocational training became fully in vogue with Washington's public endorsement in the 1890s, dollars that were previously Fisk-bound found their way into the treasury of industrial institutions. This phenomenon is precisely what Du Bois referred to in his speech when he cautioned the graduates against taking "the bribe of public opinion and private wealth."[101]

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[100] Richardson, *A History of Fisk* University, 53.
[101] Ibid., 22, 55-56, 66; W.E.B. Du Bois, "Galileo Galilei," 27.

Furthermore, political changes throughout Reconstruction, "Southern Redemption" and the age of Progressivism, affected the development of Fisk and the deportment of Fiskites. In the midst of growing anti-black sentiment in the South, Fisk stood in glaring opposition to the popular notion that blacks lacked the natural inclination to learn and practice self-improvement. Though some students were impoverished, all students shared equally in the distinction of being a "Fiskite" and representing the intellectual capabilities of the black race. Faculty, students, and administrators proved their resolve to uphold Fisk's distinctiveness by maintaining rigorous academic standards in the face of mounting pressures to industrialize their curriculum.

Despite Fisk's commendable qualities, its history should not be told as a narrative of absolute triumph. The elitist character of the school created a wedged between "Fiskites" and the surrounding black community. While some of this perception may be a natural divide that evolves between those who are formally educated and those who are not, this is hard to reconcile with the administration's decision to move the campus further away from the black community. It should also be recognized that while Fisk did educate future race leaders and visionaries, it did not directly subvert the system of racial paternalism that beset higher education. All of Fisk's presidents were white until 1947, and most of the money raised through philanthropy was wooed from the pockets of northern white sympathizers. The hypocrisy of a system of education that claims to elevate blacks, only to then deny blacks positions of authority within that institution of higher learning, is self-evident.

Fisk University, with all its achievements and shortcomings, was the genesis of the jubilee movement. The university attracted an assortment of vocalists to its budding

music program, representing a cross section of Fisk's student body. The youngest touring member was 14; the oldest was 25. Seven of the original Jubilees had firsthand experience with slavery, while four were born free. Two of the students born into slavery were emancipated before the Civil War and had little recollection of their lives in captivity. Seven singers had a degree of formal schooling before studying at Fisk while two had prior experience as teachers themselves. One singer served in the Union Army during the Civil War, while another was compelled to "serve" the Confederacy by his former master who insisted that his slave accompany him to the battlefield. Yet, when this singing troupe took the stage, the differences between them were obscured. To the spectators that funneled money to the university, the Jubilees were a univocal representation of the hardships of slavery and the joys of emancipation.[102]

The Jubilees Take the Stage

The story of the Jubilee Singers' first tour, as recounted by AMA Agent J. B. T. Marsh, reads like chapter from a Greek epic:

> It is the story of a little company of emancipated slaves who set out to secure, by their singing, the fabulous sum of $20,000 for the impoverished and unknown school in which they were students. The world was unfamiliar to these untraveled freed people as were the countries through which the Argonauts had to pass; the social prejudices that confronted them were as terrible to meet as fire-breathing bulls or the warriors that sprang from the land sown with dragons' teeth; and no sea were ever more tempestuous than the stormy experiences that for a time tested their faith and courage.[103]

The language Agent Marsh used to describe the "little company of emancipated slaves" who traveled distant lands to aid their impoverished university is melodramatic, even by contemporary standards. Yet, the piteous and infantilizing tone of his account mirrored

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[102] "The Jubilee Singers," *Fisk University News*, circa 1910; Marsh, *The Story of the Jubilee Singers*, 101-120; Richardson, *A History of Fisk*, 26-27.
[103] Marsh, *Story of the Jubilee Singers*, 1.

popular perceptions of the Fisk Jubilees from the troupe's initial tours in the 1870s to later iterations of the group in the first quarter of the twentieth century.

Spectators used adjectives like "primitive," "haunting," "weird" and "artless" to characterize the Jubilees in the press. These descriptors appeared in newspapers spanning Europe to the American Midwest from the 1870s to the 1920s. Audiences at home and abroad, whether they were monarchs, music critics, or untrained auditors, reported the Jubilees' sound to be strangely captivating, eerily authentic, and distinctly black.[104]

White audiences packed into concert halls to hear the Jubilees to witness something strange and novel, but they also attended performances to experience an art form that defied white understanding. As Ronald Radano, a scholar of black music, explains: "While barbaric, the spirituals conveyed a profound meaning; because slaves lacked imagination, their songs developed from a 'native musical capacity" that highlighted natural feats of improvisation." Hence, critiques of jubilee performances by white audiences typically centered on emotion and exoticism rather than conventional measures of musicality.[105]

A review in the *Glasgow Herald*, dated August 18, 1873, captured the response of one awed spectator who witnessed the singers' first performance in Scotland. Commenting on the quality of the singers' voices, the reviewer reported that "their music, although the outcome of wholly untutored minds… has a powerful charm of its own." This charm, he further added, "exercised an influence over the sympathies and the smiles

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[104] Based on newspapers clippings found in the Jubilee Singers Archives, 1858-1924, Franklin Library Special Collections and Archives, Fisk University.

[105] Ronald, Radano, "Denoting Difference: The Writing of the Slave Spirituals," *Critical Inquiry 22* (Spring 1996): 519. Black periodicals were not vocal about the Jubilees, particularly during the original troupe's tours. See Genithia Lily Hogges, "Canonization Reconstructed: Inclusion and Exclusion in Nineteenth-Century, African-American Periodicals, with an Ear to the Music of African-Americans," *American Periodicals* 12 (2002), 155 and Milner, "American Vernacular", 28. The singers were featured in black newspapers during the twentieth century, which will be addressed in the concluding chapter.

of their audience which is seldom possessed by singers of much higher pretentions."[106] The *Glasgow Herald* contributor brought to light the appeal of jubilee music: it appeared raw, spontaneous, and devoid of cultural refinement. Above all else, it was the "real thing."

For the more perceptive observer, authenticity transcended the singer's voice and could be witnessed through the body. Newman Hall, a spectator of a Jubilee performance in England on the same European tour, reported witnessing a physical change in the singers as they performed: "They sang as beings inspired. Their whole form seemed to dilate. Their eyes flashed; their countenance told of reverence and joy and gratitude to God."[107] In addition to highlighting the physical transcendence of the Jubilees, Hall's critique speaks to the popular belief that the singers maintained an exceptional connection to God— a connection specific to black folk that could only be genuinely articulated through black art. White audiences viewed "slave song" performances, though simple and primeval, as a natural expression of the sacred, unadulterated by the formulaic influence of white music. Patronizing jubilee performances offered white voyeurs a window into a realm of spiritual intimacy that was otherwise inaccessible to them. Furthermore, by aiding the singers' spiritual mission through ticket purchases, song book sales, and philanthropy, white audiences felt they were contributing to a godly cause that bolstered white spiritual development. [108]

When the Fisk Jubilee Singers returned to England in the summer of 1924, roughly fifty years after the singers' European debut, the reception they received paralleled that of their forbearers. The individual singers and the choral director were, of

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[106] "The Jubilee Singers of America at Castle Wemyss," *Glasgow Herald,* August 18, 1873.
[107] "Mr. Gladstone and the Jubilee Singers," *Independent,* August 21, 1873.
[108] Radano, "Denoting Difference," 519-520.

course, not the same Jubilees, but the public response to their performances was strikingly similar. A critic writing to the *London Daily Telegraph* in June insisted that, "One has only to listen to these singers who have the religious tradition in their blood, to realize how intensely sincere the Spirituals really are; to realize also, that the singing itself has an unwritten technique of a subtle and lovely kind that seems to be a secret of the coloured musician alone."[109] Despite the years that had elapsed between the two tours, the London audience still valued the Jubilees' music for its simplicity, its sacred roots, and its racial distinctiveness. One English reviewer even referenced the legacy of the original troupe while assessing the merits of the contemporary one:

> For Fisk University is, as it were, the foster mother of the Negro tradition. Only a few of the older generation can remember the first Negro Singers who came to England in the seventies to collect funds for Fisk University…. The singers who so enchanted us yesterday represent probably the third generation from the Negro University and their singing is therefore authoritative- minus any kind of pedantry, of course.

This passage is a telling critique. The reviewer recognized that several decades of practice and refinement gave the Jubilees an "authoritative" edge over the original troupe, however, he followed this praise with a revealing caveat: "minus any kind of pedantry—*of course*." This added qualification reinforced the popular belief that the jubilee genre lacked cultural sophistication, regardless of the singers' level of training.[110]

The tropes that characterized the Jubilees and their music were not specific to Europe. Audiences across the Eastern Seaboard and the American Midwest echoed similar sentiments. For instance, the troupe's stop in Brooklyn during their first national tour inspired a *Harper's Weekly* reviewer to note that the Jubilees "sang with a pathos

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[109] *London Daily Telegraph*, June 27, 1924.
[110] *London Observer*, June 15, 1924.

and sweetness that appealed to every true heart the songs of their bondage."[111] The feelings of anguish and "sweetness" that moved New Yorkers in 1872 survived into the early twentieth century. After a Jubilee performance in January of 1916, the *Columbus Evening Dispatch* reported:

> There is nothing else in music quite like these melodies of the Negro people. It is the human side of music, now bubbling, now flowing out in sweetness and with an enunciation that makes every word count. If the music is natural, so is its interpretation. There is no straining for effect and the effect is all the more noticeable for that. The achievement of the Negro singers is as impossible to white singers as is the achievement of white singers to those of the Negro race.[112]

The first few lines of this critique employed the familiar trope that characterized the Jubilees' sound as natural, spontaneous, and exclusive to blacks. The last line took this idea a step further, however, by insisting that black artists were inherently incapable of performing white music. This belief should be understood within the larger context of contemporary race theory. As scientific racism became more salient in European and American popular consciousness, whites commonly viewed blacks as naturally less intelligent, but more apt to possess emotional traits like warmth, sweetness, and intuition—characteristics Anglo-Saxons supposedly lacked. White responses to the Jubilees' music reflected this pervasive trend of "othering." Moreover, the common refrain that jubilee music was "a secret of the coloured musician alone," implored white spectators to learn this secret, or at least be entertained while trying.[113]

Appreciation for the Jubilees extended to ordinary people and individuals belonging to the highest social and political orders. The singers entertained Kings and Queens, Princes and Princesses, Czars and Czarinas, Dukes and Duchesses, members of

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[111] "Home and Foreign Gossip," *Harper's Weekly*, January 20, 1872.
[112] *Columbus Evening Dispatch*, January 11, 1916.
[113] Radano, "Denoting Difference," 519-521.

Parliament and Congress, and Presidents of the United States.[114] *The Washington Times* printed an article that captured President Woodrow Wilson's response to the Jubilees' White House performance in March of 1916:

> One by one the old songs of the South followed each other in richness of tone that thrilled the hearers. Gradually the deep lines on the President's face softened. With eyes closed and head thrown back he sat at the Cabinet table listening. When it was over the President, with eyes a wee bit dimmed, shook hands with the singers.

The reporter may have taken a few liberties to dramatize the episode, but the President's positive reception of the singers is telling, particularly because Wilson's presidential policies private choices did not reflect progressive ideas about race.

Despite Wilson's reputation for championing liberal reform and social justice, his passion and progressivism did not extend to people of color. Born and raised in the South, Wilson maintained southern sympathies throughout his presidency and refused to take a progressive stance on issues of race even when fellow reformists urged him to do so. In 1913, he approved measures presented by his Cabinet to segregate federal agencies, resulting in the loss of jobs and promotions for blacks. Though Wilson never endorsed legal enforcement of segregation, his administration made it clear that no action would be taken to prevent federal offices from demoting or removing black employees to offer more civil service positions to whites. This was a serious blow to the black middle class who had made steady employment gains in the government sector since Reconstruction.[115]

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[114] Mable Lewis Imes, "Biographical Information," cira 1928, Box 1, Folder 2, Fisk Singers Archive 1858-1924, Franklin Library Special Collections and Archives, Fisk University. The Jubilees sang for Ulysses S. Grant in 1872 and Woodrow Wilson in 1916.

[115] Jennifer D. Keene, "Wilson and His Race Relations," in *A Companion to Woodrow Wilson* ed. by Ross A. Kennedy (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 134, 137, 140.

In addition to his regressive policies, Wilson's infamous endorsement of D.W. Griffith's controversial film, *Birth of Nation,* further revealed his personal sentiments regarding modern race relations. Based on Thomas Dixon's popular novel, *The Clansman,* the film valorized Klansmen for redeeming the post-war South after bestial black Republicans used their political power to terrorize white women and humiliate white men. The President hosted a private White House screening of the film in February of 1915, after which he reportedly remarked: "It is like writing history with lighting. And my only regret is that it is all so terribly true."[116]

Wilson screened *Birth of Nation* less than a year prior to inviting the Jubilees to sing at the White House. This raises an obvious question: how did Wilson reconcile his conservative views about race with the praise he bestowed upon the Jubilees? While there is no way to determine his internal justification, it stands to reason that Wilson did not find the Jubilees at odds with his belief in white supremacy. Just as Wilson took no issue identifying himself as a Progressive who supported segregation, he had no qualms appreciating jubilee music while validating the demoralizing portrayal of blacks in *Birth of a Nation*.

Wilson's position of authority and civic responsibility marks him as an easy target for criticism, but his racial views speak to the broader appeal of jubilee music throughout the age of Jim Crow. Because jubilee music presented blacks as pious, sympathetic beings, it did not challenge the white viewer's position of racial authority. While there is

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[116] Ibid., 144-145; The legitimacy of this comment is debated by historians. Some are convinced that Wilson said it, while skeptics suggest that Thomas Dixon fabricated the comment to publicize *Birth of a Nation*. In either case, Wilson never denied ownership of the quote, and he confirmed his approval of the film by writing a note of congratulations to Griffith the following month. For specifics about the debate see Gary Gerstle's *American Crucible: Race and Nation in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 121.

no doubt that many spectators were genuinely moved by Jubilee performances, it is also undeniable that renditions of slave songs conjured paternalistic fantasies that disarmed white fears of unruly Negroes—much like the ones attempting to ravish white women in Griffith's film. As the previous press references demonstrate, these fantasies were not invented in the twentieth century. Commercial black spirituals fetishized slave culture from its very inception. However, these tropes took on new purpose at the onset of the Jim Crow era when mob violence, race riots, and black civil protests incited anxiety about the future of American race relations. The Jubilees' nostalgic "slave songs" offered an alternate reality that allowed whites to view blacks in a manner they found acceptable, even comforting.[117]

Behind the Scenes

The public image and reception of the Jubilees remained largely static throughout the troupe's fifty year tenure, but the singers' individual lives were far less congruent. The men and women who left Fisk in 1871 experienced a different set of daily struggles and feats than later generations of Jubilees. However, the Jubilee singers' public persona obscured differences between troupes and individual members. This pretense of continuity was, in large part, a premeditated commercial strategy. Jubilees touring during the twentieth century naturally drew upon the popularity of their predecessors to attract a similar cult following.

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[117] For detailed accounts of race relations and racial violence during the early twentieth century see: Leon F. Litwack, *Trouble in the Mind: Black Southerners in the Age of Jim Crow* (New York: Knopf, 1998); Kida E. Williams, *They Left Great Marks On Me: African American Testimonies of Racial Violence from Emancipation to World War I* (New York: New York University Press, 2012); Gregory Mixon, *The Atlanta Riot: Race, Class, and Violence in a New South City* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2005); Charles L. Lumpkins, *American Pogrom: The East St. Louis Race Riot and Black Politics* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2008).

A broadside announcing an upcoming Jubilee performance in 1901 exemplified this tactic. The advertisement included a section titled "Their History" in which current Fisk President, J.G. Merrill, highlighted the original troupe's achievements. Transitioning to the work of the contemporary group, he claimed that "this new company has been formed as the successors of the Original Fisk Jubilee Singers." Merrill further tied the 1901 company to the past in another section titled "Their Songs":

> They are unique and characteristic folk songs of their race…. They are being improvised under the exciting experiences of revivals and in times of distress and sorrow now just as they had been all along during the past two hundred years. They are a distinct musical contribution by the Negro race in the United States, both in word and music, and they have a sweetness and a charm, a weirdness and a pathos that have never been excelled.

Merrill's promotion of jubilee music demonstrated how Fisk administrators used the legacy of the original troupe and slave imagery to legitimize later iterations of the singers. Merrill indirectly referenced current obstacles besetting the "Negro race" when he mentioned that the songs "*are being improvised* under the exciting experiences of revivals and in times of *distress and sorrow*…" However, the second half of his comment "… *now*, just as they as they *had been all along*," anchored the Jubilees to a tragic past spanning hundreds of years. Merrill's statement implicitly suggested that southern blacks naturally revert to the collective experience of slavery to express themselves artistically. Even artists living forty years after emancipation performed under the abiding shadow of slavery.

Masking individuality to exalt a collective black sound was not only an effective advertising tactic, but a conscious part of the jubilee aesthetic. Musicologist Sandra Graham suggests that the troupe's first director, George White, meticulously engineered the group's signature blended sound. Singers reported being constantly drilled by White

to control and articulate their voices so uniformly as to create the illusion of a single voice.[118]

Maggie Porter, one of White's most gifted students, recalled going over the music again and again "till Mr. White says 'good' and we know that it is perfect." She claimed that even the slightest deviation from White's vision resulted in hours of tedious practice: "Perhaps it was simply an accent upon a single word; sometimes it was simply to breathe that word, so soft and pure one might think it the voice of angels."[119] Another Jubilee, Georgia Gordon, corroborated Maggie Porter's depiction of White's rigid rehearsal style: "He would keep us singing them all day until he was satisfied that we had every soft or loud passage to suite his fastidious taste."[120] White's relentless coaching did not go unnoticed. Many reviewers commented on the blended tonality of the Jubilees. One critic made an explicit reference to the homogeny of the group, claiming: "The charm of their music does not depend upon individual voices. In their singing the voices are so beautifully blended that individuality is nearly lost."[121]

Though the reviewer found "charm" in the singers' loss of individuality, perhaps a more pressing matter is what was lost in the absence of individual identities on stage. For the white spectator, the uniformity of the troupe made it easier to essentialize the black experience and project paternalistic fantasies onto the performers. Displays of individuality would only disrupt the auditor's ability to associate the singers' voices with

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[118] Sandra J. Graham, "The Fisk Jubilee Singers and the Concert Spiritual," 230.
[119] Maggie Porter Cole to Andrew J. Allison, 26 September 1924, Box 1, Folder 11, Jubilee Singers Archives, 1858-1924, Franklin Library Special Collections and Archives, Fisk University.
[120] Georgia Gordon Taylor, "Reminiscences of the Jubilee Singers," *Fisk University News*, October 5, 1911.
[121] *Manchester Courier*, January 13, 1874. As quoted in Sandra J. Graham's "The Fisk Jubilee Singers and the Concert Spiritual," 230.

"the lilting Negro melodies so familiar to the Southern ear." [122] These regressive fantasies hindered the mobility of black southerners as they discouraged spectators from viewing blacks as modern contributors to society who deserved social equality and political rights.

Though jubilee music perpetuated troubling images of black southerners, the original troupe's $150,000 contribution to Fisk complicates this narrative. Without the talent and labor of eleven individual singers: Ella Sheppard, Maggie Porter, Jennie Jackson, Minnie Tate, Eliza Walker, Thomas Rutling, Benjamin Holmes, Isaac Dickerson, Mable Lewis Imes, Loudin Fredrick, and Georgia Gordon, Fisk University would not have survived as a wellspring of black intellectualism. These students' sacrifices and personal experiences on tour should not be overlooked or underestimated. Though the singers presented themselves as a collective representation of the emancipated slave, they were much more than the sum of their parts.

Figure 18: Jubilee Singers, early 1872
Singers from left to right: Eliza Walker, Benjamin Holmes, Thomas Rutling, Ella Sheppard, Maggie Porter, Jennie Jackson, Isaac Dickerson, Greene Evans (left the troupe after the first tour), and Minnie Tate. Singers not pictured joined the troupe during or after the first tour.
Jubilee Singers, Fisk University, Nashville, Tenn. Photograph. American Missionary Association, c. 1872. From Library of Congress: *Carte de visite photographs from the Gladstone Collection*.

[122] *Pittsburgh Gazette Times*, 1917.

Poor facilities and low wages drove Fisk to the brink of collapse in 1870. The make-shift dormitories fashioned out of old army barracks were in a severe state of disrepair. Ella Sheppard recalled that "Many a night in the '68 and 69'… the wind whistled around and groaned so fearfully that we trembled in horror in our beds, thinking the sounds were the cries of lost spirits of the soldiers who had died in them."[123] On a more urgent note, Sheppard added that "there was no money for food, much less repairs. Many a time special prayer was offered for the next meal."[124] In light of these and other privations, AMA officials prepared to deem Fisk a failed experiment and close the school, but teachers and students pushed the administration to consider alternative means of funding.

George White offered a novel solution. His choral group could travel to the North and "sing the money out of the hearts and pockets of people."[125] AMA officials hesitated to accept White's plan as they did not support investing already limited funds into a risky commercial venture. Without AMA backing, White was forced to drain the university's treasury and ask for personal loans to cover the startup costs of the first tour. On October 6, 1871, the company took to the road with what little money White could muster, uncertain of what the future held for its members and the university they left behind.[126]

The first leg of the tour was met with more disappointment than success. The singers barely met the cost of traveling expenses, leaving no money to spare for Fisk. In addition to financial woes, the Jubilees faced prejudicial treatment. Ella Sheppard recounted: "Burden's grew and our strength was failing under the ill treatment at hotels,

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[123] Ella Sheppard , "Historical Sketches of the Jubilee Singers," *Fisk University News*, n.d., 45.
[124] Ibid.
[125] Marsh, *The Story of the Jubilee Singers*," 14.
[126] Richardson, *A History of Fisk*, 25-26.

on railroads, poorly attended concerts, and ridicule."[127] Mable Lewis Imes recalled an incident of flagrant racism when the singers sought accommodations in Elizabeth, New Jersey. The proprietor of a boarding house welcomed the singers, but his wife did not take kindly to serving black patrons. On a free Sunday evening, a few of the singers gathered in the parlor to sing around the piano. While they were singing, Imes heard "a great scuffling over our heads… and there at the head of the stairs was Mr. Proprietor tying Mrs. Proprietor with a clothes line to keep her upstairs, because she said, 'I'm going to turn those niggers out of my house. I'm not going to have them pawing on my piano.'"[128]

The singers suffered these types of indignities during their first tour, but such episodes reportedly lessened over time. According to AMA agent J.B.T. Marsh who accompanied the troupe, "the prejudice against color… which was so prevalent and powerful as to make those insults common in their first year's work, was so broken down that they were quite unfrequent in their travels three years afterwards." Further highlighting the positive shift in the troupe's reception, Marsh reported that, "people who would not sit in the same church-pew with a Negro, under the magic of their song were able to get new light on questions of social equality."[129] The "magic" Marsh mentioned certainly referred to the emotional power of slave songs, but the company did not entertain audiences with these spirituals from the onset. Contrary to the popular perception that slave songs were spontaneously inspired, performing spirituals for profit

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[127] Ella Sheppard , "Historical Sketches of the Jubilee Singers," 46.
[128] Maggie Porter Cole, "The Jubilee Singers on the Ocean and in Europe," *Fisk University News*, 20 September, 1911, 33.
[129] Marsh, *The Story of the Jubilee Singers,* 18. Marsh's account should be read with caution. While the singers did gain more acceptance and respectability in later tours, the audience's willingness to engage "questions of social equality" is likely exaggerated. The appeal of jubilee music was its racial distinctiveness which undercut conceptions of innate human equality.

was a crafted decision that evolved over the course of the company's first tour in direct response to consumer demand.

During the first couple of months on tour, the singers performed what they referred to as "white man's music"—traditional hymns, ballads, and patriotic folk songs.[130] Though the troupe had rehearsed slave songs in the privacy of their practice hall, they were not part of the company's initial repertoire. Several of the singers shared Ella Sheppard's hesitation to perform the songs in public, believing them to be too intimately tied to slavery and reminiscent of "the things to be forgotten."[131] Despite the singers' reluctance, White encouraged them to perform the spirituals, fearing that the troupe would never turn a profit if it did not offer patrons a novel experience that separated them from common minstrels. After months of persuasion, Sheppard reported that the singers finally agreed to White's request: "Gradually our hearts were finally open… and we began to appreciate the wonderful beauty and power of our songs."[132] This newfound appreciation did not diminish the level of work that went into preparing the music. Sheppard claimed that learning the slave songs "demanded much mental labor, and to prepare them for public singing required much rehearsing."[133]

The troupe began incorporating two or three spiritual numbers into their standard set of nineteen songs. It quickly became evident that the audience strongly preferred the "slave inspired" melodies, and soon, the ratio of "white man's music" to slave songs on the program reversed. The revamped program, coupled with the endorsement of famous

[130] Gordon, "Reminiscences of the Jubilee Singers," 28.
[131] Sheppard, "Historical Sketches of the Jubilee Singers,"43
[132] Ibid., 48
[133] Ibid.

minister and lecturer, Rev. Henry Ward Beecher, also marked the reversal of the troupe's fortune.[134]

After Beecher heard the singers perform in December 1871, he incited interest in their music from his pulpit. He also sent letters of support to churches and other potential performance venues to publicize the company. One such letter read, "They will charm any audience… they make their mark by giving the 'spirituals' and plantation hymns as only they can sing them who know how to keep time to a master's whip. Our people have been delighted."[135] Beecher's delight was shared by many who trusted his endorsement. His approval validated the singers as true stewards of Christianity and sanctioned their music as a wholesome form of entertainment. Following Beecher's lead, prominent ministers across the Northeast invited the troupe to perform for their congregations, netting the singers $20,000 in the last three months of their tour. [136] In addition to this sum, spectators who wanted to personalize their generosity provided Fisk with gifts. As Sheppard recalled: "Gifts of all kinds poured in daily for use at Fisk—books, furnishings of many kinds, silverware for our boarding hall, clocks, apparatus and money to furnish recitation rooms, bed rooms, etc. The great bell with names of the singers cast upon it… came from Connecticut."[137]

Having fully committed to bringing spirituals to the public stage, White decided his choral group needed a name that befit the new genre. According to Sheppard, it was after a long night of prayer when a stroke of inspiration struck White. "Next morning Mr. White met us with a glowing face…'Children,' he said, "it shall be Jubilee Singers in

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[134] Ibid., 47-48.
[135] Marsh, *The Story of the Jubilee Singers,* 30.
[136] Anderson, "*Tell Them We're Sing for Jesus,"* 51.
[137] Sheppard, "Historical Sketches of the Jubilee Singers," 48

memory of the Jewish year of Jubilee."[138] From this point forward, commercial black spirituals bore the name jubilees, and the company of eleven students —now branded the "Fisk Jubilee Singers"—worked tirelessly to craft a performance style that captivated audiences far and wide, shaping the careers of successive Jubilees and imitation artists alike.

Coda

The fiscal value of jubilee music for the southern black community is undeniable. Fisk's ability to continue educating students depended on the Jubilees and their diligent work. The significance of keeping Fisk in operation is made all the more apparent in light of the curriculum offered at the university. Unlike industrial trade schools that tethered blacks to manual labor, Fisk never substituted "hands for brains" as a solution to economic or social disparity.[139] Fisk educators believed that a traditional liberal arts education would help prepare the rising generation of blacks to address modern problems. By educating blacks in a similar modality to whites, Fisk hoped to graduate a class of black intellectuals that would lead the race out of poverty and ignorance and into a modern existence.

While Fisk was very much invested in fostering a modern consciousness in the minds of developing Fiskites, the administration, faculty, and students, refused to pander to every opportunity born from modernity. Though vocational training had the potential to provide economic security, the value of this security was not worth the cost of becoming a cog in the industrial machine. Ironically, the lynchpin that supported Fisk's effort to resist industrial education in support of black intellectualism was the Jubilee

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[138] Ibid., 47- 48.

[139] W.E.B. Dubois referred to industrial education as a "substitution of hands for brains" in the speech he delivered to Fisk University graduates in 1908. Du Bois, "Galileo Galilei," 26.

Singers and their "weird," "plaintive" melodies. The inspiration for these songs was not wildly spontaneous or bubbling from a collective slave experience, but one that was consciously constructed to support southern blacks in an increasingly modernized world.

In addition to advancing the mission of Fisk, the Jubilee tours also engendered a shift of consciousness in the men and women who identified as Fisk Jubilee Singers. Several members experienced an unprecedented sense of liberation while traveling through Europe. Reflecting on the Jubilees' performance for Queen Victoria in 1872, Maggie Porter stated that "we felt… that we were having our first taste of real freedom, where a man was 'a man for a' that and a' that.'"[140]

Touring through Europe also had a lasting impact on Georgia Gordon: "As my mind goes back, it seems but yesterday when we were introduced to the wonderful sights of the Old World. I could go on writing of the beautiful things we saw, of the gracious and kindly words spoken to us, of the welcoming into the homes of the best people of England."[141] Gordon recalled anxiously waiting to read the morning newspapers for reviews of the previous night's performance. One article Gordon found especially flattering reported that "Mable Lewis and Georgia Gordon could pass as fair English belles in any drawing room, and Minnie Tate as coming from the south of France."[142] The reviewer deemed Gordon, Lewis, and Tate "fair," not in their own right, but because they supposedly met European standards of beauty. While the comment can be justly tied

[140] Maggie Porter Cole, "The Jubilee Singers on the Ocean and in Europe," *Fisk University News,* 20 September, 1911, 34. Maggie Porter's quote "where a man was 'a man for a' that and a' that" referenced Robert Burn's 1795 poem, "A Man's A Man For A' That," which centers on the inherent equality of all mankind.
[141] Gordon, "Reminiscences of the Jubilee Singers,"30.
[142] Ibid., 29.

to assumptions of white supremacy, it also represented a degree of societal acceptance and respectability that Gordon could hardly have hoped for at home.

Two singers, Isaac Dickerson and Thomas Rutling, remained in Europe after their careers as Jubilees. Dickerson left the troupe after the second campaign to study ministry in Edinburgh, while Rutling stayed in Europe after the Jubilees disbanded in 1878 to pursue a solo music career.[143] Reflecting on his life in Europe, Rutling recalled: "My sojourn in Switzerland, where I learned French, was the happiest of my life; Germany was polite, and Italy was charming." Finding life as a musician to be too taxing, Rutling eventually took a more stable position as a music teacher at a British academy in 1891—a position he held for fifteen years.[144]

While Europe offered temporary deliverance to some singers and a permanent refuge for others, Ella Sheppard focused her energy on confronting issues at home. Following her Jubilee career, Sheppard used her celebrity as a platform to discuss contemporary inequities facing black Americans—particularly women. Partnering with the AMA, Sheppard published pamphlets, presented papers, and delivered speeches and lectures about combating racial injustice until her death at age 63 in 1914. She was an active member of the National Federation of Afro-American Women, a founding member of the National Association for Colored Women, and continued to maintain close ties to Fisk by training later iterations of the Fisk Jubilees.[145]

A speech printed in the *American Missionary* in January 1889 conveyed Sheppard's guiding philosophy about race, gender, and education. The speech, titled

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[143] Graham, "The Fisk Jubilee Singers and the Concert Spiritual," 239, 302.
[144] Thomas Rutling, "My Life Since Leaving The Jubilee Singers," *Fisk University News*, 22 September 1911, 36.
[145] Anderson, "*Tell Them We're Sing for Jesus,"* 204-207.

"Needs of Colored Women and Girls" opened by discussing the trauma black women suffered under the "iniquitous system" of slavery:

> No human lip can tell the story of that dark night that has left its impress upon the habits, custom, and life of a whole race of people. The cruelest results of that iniquitous system fell heaviest upon the colored woman. From childhood, no matter how favorably situated, she was liable to become the doomed victim of the grossest outrage… Swayed body, mind and spirit, by a master class who found it necessary to close every avenue of intelligence in order to accomplish his fiendish purpose, this creature, made in the image of God, was often taught that there was no God of justice for her.[146]

Sheppard then transitioned to the current plight of black women in the United States:

> How have they fared since Freedom? Have they had a fair chance in the race of life? No. They have met caste-prejudice, the ghost of slavery, at every step of their journey during these years of freedom. They have been made to feel that they are a separate species of the human family. The phrases "Your people" and "Your place," do not so much designate their race identity, as the fixed status in the sisterhood of races…. It has colored everything they have to do. Their place, like the ebony of their skin, is a dark place.[147]

After describing the obstacles beleaguering black women in the closing decade of the nineteenth century, Sheppard offered what she believed to be the only logical solution: education.

> It is said that "the hand rocks the cradle, rules the world." It matters not whether that hand is white or black, but it does matter whether that hand be intelligent or ignorant…. My first introduction into an intelligent idea of practical Christianity was at Fisk University…. Such schools furnish potent object lessons; such are the factors of the problem in answer to the question of how to meet the needs of colored girls and women."[148]

Ella Sheppard's words, both evocative and boldly progressive, demonstrated the significance of her travels as a Jubilee *and* the training she received at Fisk. In the same speech, Sheppard referenced the time she spent in Europe: "My five years' experience in

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[146] Mrs. G.W. Moore (Ella Sheppard), "Needs of Colored Women and Girls," *American Missionary* (January 1889): 22.
[147] Ibid., 23.
[148] Ibid., 24.

Europe as a Jubilee Singer gave me a taste of the sweets of true womanhood, unfettered by caste-prejudice and by a low estimation of my position."[149] The treatment she received abroad clearly shaped her advocacy at home. However, she did not cite European progressivism or worldly travels as a solution to modern race issues. Sheppard urged women to attend Fisk.

Though Ella Sheppard became the most vocal Jubilee to engage in public discourse about racial inequality, all members of the company undoubtedly encountered similar difficulties. The singers experienced liberation abroad, but the Southland that most returned to was slipping deeper into the clutch of Jim Crow. The singers responded to these challenges in ways that reflected both their personal experiences on tour and their ties to the community of Fisk. The individual development of the Jubilee Singers personifies the mission of the university and reveals that people ultimately embodied the force of racial uplift fostered by Fisk.

[149] Ibid., 23

EPILOGUE: MINSTRELS MEET JUBILEES

On April 4, 1916, The Fisk Jubilee Singers performed for Savannah's black community at the First African Baptist Church. The company had recently reorganized under Fisk professor John W. Work after a thirteen year hiatus, and the troupe aimed to attract the patronage of both black and white audiences. Though pared down to a sextet, the troupe's repertoire featured renditions of the "Negro folk music" that launched the original singers to fame. The headline and ad below announced the upcoming concert to *Savannah Tribune* readers four days before the singers arrived.

FISK SINGERS
HERE TUESDAY

WILL APPEAR AT F. A. B. CHURCH, FRANKLIN SQUARE

Famous Singers Who Recently Sang Before President Woodrow Wilson Will Probably be Greeted with Packed House.

Figure 19: "Fisk Singers Here Tuesday"
Savannah Tribune, April 1, 1916

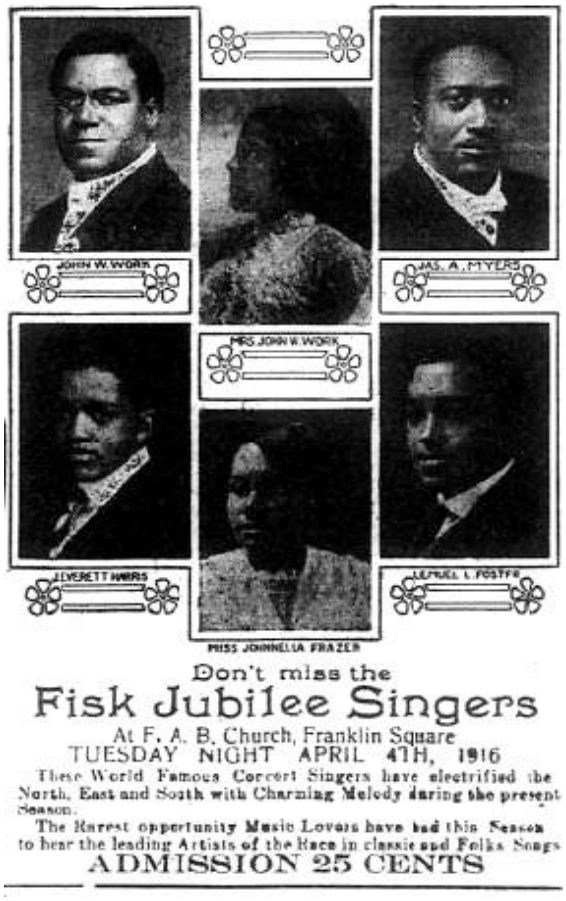

Figure 20: "Don't Miss the Fisk Jubilee Singers"
Savannah Tribune, April 1, 1916

Though it would be telling to learn how black Savannahians reviewed the troupe's performance, if at all, the two issues of the *Savannah Tribune* that followed the concert cannot be recovered. However, the article following the headline "Fisk Singers Here Tuesday" did offer an estimate of the number of patrons expected to attend the performance, reporting that "nearly a thousand tickets have found their way into the hands of purchasers." The article also hinted at the caliber of entertainment patrons expected from the performance: "Local lovers of genuinely beautiful and highly entertaining music will have one of the rarest privileges of recent years when the Fisk Jubilee Singers appear here Tuesday night. A more celebrated aggregation of Negro singers than these has not been heard in this city in the past score or more years." This article offers only a limited view of the black reception of the singers in Savannah, but its focus on the talent of the singers—rather than their emotive power—is striking. The author described the singers as "highly trained" —the very antithesis of the descriptors used by the white press to characterize the singers during the same period.

While black Savannahians may have subjected jubilees, minstrels, and vaudeville performers to a similar standard of talent, the Jubilees sought separation from minstrel artists. The troupe's very name "Jubilee Singers" was born out of a sense of urgency to distinguish the group from minstrels. Agent Marsh recalled that before the troupe settled on a name, they were commonly referred to as "Negro Minstrels," or as one Cincinnati paper reported: "a band of negro minstrels who call themselves Colored Christian Singers."[150] The "Jubilee" branding signaled White's effort to distance the singers from

[150] Marsh, *The Story of the Jubilee Singers*, 26.

the negative connotations associated with minstrelsy while validating the troupe's spiritual mission.[151]

Commentary from contemporary intellectuals, both black and white, suggested that the company was successful in distinguishing its image from that of minstrel performers among the educated public. Mark Twain, an avid spectator of both minstrel shows and jubilee concerts, expressed his fondness for both styles of performance, but he considered minstrel and jubilee music distinct art forms. In reference to minstrelsy, he remarked in his autobiography that "if I could have the nigger-show back again, in its pristine purity and perfection, I should have but little further use for opera. It seems to me that to the elevated mind and the sensitive spirit the hand-organ and the nigger-show are a standard and a summit to whose rarefied altitude the other forms of musical art may not hope to reach."[152]

When Twain spoke about the Jubilee Singers in a letter to London publisher, Tom Hood, his tone was decidedly different:

> I think these ladies & gentlemen make eloquent music—& what is as much to the point, they reproduce the true melody of the plantations, & are the only persons I ever heard accomplish this on the public platform. The so-called "negro minstrels" simply mis-represent the thing; I do not think they ever saw a plantation or ever heard a slave sing… one must have been a slave himself in order to feel what that life was & so convey the pathos of it in the music.[153]

Twain appreciated both genres for their entertainment value, but he believed the Jubilee Singers represented the authentic slave experience. He further distinguished the singers

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[151] Anderson, "*Tell Them We're Sing for Jesus,"* 40, 44.
[152] Mark Twain, *Mark Twain's Own Autobiography* (1906), ed. by William L. Andrews (Madison: Wisconsin University Press, 1990), 175.
[153] Samuel Langhorne Clemens to Tom Hood and George Routledge and Sons, 10 March 1873, Hartford, Conn. (UCCL 00886). In Mark Twain Project Online. Berkeley: University of California Press. 2007. http://www.marktwainproject.org/xtf/view?docId=letters/UCCL00886.xml;style=letter;brand=mtp, accessed May 6, 2015.

by referring to them as "ladies & gentlemen" who "make eloquent music"—a stark contrast to his use of the term "nigger-show" to reference minstrelsy.

W.E.B. Du Bois also viewed minstrel and jubilee music as fundamentality different. But, unlike Twain, Du Bois had little appreciation for minstrels and felt that they detracted from the sanctity of black spirituals. In an essay published in *Souls of Black Folk* titled, "Sorrow Songs," Du Bios described his personal connection to jubilee songs during his time at Fisk University:

> They came out of the South unknown to me, one by one, and yet at once I knew them as of me and mine. Then in after years when I came to Nashville I saw the great temple builded of these songs tower over the pale city. To me Jubilee Hall seemed ever made of the songs themselves, and its bricks were red with the blood and dust of toil. Out of them rose for me morning, noon, and night, bursts of wonderful melody, full of the voices of my brothers and sisters, full of the voices of the past.[154]

Du Bois further detailed the threat minstrel parodies posed to the integrity of jubilee music, stating that "caricature has sought again to spoil the quaint beauty of the music, and has filled the air with many debased melodies which vulgar ears scarce know from the real." Viewing "sorrow songs" as "the articulate message of the slave to the world," Du Bois believed that the music challenged the pervasive myth that blacks living under the system of slavery were carefree and happy. The songs, he explained, "are the music of an unhappy people, of the children of disappointment; they tell of death and suffering and unvoiced longing toward a truer world, of misty wonderings and hidden ways." To lampoon these songs was to strip them of their inherent power and purpose.[155]

The general viewing public also commented on the differences they perceived between minstrel and jubilee artists. When the Fisk Jubilees toured London in 1924,

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[154] Du Bois, *Souls of Black Folk: Essays and Sketches* (Chicago: A. C. McClurg & Co., 1903), 250-251.
[155] Ibid., 258.

several press dispatches mentioned preceding "imitation" acts that failed to stir the audience like the Jubilees. *The London Era* reported:

> Jubilee Singers from Nashville, Tennessee, are here to show us how Negro spirituals should be sung. We have had all sorts of "interpretations" of these traditional songs ranging from the serious to the flippant, and we have accepted them with, more or less, open arms. But singers will find us more critical in the future, for now we know. Mr. James A. Myers and his party have not only delighted us; they have taught us; and the right understanding of their racial rhythms and melodies we have gain from them is going to help us detect the spurious.[156]

Echoing this sentiment, a contributor to *The Lady* professed that local spectators "shall [n]ever again be satisfied with 'imitations' now that we have had a taste of the GENUINE ART of the coloured singers."[157] These patrons clearly preferred the Fisk Jubilees to minstrel and vaudeville performers who imitated spirituals, but the comparison alone suggests that jubilee music bled over into other contemporary music styles by the early twentieth century.

Though the Jubilees did establish a distinct genre, their attempts to maintain a rigid boundary between jubilee music and minstrelsy became increasingly difficult as a multitude of artists began to perform and repurpose their music. Some artists were more or less "copycats" who fashioned their style of performance after the Jubilees. Several of these companies were endorsed by black universities and vocational schools that hoped to ride the jubilee wave to solicit aid for their schools. These groups posed minimal threat to the jubilee image pioneered by Fisk.[158]

Imitation groups under private management presented a more acute problem. Without the reputation of a university to uphold, many private companies began to

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[156] *London Era*, 1924; no exact date unknown, tour began in June.
[157] *The Lady* (London), 1924; exact date unknown, tour began in June.
[158] Graham, "The Fisk Jubilee Singers and the Concert Spiritual," 309-313.

straddle the line between jubilee music and minstrelsy. Singers billed as "jubilees," began incorporating minstrel tropes in their performances by wearing slave costumes, playing banjos, and hamming up their southern dialect. A number of copycat groups even attempted to mislead patrons into thinking they were actually paying to see the Fisk Jubilee Singers. A company that adopted the name "The Original Nashville Students" was among these swindling troupes who hoped a mnemonic tie to the Fisk Jubilees would entice customers to attend their performances (see figures 20 and 21). [159]

Figure 20: The Original Nashville Students (1) *Rusco and Holland present the Original Nashville Students in mighty union with Gideon's Big Minstrel Carniva*. Lithograph. Cincinnati; New York: U.S. Printing Co., c. 1899. From Library of Congress:*Minstrel poster collection.*

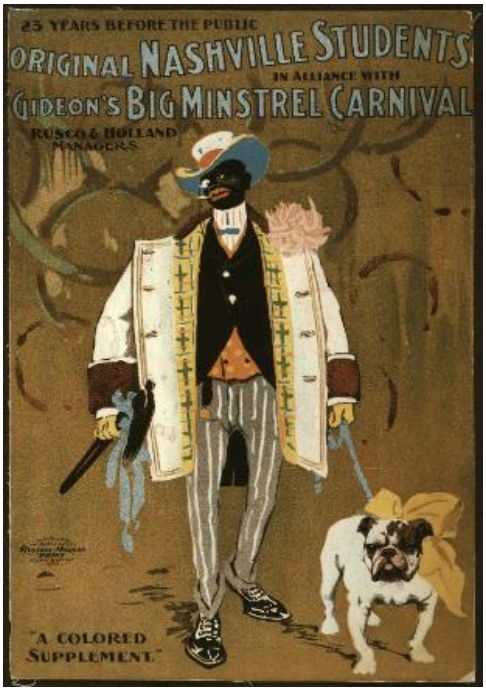

Figure 21: The Original Nashville Students (2) *Original Nashville Students in alliance alliance with Gideon's Big Minstrel Carnival.* Lithograph. Cincinnati; New York: U.S. Printing Co., c. 1899 From Library of Congress: *Minstrel poster collection.*

The "jubilee craze," in all its splintered forms, ballooned into an industry that could no longer be monopolized or controlled by Fisk. The expansion of the genre was a

[159] Ibid., 333-336.

disturbing reality for the Fisk community who took pride in preserving the songs' original integrity. J.A. Myers, director of the Fisk Jubilees in 1922, lamented that the Negro spiritual "has an appealing rhythm and melody, as well as naiveté of text, which open it to mal-usage. Many singers realize this and have taken advantage of these qualities by making them into 'humorous' songs, which they are not, and which is entirely against their spirit."[160] Maggie Porter expressed similar concerns about the present state of "old plantation songs" in a letter addressed to Fisk's Alumni Secretary in 1934. Now approaching 81 years of age, Porter stated:

> I sometimes try to listen in as some so-called Jubilee singers jig through one of our beloved melodies and leave the room with a sad heart. The situation of our parents as they tried to tell God their troubles cannot, it seems, be felt or expressed by most groups who attempt to show the world what Negro melodies are. It ends with my leaving the living room to return to my own quite, silent place where I cannot hear, to my mind, sacrilege."[161]

In spite of the harsh judgements leveled against "so-called Jubilees" in the twentieth century, these performers carved out a marketable niche for themselves. Though many critics felt that these performers achieved success at the expense of the Jubilees, the intersection of the two genres increased employment opportunities for blacks and diversified outlets of artistic expression available to black southerners.

Jubilee music certainly offered a different form of entertainment than the acts billed at black-owned theaters like the Pekin, but who is to say one is more authentic than the other? Jubilees presented themselves as a collective expression of slavery and emancipation to fund black higher education, but the singers' individual histories and experiences reveal that this public persona over-simplified complex beings. The

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[160] J.A. Myers, quoted in "Respect Spirit of Negro Song, Is Plea of Fisk Leader," *New York City Musical America*, July 15, 1922.
[161] Maggie Porter Cole to Andrew Allison, 28 September 1934, Jubilee Singers Archives.

performers and patrons that frequented the Pekin were no less dynamic. Black minstrels and vaudeville performers also sought validation for their art and avenues for advancement.

The two case studies presented in the preceding chapters emphasize the cultural power of southern black performance art and the ways in which this art has been experienced, shaped, and repurposed through acts of transference. Both studies demonstrate that performance is not a static or finite expression, but an experience that responds to social needs and cultural shifts—an experience that is first filtered through the lens of the performer, and then once more, through the lens of the spectator. Jubilee and minstrel performances, though problematic in specific ways, created a space for artists and patrons to experiment with new conceptions of what it meant to be a black and southern in the modern world.

More scholarship and thoughtful research is needed to provide a fuller picture of how modes of black performance engaged questions of modernity in the South. My thesis project makes a modest contribution to this end by analyzing two performance outlets and the communities that supported them. Though limited in scope, I hope my work calls attention to a need for scholars to consider the contributions of black southern performers and recognize their roles as producers, consumers, and critics of representations of race on the public stage. This inclusion is a worthy aspiration that can only enrich our understanding of what it meant to be a “New Negro” in the “New South.”

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