Negotiating spectacle: Florence Mills, Josephine Baker & Adelaide Hall, transnational black women's expressive culture 1920-1935


Negotiating Spectacle highlights three African American women vaudeville entertainers as part of the trans-Atlantic and transnational genre of black expressive culture to demonstrate the ways in which the performance of ethnographic spectacles and the performers of such spectacles became racial and gender signifiers of nationhood and industrial modern movements. This cultural, historical project articulates the relationship between the acts of race and lived race to demonstrate the ways in which theatrical performances of the exotic non-white by African American women during the early twentieth century reiterated colonial ideas of race, sexuality and nation as well as conveyed an early twentieth century Afro-centric feminism. This dissertation comprises five chapters which examine the rise in popularity in Europe and the United States of black women vaudeville performers and their performance in theatrical race spectacles. Following the Introduction, in Chapter One I offer a feminist reading of black vaudeville women and demonstrate the expressive possibilities of performance. In Chapter Two, I theorize the relationship between Josephine Baker's trans-Atlantic success and African American modernity. This chapter also posits a connection between black diasporic aims toward equality and black women's trans-Atlantic and transnational cultural productions. In Chapter Three I demonstrate black uses of commodity culture and feminist articulations of the body. This chapter illuminates the uneasy relationship between black women's expressive culture and African American political and social pursuits toward equality and self determination. Finally, in the Conclusion I revisit the theme of black modernity and discuss the overall theoretical implications of the relationship between transnational race and gender theatrical spectacles and black modernity. This dissertation presents a non-linear historical account of women from varied backgrounds and expands black women's experience beyond geographical and thus theoretical and methodological boundaries of the United States.

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Department of Gender, Women & Sexuality Studies
University of Washington
B110 Padelford Hall, Box 354345
Seattle, WA 98195

Phone: (206) 543-6900
Fax: (206) 685-9555
gwss@uw.edu

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