

“To Help Enlighten Our People”: ‘Theater Folk’ and Stage Advice Columns in the 1920s *Chicago Defender*

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“Attention audience! Especially those of you that are commonly called stage struck,” noted the advice column on the *Chicago Defender*’s Stage Page of November 7, 1925. African American former chorus girl Vivienne Russell, who used the byline “Vivienne,” declared that she had “received a number of letters from girls and boys desirous of going upon the stage. I have answered them personally, however but not in detail. Hence this article ‘Stage Struck.’”¹ Vivienne argued that overall “show business is a good business” for those with “plenty of grit,” but that only the “folks that are endowed with talent” should consider the entertainment industry. After measuring one’s vocal or dance ability against other “Race shows or acts,” Vivienne maintained, select amateur entertainers should “fight for their place” on the stage amid a racially segregated entertainment system.² “Stage Struck” was one of the dozens of such pieces Vivienne addressed to young Black *Defender* readers who sought practical advice on how to successfully enter the vibrant and challenging world of the 1920s professional Black stage.

Between October 1925 and May 1926, vaudevillian Vivienne Gordon Russell wrote the theatrical advice column, “Theater Folks and Theatergoers,” in the *Chicago Defender*, aimed at both entertainment professionals and audience members. When vivid reports of tragedy and turmoil, including chronicles of increased racial violence, new segregation policies, escalating poverty, or criminal exploits, flooded 1920s Black newspaper headlines, entertainment and leisure news could offer readers momentary escape and solace.³ Black newspapers including the *Baltimore Afro-American*, *Pittsburgh Courier*, *New York Amsterdam*

THEATER FOLKS and THEATERGOERS

By VIVIENNE



Vivienne

Figures 1 and 2: Vivienne, “Theater Folks and Theatergoers: Chorus Girls Over the Top,” *Chicago Defender*, 25 October 1925

News, and *Chicago Defender*, often dedicated at least two pages (out of twenty) to national and local Black entertainment occurrences, from discussions of how blues singer Sarah Martin was a “hit in Baltimore” to laments of the separation of the “Crosby and Jackson” comedy team in San Diego.⁴

The importance of the Black press and the *Chicago Defender* specifically in transmitting the narratives of African American lives has been explored in historical, American Studies, and musicology texts over the past two decades.⁵ Likewise, the lives of Black female journalists in the twentieth century have also been chronicled by historians and media studies scholars.⁶ Yet Vivienne’s columns reveal a moment in the *Defender*’s 1920s history where a Black woman entertainer also commanded a space as a Black theater industry journalist. This social history article details Vivienne’s professional background and illuminates the broader historical context of the *Defender*’s “Theater Folks” column. It utilizes Vivienne’s industry experiences to explain her columns’ messages on the mechanics of Black show business, the challenges of respectability politics, her disdain for blackface minstrelsy, and the value of Black entertainment in early-twentieth-century America.⁷ In the absence of biographies, memoirs, or personal correspondence, Vivienne’s professional life was gleaned from census information, city directories, playbills, advertisements, oral histories of Black theater professionals, and, most importantly, the “Theater Folks” articles themselves.

As a Black woman theatrical journalist, amid many male theater columnists published in the *Defender*, Vivienne publicly championed Black entertainment as a method of “racial uplift”—the attempt to challenge racial hostility and negative images of African Americans through Black political, educational, and socio-cultural success.⁸ Black entertainers in the 1920s contended with the same heightened racial tensions and negative depictions of blackness that plagued African Americans more generally, and they often faced critique and ridicule from Black and white conservative communities who viewed the entertainment profession as one that was not suitable for proper ladies and gentlemen. Revealing that many in the Black entertainment world were quite self-conscious about the images of morality they exhibited on stage and off, Vivienne took it as her charge “to help enlighten” her people by redefining notions of stage respectability and demonstrating how the theatrical profession was a worthy and “honest occupation” for African Americans.⁹ In a decade plagued by growing white supremacist violence, Vivienne’s “Theater Folks and Theatergoers” promoted the positive significance of Black entertainment in American society, and furthered New Negro beliefs that the Black theatrical profession was a valuable weapon against racial and gendered injustice.¹⁰

The Vaudevillian, Vivienne Russell

Born in Ohio in 1894, Vivienne (Vivian) Gordon was steeped in the music of the Black Baptist church from an early age. With her widowed mother, Mary Gordon, Vivienne moved to New Rochelle, New York by 1900, where Mrs. Gordon became a faithful member of Bethesda Baptist Church in 1904.¹¹ Vivienne was well acquainted with hymns and church doctrine yet found herself living just miles outside of New York City’s burgeoning Black entertainment scene. Although downtown New York City’s vaudeville theaters hosted individual Black acts, Black musical comedies with stars like Bert Williams, Aida Overton Walker, or S.H. Dudley pushed their way to Broadway, off-Broadway, and uptown to Harlem between 1910 and 1915.¹² Against the “straight-laced rules of the church,” her mother’s “prejudice towards theatrical work,” and beliefs that ragtime songs sent one “straight to the devil,” a nineteen-year-old Vivienne was drawn to these performances and began her career as a chorus girl.¹³ She rose from the ranks as a cast member in all-Black musicals like *Darktown Follies*, produced by J. Leubrie Hill, in 1913, and Will Marion Cook’s *Darkydom* in 1915.¹⁴ Both were early Black musicals that followed the standard pattern of a light-hearted narrative, comedic antics, a dancing chorus, and ragtime music. The musical comedies opened out of state before playing Harlem’s Lafayette Theater—the foundation of Black “big time” theaters.¹⁵ While Vivienne claimed in reference to her dancing that she was “a failure as far as chorus work was concerned,” she remained “in the business” and traveled nationally in vaudeville ensemble acts as a soprano singer.¹⁶



Figure 3: Vivienne Gordon’s early Black variety theater work in the Darktown Follies. “Portrait of J. Leubrie Hill and his famous Dark Town Follies of 1914 and 1915,” Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Photographs and Prints Division, From the New York Public Library.

In 1922, Vivienne married fellow Black vaudevillian Edward “Strawberry” Russell and began another phase of her career. Louisiana-born Ed Russell began his career as a blackface comedian in the 1910s and remained a sought-after vaudeville comedian and musician both as a “single” (solo individual act) and in partnerships until the late 1940s.¹⁷ After marrying, Vivienne continued touring the nation as a single act while Ed and his ever-changing entertainment partner worked in comedy teams.¹⁸ Following Ed’s modest success in the traveling Black musical *Steppin’ High* in late 1924 with Dike Thomas, the Russells partnered on stage and developed their own act.¹⁹ *Chicago Defender* theater critic Billy Tucker praised the new pairing of “Strawberry and Vivienne,” noted that Vivienne was “an asset to any one’s act or show,” and maintained that together they “should be a knockout as a team.”²⁰

Vivienne began her column just as “Strawberry and Viv” became a popular traveling musical comedy act in 1925. She wrote from the road in California, Oregon, Illinois, and New York for many of the same reasons that other vaudevillians wrote to Black newspapers—to let readers know where entertainers

were performing; to communicate how they could be reached during the season in the absence of a stable address; and to hint at backstage antics that fostered audience curiosity and encouraged ticket sales. Strawberry Russell himself wrote to the *Defender*'s theatrical editor Tony Langston in 1924 about the “wonderful business” he did in San Francisco and Los Angeles, and the paper published all Strawberry's details of entertainment life on the West Coast.²¹ Vivienne's “Theater Folks and Theatergoers” attracted readers in a more complex way and demonstrated a willingness to share more than gossip or routing information. In the October 10, 1925 Stage section—in between brief columns that told of performances at Newark's Orpheum Theater and the Washington D.C. wedding of the vaudeville team of Billie Stewart and Susie Martin—Vivienne raised the issue of giving chorus girls “more appreciation” in her first column, “Chorus Girls Over The Top,” and broadened the Black entertainment conversation.²²

The Black Press-Black Arts Partnership

The relationship between Black entertainment and the Black press has deep roots. The *Indianapolis Freeman* had an early starring role as the essential African American theater periodical over the tenure of its 1884 to 1927 run. The weekly newspaper, published by Louis Howland until 1892, and George Knox from 1892 to 1927, dedicated at least two of its eight-page publication to “The Stage.”²³ *Freeman* journalists reported on a variety of entertainment genres including blackface minstrelsy, musical revues, concert bands, and circuses. Readers could explore everything from the early performances of a young Sissieretta Jones (professionally known as the Black Patti) to news of the potential purchase of a new Black theater in Jacksonville, Florida. Although based in Indianapolis, the *Freeman* was a national Black weekly with correspondents who captured the political, economic, and social news of Black America. Columns in the Stage section might be dedicated to the happenings in Cincinnati, New Orleans, Chattanooga, or Detroit at any given moment, connecting a Southern Black population with some of the larger Northern urban sites of African American migration.

The *Freeman* was a foundational model for the successful cooperative efforts of Black theater and Black media. The *Chicago Defender* continued this model and evolved into a long-lasting national repository of Black entertainment happenings. Founded in 1905, the initial *Defender* issues were drafted by founder Robert S. Abbott on Henrietta P. Lee's boarding house table on State Street in Chicago's Southside.²⁴ The *Defender* reached a circulation of 250,000 and a readership of “more than a million” by the 1910s and was sold openly throughout Northern states.²⁵ Pullman porters and traveling entertainers later covertly distributed the paper in virulently racist and strictly segregated Southern states that had banned its sale.²⁶ The *Defender*'s role as a catalyst of the Great Migration, the 1915–1930 geographical shift of urban and rural African Americans from the South to urban North and West, is well told. Abbott's ability to use the newspaper as a connection between Southern and Northern African Americans

is exemplified in the regional coverage of such disparate entertainment groups as the Gee Cleft Singers in Detroit and the Jackson, Mississippi shows of the Silas Green Show.²⁷ “The World’s Greatest Weekly” always had a robust entertainment section, and particularly strengthened its stage and entertainment pages after the end of World War I.²⁸

In 1921, the *Defender* made a direct connection with the Theater Owners Booking Association (T.O.B.A. or Toby Time), a 1920s interracial owned circuit of over one hundred Black-serving variety theaters throughout the Midwest and Southeast United States, upon whose stages Russell would refine her craft. By the mid-1920s, the *Defender* had published nearly three hundred full articles or columns devoted to “Toby Time,” not including the targeted advertisements for the circuit itself, performance reviews, or marketing for individual entertainers.²⁹ More than just routing guides, these pieces were built on the belief that Black entertainment news should combine readers’ desire for “sensationalistic” and “lurid” gossip with an interest in the greater social significance of African Americans in entertainment productions.³⁰

The *Defender*’s entertainment columns were written predominantly by Black male minstrels, vaudevillians, and silent film participants who commented on the latest events throughout the country, whether that be in Kansas City or Los Angeles. Regular columnists included Coy Herndon, Tim Owsley, Charles O’Neal, Dave Peyton, Bill Potter, “Ragtime” Billy Tucker and Salem Tutt Whitney.³¹ Women columnists made occasional appearances in the paper alongside these male journalists and Russell took her place amongst them.³² The “Movie and Stage Department” page of the 1920s included Agnes Johnson, Nora Douglas Holt, and Maude George Roberts. Johnson, “a booster of her dear artist friends,” wrote a brief column that ran from August to October 1925 which primarily focused on how to be strong patrons of Black entertainment. Holt, followed by Roberts, focused on classical music in the column “News of the Music World,” and each wrote for the *Defender* for years.³³ These “Music World” pieces reviewed sacred music recitals, operas, and classical concerts by rising Black professionals. Publisher Robert Abbott believed that classical music was devoid of many of the negative racial or sexual stereotypes prevalent in vaudeville or blues music, and thus was a more appropriate subject for a woman writer than the antics of a vaudeville show.³⁴ Vivienne’s “Theater Folks and Theatergoers” successfully challenged the *Defender*’s custom of publishing male-authored pieces on vaudeville and musical comedies while women’s columns predominantly featured classical recitals and concert music.

Black Women, Respectability, and the Vaudeville Stage

Vivienne directly engaged issues of gender and racial oppression in Black vaudeville theater during the era when the New Negro Woman was on the rise. Historians and Black feminist scholars broadly define New Negro Women as Black women who, between the 1890s and 1930s, fought for racial advance-

ment politically, socially, and intellectually while simultaneously challenging gendered subjugation.³⁵ Vivienne’s fellow columnist S.T. Whitney observed that men historically “set up a standard of conduct by which women must abide or forever be under the ban of disapproval and ostracism. . . .But the new woman no longer stands for the old line of bunk. . . .and they are now asserting their independence.”³⁶ Vivienne infused this New Negro Woman independence into much of her stage advice. Her nearly thirty columns appeared as Black and white entertainment industry leaders expected female performers to succeed in a profession that both encouraged the objectification of women’s sexualized images for profit while particularly criticizing women entertainers’ character and morality. Black women endured an additional level of scrutiny because of their race and the negative connotations associated with Black womanhood. Several articles in the *Chicago Defender* and *Baltimore Afro-American* called attention to Black actresses’ “bobbed hair” and “rouged lips”; championed the newest “It” dancing girls who were not “fat girls with piano legs” or “box ankles”; or lauded medium-brown-complexioned youth in costumes that were not more than “loin clothes or fig leaves.”³⁷ Black press articles also demanded that vaudevillians revitalize acts that relied on overtly sexualized antics and called on “modern actresses” to “come through and come through *clean*” in their new “up to date” first class shows.³⁸

The policing of an entertainer’s moral character echoed a larger turn-of-the-century discussion about acceptable roles for Black women in American society. Many middle-class Black women’s rights advocates like Mary Church Terrell, Fannie Barrier Williams, or Nannie Helen Burroughs were club women who were part of a national movement that sought, in Terrell’s words, to promote “negro womanhood” as “pure and virtuous” in the face of stereotypes about Black female inferiority and their assumed sexual promiscuity.³⁹ In 1904, Chicago-based activist Fannie Barrier Williams wrote to other Black women and warned them about the “evils that menace the integrity of the home, the small vices that are too often mistaken for legitimate pleasures,” like music and theater and other “dangers of city life.”⁴⁰ Decades later activist Nannie Helen Burroughs commanded African Americans “to glorify things of the spirit and keep the things of the *flesh* under control.”⁴¹ Burroughs specifically spoke from a Black Protestant world view that characterized many secular pursuits as ungodly, non-Biblical, and sinful. Yet many other Black progressive leaders discouraged leisure activities like blatantly risqué secular music, dance, or comedy that could potentially increase immorality and vice in Black working-class, largely migrant communities that were already the target of societal scorn.⁴² Terrell, Williams, and other Black club women (many of whose speeches were also covered in the *Defender*) challenged stereotypes of promiscuity and inferiority that had been used to justify the abuse and harassment of Black people since the period of enslavement.⁴³ For example, in 1918 Detroit, the Urban League distributed “Helpful Hints” pamphlets to working-class Southern Black migrants that warned against “using vulgar or obscene language in street cars, streets or public places” or “spending all your

money for pleasure” in order to better assimilate into urban society.⁴⁴ Respectability promoters wanted African Americans to curtail any unseemly behavior to demonstrate that they were spiritually, morally, and intellectually worthy of becoming “full and equal participants in American society.”⁴⁵

The respectability debate followed Black women entertainers onstage soon after they entered the profession. Prior to the late 1870s, white men in blackface, costumed as women, portrayed many female characters in minstrel shows and dramatic productions.⁴⁶ Sam T. Jack cast African American women in the burlesque *The Creole Show* in 1890. As the twentieth century commenced, white theater critics and some African American audience members alike publicly wondered if Black women really belonged on the stage and questioned their skill, wit, and artistry.⁴⁷ Some conservative community members generally characterized all actresses as barely a step above the majority of women who frequented nineteenth-century urban theaters—the paid escorts and roving sex workers of a theater’s third tier.⁴⁸ For example, in New York in 1902, Christian missionaries wrote to the *Freeman* to declare that their field of service was not some distant overseas community, but local Black stages. These missionaries offered Bible classes to combat the “widespread superstition” of “the inherent and *universal wickedness* of stage people, particularly *chorus girls*.”⁴⁹ In a November 1909 *Freeman* column, Black vaudevillian Harry Brown asked, “can girls of our race be moral on the stage?” and again raised the question of whether a theatrical performer could also be a virtuous Black woman.⁵⁰ A reader directly answered Brown in the next month’s *Freeman* and commented that “immoral colored girls” would not be “immoral,” if “colored men of the stage” did not lead them “astray.”⁵¹ This debate in the *Freeman* about whether men or women were more at fault for sensual dancing and pre-marital intimacy was not settled, and the discussion of female morality in Black vaudeville and American society persisted as the 1920s approached.

Vivienne’s Views: The Columns

Cognizant of the greater respectability battles in American society and the many negative perceptions critics held of Black women and Black entertainers, Vivienne used “Theater Folks” to encourage amateur artists to join the stage and to warn them honestly about the obstacles they could encounter. As an industry participant she saw the humor, freedom of expression, and joy that the theatrical arts could bring to African American communities, and many of her articles were meant to further the belief that “stage folks have the wonderful opportunity to help elevate the Race.”⁵² She was conscious of her unique opportunity as “the only female contributor” on the Stage Page and used it to infuse many of her articles with discussions of Black women entertainers and the gendered and raced problems they encountered.⁵³ Tim Owsley viewed Vivienne’s presence as a Stage Page writer as evidence of how “progression” was at work at the *Defender*. For him, “Mrs. Russell” was a fascinating, intelligent woman, “emancipated from

her domestic duties.”⁵⁴ Vivienne used her freedom from the home as a public platform to craft “Vivienne’s Views,” a term she initially used to label the stage advice she disseminated.⁵⁵ She directed much of her advice towards aspiring vaudevillians and performers in “tabs” or tabloid shows, abbreviated musical comedies packaged for road travel.⁵⁶ The bi-weekly columns shifted in specific topic but were arranged thematically on issues including the significance of Black women participants in vaudeville; the challenges of segregated road travel and performance; and the problems of respectability politics, stage vulgarity, and blackface. Taken as a whole “Vivienne’s Views” offered Vivienne’s “plain truth” on bettering conditions for Black theater performers.⁵⁷

In several columns Vivienne emphasized how significant Black female entertainers were to Black traveling show success. She asked theatergoing audiences to suspend their judgments of Black women entertainers and their supposed immorality “to consider how strenuous (female) parts are and how little credit they get.”⁵⁸ A cursory review of the named Black musical acts (or “aggregations” as Vivienne labeled them) of 1924 and 1925 reveals female driven titles like the Broadway Vamps, Brown Beauties, Brown Skin Vamps, Melody Lane Girls, Ollie Burgoyne and Her Darktown Strutters, and Radio Girls, among many others. Advertisers used photographs of a well-dressed female chorus as a featured attraction whose beauty might garner increased ticket sales. 1920s theater advertising from Washington D.C.’s Howard Theater or New York’s Alhambra Theater prominently featured sketches of Black ingenues with bobbed hair or photos of dancers like Celeste Coles, which reinforced how significant female participants were to the heart of the musical format.⁵⁹

In Vivienne’s words the chorus was “the very backbone of our shows” and the “very *source* of the theatrical profession.”⁶⁰ A fellow vaudevillian, dancer Leonard Reed, echoed Vivienne’s descriptions when he recounted how chorus girls could perform up to six shows a day at New York’s Apollo Theater, and that was the “hardest job he’d ever seen for girls.”⁶¹ Vivienne detailed how, despite their importance, chorus girls often rehearsed without pay and worked hours after the headliners and male cast mates had gone, like “little Trojans” with “empty stomachs.”⁶² At the “end of a performance,” many male principal performers “walked off serenely with all the laurels.” To counter this imbalance Vivienne proposed that producers create a “Chorus Night” in which the individual women of the chorus line would be featured for a mini solo “giving girls a higher incentive [to continue] and “more recognition and appreciation.”⁶³ Vivienne believed that an artist who was appreciated for her labor, worked harder for a show’s success, and this higher work ethic was essential as it was “much harder for one of our [Black] shows to make good,” with the obstacles of segregated travel and insufficient economic resources.⁶⁴

Vivienne received many queries about the daily difficulties of the entertainment profession and this became a central theme of her articles. Young readers wanted to know about auditioning, travel, training, and the supposed glamor of stage life. Revealing the popularity of her columns, Vivienne collectively



Figure 4: Example of 1920s Black chorus line. Bonnie Clark. *Unidentified Performers*. Bonnie and Semoura Clark black vaudeville photographs and ephemera, Box 2, Folder 33, Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.

answered letters “from different parts of the United States,” and offered to give direct and personal responses to those who mailed self-addressed envelopes in late 1925.⁶⁵ Because Vivienne had worked in the chorus and in single and double acts in Black and white vaudeville, what readers received were her unvarnished views about life upon the traveling stage.⁶⁶ Politely but directly, she addressed the “stage struck” youth mentioned in this essay’s opening and maintained that:

Show business is a good business for people with ability, plenty of grit, and the backbone to withstand hardships, plus

strength of character. . . [Yet] show work is cruel even for the best of us. . . The public doesn't want to be worried with our troubles. When you go on stage you are there to chase away their troubles, regardless of your own.⁶⁷

Vivienne continued by detailing the harsh conditions of touring and noted that performances occurred after traveling all night and a few hours of “snatched” sleep, if there were any accommodations for “Race folk in town.” In municipalities without facilities for African Americans, entertainers slept on trains, changed costumes in closets, and ate takeout from “unsavory restaurants.” There could be many drawbacks to segregated road travel and as an honest mentor Vivienne felt obligated “to protect the stage struck girls and boys” from any illusions that stage life was easy.⁶⁸

In “Stage Aspirant,” Vivienne further warned against young girls leaving their parents without permission for a “haphazard career” in “show business” as it was not a “certain” or stable industry.⁶⁹ Vivienne’s subsequent articles dealt with the hard work expected of all performers, whether headliners or not. She wrote to the chorus girl in the backline and argued, “don’t imagine that because you’re in the back line you won’t be noticed by the people in the front. Some folks come to the theater for the sole purpose of picking flaws and those people can make you or break you.”⁷⁰ She also discouraged potential performers “without ability” and wrote of the importance of training in dance and music schools with parental support in her “Parent’s Opinion” article from November 1925. Using her mother, Mary Gordon’s, religious misgivings about her own career, Vivienne called out to those “dear parents” to support their children’s efforts. She begged them not to “throw up their hands in horror” at a child’s desire to become an entertainer, but rather to help educate their children about whatever career they might want to pursue, as “early training was the greatest protector from evil and poverty.”⁷¹

Without support and guidance new Black vaudevillians ran the risk of exploitation, sexual harassment, and assault. Black dancer Bessie Dudley recalled that as she attempted to audition for the Gibson Family Troupe in 1923, a piano player only referred to as “Steve” tried to “get fresh.” Steve dragged a thirteen-year-old Dudley “in the alley” behind Baltimore’s Lincoln Theater, but she thankfully was able to run away and avoid sexual assault.⁷² Vivienne warned potential performers of the fraudulent “parasite” producers, the “dapper sheiks, with flowery promises” for whom “sex was the main incentive.” Repeatedly she told her readers to not “be deluded by spectacular notoriety and the glittering lights” of Black traveling theater and to clearly see all of the obstacles littered along the road.⁷³

Even with talent, ability, and training, Black entertainers faced a further obstacle unique to their race—the problem of colorism. Intra-racial color prejudice or the issue of attributing beauty, intelligence, social standing, and power to African Americans with fairer skin and straighter hair because of their closer

proximity to whiteness was an issue that stemmed from the forced divisions fostered during the era of chattel slavery in the Americas. Colorism became even more prominent after Emancipation.⁷⁴ Black club woman Nannie Helen Burroughs noted that “colorphobia” abounded throughout early-twentieth-century social circles, church congregations, and professional institutions for both men and women.⁷⁵ Social clubs might extend invitations to new members based in part on their fairer skin tone, for example. Likewise, colorism was a concern in Black theater.

While colorism affected both female and male entertainers in terms of access to certain industry positions or stereotypical roles onstage, Vivienne addressed instances that particularly plagued Black women. The theatrical ensembles which first featured Black actresses included John Isham’s *Octoroons* (active 1895–1900) and his *Oriental Americans* (1896–1899). The titles themselves capitalized on the mixed race, fair-skinned actresses in the productions’ casts, and audiences seemed to be captivated with the “exotic” looking actresses in Isham’s shows. Well attended, long-running productions that featured light-skinned Black actresses and garnered high receipts only furthered a producer’s desire to continue that format and prioritize light-skinned African American women over darker-skinned women in all-Black musical casts.⁷⁶

Managers and producers’ overt preference for fair-skinned women in 1890s productions continued in many Black vaudeville shows in the 1920s. On April 1, 1922 Charles Turpin, Black owner of St. Louis’s Booker T. Washington Theater and T.O.B.A. board member, vented in the *Defender* that “we could stand a lot more good-looking women in the game. Shapes and faces!” Turpin continued that he could “write volumes about the good-looking women we DON’T see in colored show business. What’s become of ‘em? Let’s have ‘em! Put ‘em in the game!”⁷⁷ A week later Black orchestra leader Benton Overstreet of Philadelphia’s Dunbar Theater vehemently disagreed with Turpin’s comments on women performers. In a letter to the editor on April 8, Overstreet unmasked Turpin’s terminology to reveal that “good-looking” was Turpin’s code for “fair-skinned.” Overstreet shared that worthy Black managers hired good “talent, regardless of color and looks.” The orchestra leader also warned fellow theater staffers that if they failed to hire “your dark women and your browns,” they would not have the best show as talent came in a variety of “colors.”⁷⁸

Vivienne’s views on colorism came somewhere in the middle of Turpin’s desires and Overstreet’s warnings. Her byline photo reveals that Vivienne was a fair-skinned African American entertainer who could have relished her fair-skinned privilege. However, she thought that the colorism debate harmed potential performers, the Black theater world, and Black communities at large. In “False Faces,” Vivienne maintained that blackness and beauty came in “every shade from jet black to real high yellow (fair skinned),” and contended that “color doesn’t make a woman beautiful.” She acknowledged that mixed race and “brown” actresses were “much more appreciated by the white audiences in show business,” and that blackness was used as a costume and a comedic tool

on theater stages.⁷⁹ Vivienne directed much of her practical commentary at Black performers in tab shows that entertained predominantly Black audiences. In one of her earliest columns in 1925, Vivienne concluded that “the prettiest woman” she knew was as “black as cork” and that ugliness (physical and situational) came in “every shade.” In terms of stage makeup, she advocated that women entertainers specifically use shades that enhanced rather than masked natural skin tones so they could present the most polished look. As far as the ideologies that propelled colorism in the theater, Vivienne challenged African American entertainers to disprove the “myth” that blackness equaled humor, a theme she later expanded upon in her blackface minstrelsy discussions.⁸⁰

An even more prevalent theme Vivienne addressed was the challenge of conservative Black communities’ ideas about respectability. In columns like “Commendable Conduct” and “Doing More Than Their Share,” she encouraged entertainers and audience members alike to see Black entertainment as a way to challenge larger societal images of Black inferiority. For Vivienne being respectable on stage meant performing songs, dances, and skits with no profanity or overt crude, sexual, or criminal references. Like many of her Black club woman contemporaries, Vivienne advocated respectability as way of eradicating negative images of “colored entertainers” and promoting racial uplift for women and men. Yet Vivienne’s respectability views did not entail a notion that African Americans should imitate middle-class white behavior to gain acceptance into white society. Nor did it contain a class-based argument that elite African Americans should demonstrate a civilized “genteel performance” at all times and prove their worth and higher social rank by enacting conservative behavior in public and private.⁸¹ Rather, Vivienne believed that African American entertainers should define themselves for themselves. She was angered by cultural appropriation on stage and spoke against white vaudevillians “giving the public the imitation of the Race artist” as blackface minstrels or by mimicking supposed Black mannerisms, dances, and songs. She told Black artists “to be yourself and create something else” aside from plantation stereotypes to garner humor and success.⁸² Vivienne further argued that Black entertainers demonstrated respectability or “commendable conduct” in part by being skilled artists who did their “best at all times,” and exhibited “real desire, energy, and labor” in their craft.⁸³

A discussion of Black economic advancement for theater professionals was also imbedded in Vivienne’s beliefs about respectability. She contended that “respectable” acts garnered employment on both the Black and white stages. As a vaudevillian, Vivienne did not advocate removing all elements of sexual humor or suggestive comedy from vaudeville performance. Rather, in “Stage Vulgarity,” she told potential and current performers that needless “vulgarity was a yoke and burden” to Black entertainers’ success. “Cleaner” acts without the “suggestive songs, sensuous and repulsive dances, and dirty costumes,” Vivienne argued, just might ensure that mainstream stages paid Black entertainers “the same wage” as white entertainers. Reforming current stage acts placed Black artists in a “position to demand” economic equality on any stage.⁸⁴

Vivienne warned Black vaudevillians against sharing their acts' details with white vaudevillians unless they were "paid," for white artists "have proven they can take your own" material and "beat you doing it."⁸⁵ With these statements about appropriation and unpaid service, Vivienne alluded to the white practitioners of blackface and the popular early-twentieth-century "coon shouters"—white women who imitated African American vocal phrasing and mannerisms in comic songs often infused with stereotypical racist imagery. Vivienne implored Black vaudevillians to not give away their "routine of dance for a smile."⁸⁶ Vivienne's critiques echoed the views of Black female vaudevillian entrepreneurs, the Griffin Sisters. Popular performers between the 1890s and 1918, Emma and Mabel Griffin also called out white performers who were paid more than African American artists for the skits and songs they "borrowed" from Black vaudevillians. The Griffins briefly created their own theatrical agency in Chicago in 1913 with the hopes that it might challenge economic discrimination and ensure African Americans "as a race would be equal to the whites" in the theatrical profession in terms of salary and respect.⁸⁷

Vivienne's columns on vulgarity and stage conduct tapped into a growing national debate that occurred on the T.O.B.A. circuit and within independent Black theaters across the country. Exactly what was objectionable material



Figure 5: Vaudevillians in *We've Got It*. Woodard's Studio and Bonnie Clark, *Photograph of Sam Robinson & "We've Got It Co."* Bonnie and Semoura Clark black vaudeville photographs and ephemera, Box 2, Folder 19, Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.

on Black stages varied depending on the historical moment, community taste, convention, and region. Yet the most problematic material for many show critics contained overt references to sexual acts, profanity, alcoholism, and gambling in a song, skit, or dance performance. Theater industry participants wrote the *Defender* and noted when other entertainers crossed the line as Williams Jones did when he called out “Sam Davis, the smuttiest of smut-hounds.” While not giving details in his March 1923 letter, Jones remarked that he “never heard such nasty jokes as this guy (Davis) put over the footlights.”⁸⁸ In 1926 Milton Starr, T.O.B.A.’s president, promised “many good things” for the next season if only the “actors did their part in giving Mr. Starr first class acts.” “Cut out the smut,” Starr maintained, as “the patrons don’t want it anymore.”⁸⁹ In the 1926–1927 theater season, *Defender* reader George Allen wrote to the Stage Page editor and demanded to know “will the time ever come when our vaudeville actors stop dancing so vulgarly and springing such vulgar jokes, [particularly] in the places where young girls and boys attend for wholesome recreation?”⁹⁰

While the top acts in traveling tab shows might have included popular blues tunes filled with sexual double entendres and suggestive titles like “It’s Tight Like That” or “He Likes It Slow,” Vivienne reserved much of her critiques for minstrel shows and comedies, perhaps because these were the types of shows she booked and whose development she had witnessed firsthand.⁹¹ The blackface minstrel performances that were acceptable in 1900 or 1910 were widely criticized by some African American audiences by the mid-1920s. In the 1899–1900 season, Bert Williams’s and George Walker’s *Policy Players*—which included songs like “Broadway Coon” with Williams in blackface, and a plot that focused on the winner of an illegal local lottery or “policy” game—earned praise as the first Williams and Walker Black musical theater production.⁹² Vivienne lamented the persistence of Black comedians wearing blackface makeup in the 1920s, and ultimately argued that blackface had more to do with institutionalized racial discrimination and Black community division than it did with skills and artistry.⁹³ In her column “Corkless Comedy,” Vivienne acknowledged the work of the late Bert Williams but argued that this type of “low comedy” in the 1920s was considered “passé” by many. She mentioned that her husband Strawberry had abandoned blackface in their acts and yet still remained popular. Vivienne asked other performers to derive “some new way to do comedy other than at the expense of the Race.”⁹⁴

Not all readers received Vivienne’s advice well. A Mr. Eddie wrote to the column in November 1925 and took personal offense at the suggestion that comedians stop using cork. Vivienne responded that she did not negate the history of the practice in the nineteenth century, only the continued “promiscuous use of cork” in the 1920s.⁹⁵ She challenged beliefs that African Americans could be funny only if they harkened back to the mockery of the enslaved, and contended that “cork appears to me as a constant reminder of a type I wish to forget. It’s like bruising an old wound.”⁹⁶ Vivienne advanced a New Negro argument here and reflected Black artistic desires to be “seen through other than the dusty spectacles of [the] past controversy” of slavery, and the persistent subservient stereotypes

of “‘aunties,’ ‘uncles’ and ‘mammies.’”⁹⁷ She further condemned blackface and its origins when she asked why African Americans should continue to live with theatrical depictions of all Black people as “poor, ignorant, and slovenly” when they were just as “clever and capable” as their “white” counterparts. Vivienne understood that Black artists continued the blackface trope because they were paid to do so, and did not want to “meddle with their methods of making a living.”⁹⁸ Yet overall she held enough confidence in Black entertainers’ skills to believe that they could still be profitable on stage without minstrelsy. For Vivienne, the 1920s and the New Negro moment was the time to create alternative performance styles and “discover a new ‘corkless’ comedy.”⁹⁹

Readers who believed the stereotypes that entertainers were innately vice ridden and immoral also challenged Vivienne and questioned her personal character as a female stage performer. In April 1926 Rev. L.T. Harvey wrote her to ask if she knew “anything of religion at all.”¹⁰⁰ Vivienne responded directly in two articles, “Our Belief in God” and “Science and Religion,” that detailed the fundamental tenets of her Christian faith and mentioned that God could find you in “your dressing room” or “servant’s quarters” and be of help “regardless of profession.”¹⁰¹ Vivienne argued that there were “boys and girls who have never looked inside a stage entrance who are off color. On the other hand, we have a great number of Christian families earning their living upon the stage. . . You will find atrocious crimes. . . in every walk of life, why deem stage people inferior?”¹⁰² In the face of Harvey’s characterizations, Vivienne reminded readers again that secular entertainment would not be the downfall of the Black race, and on the contrary Black art could be a tool to fight racial discrimination. Repeatedly, Vivienne remarked that, done well, Black entertainment possessed the ability to “melt this great barrier of race prejudice and narrow-minded, unfair opinions” held about African Americans in the nation at large, and she continued to infuse this argument in her writings throughout the column’s run.¹⁰³

Vivienne’s call to use Black entertainment as a vehicle for racial equality was part of what scholars of Black theater see as the Harlem Renaissance and New Negro attempt to “correct injustices by imposing an alternative perception of African America” through the arts.¹⁰⁴ Although there is no evidence that Vivienne was in direct conversations with popular Harlem Renaissance intellectuals, many of her sentiments were very similar. In *The New Negro*, the groundbreaking 1925 edited collection on Black art, scholar and Harlem Renaissance intellectual Alain Locke argued that Black “creative expression” must “precede the betterment of race relationships.” Likewise, James Weldon Johnson, former Black vaudevillian, author, and executive secretary of the NAACP, contended that Black artists had the potential of “getting at the very core of prejudice” by bringing “something fresh and vital into American art,” with their own “racial genius.”¹⁰⁵ Both Locke and Johnson maintained that Black artistic excellence would demonstrate that African Americans merited socio-political equality in American society. Vivienne clearly shared these beliefs. Yet “Theater Folks” made the New Negro art discussion more inclusive and comprehensible for all Black vaudevillians. Locke’s

biographer Jeffery Stewart maintains that “The New Negro was always male in Locke’s imaginary.”¹⁰⁶ Vivienne wrote openly on topics of gender discrimination and Black women entertainers’ labor and added these subjects to the ongoing narratives on Black artistic excellence.

“Theater Folks and Theatergoers” made its last appearance in late May 1926. Many of those last articles had ventured off from theater issues to touch on family and marital relationships, religion, and philosophy. Vivienne even used her column to promote an amateur essay contest and published the winning entries.¹⁰⁷ She resumed performing as part of “Strawberry and Vivienne” in earnest by summer 1926 and starred in mainstream vaudeville at “Proctor’s New York” Theater in July.¹⁰⁸ The increase in the act’s trips to Canada and Europe suggests that maintaining a bi-monthly column with an increased performance schedule may have been too demanding for Vivienne. She and Ed Russell continued performing as vaudevillians throughout much of the 1930s, when other Black entertainers either made the leap to film or were forced into retirement by the Great Depression.¹⁰⁹

Ultimately, Vivienne used the *Chicago Defender* and her role as one of its few woman stage columnists as a vehicle to expound on the significance of a Black entertainment career in a segregated nation while including women into a New Negro discourse that privileged men’s perspectives. Vivienne often walked a line between accommodating the behavioral standards that conservative Black and white audiences set as acceptable for Black performers, and covertly using the theater as a platform to champion Black excellence. She encouraged “commendable conduct” of entertainers’ onstage performances and theater behavior because African Americans “must necessarily act better than whites, because the slightest offence was sufficient” to warrant violence and backlash. Black entertainers had to navigate the gendered and racial inequities of the American entertainment landscape simply to garner a place on the stage. Despite these challenges Vivienne Gordon Russell contended that successful African American “theater folk” and the Black entertainment industry had the opportunity “to help better conditions for much abused Race folks” throughout the nation.¹¹⁰

Notes

This article is dedicated to the memory of Dr. Shirley Basfield Dunlap (1953–2020), a brilliant Black scholar and practitioner of African American theater. Portions of this article appear in a chapter of my forthcoming manuscript *T.O.B.A. Time: Black Vaudeville and the Theater Owner’s Booking Association in Jazz Age America*. I am grateful for the anonymous readers and this issue’s editors for their close readings and critical feedback on previous article drafts.

1. Vivienne, “Theater Folks and Theatergoers: Stage Struck,” *Chicago Defender*, 7 November 1925.

2. Vivienne, “Theater Folks and Theatergoers: Stage Struck,” *Chicago Defender*, 7 November 1925. As a mix of comedy, song, dance, and novelty acts without a set storyline, vaudeville or variety theater was one of the most popular and profitable forms of live entertainment in the United States from the 1880s through the 1920s. See Leroy Ashby, *With Amusement for All: The History of American Popular Culture Since 1830* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2006), 119–32.]

3. See *Chicago Defender* headlines, “Huge Fiery Cross Fails to Frighten Meharry Students,” 10 October 1925; “Bare Atrocities at a Prison Camp,” 17 October 1925; “Judge Fines Theater Owner for Jim Crow Seating Plan,” 9 January 1926.

4. Charlene B. Regester, *Black Entertainers in African American Newspaper Articles, Volume I: An Annotated Bibliography of the Chicago Defender, The Baltimore Afro American, and the New York Amsterdam News, 1910–1950* (New York: McFarland, 2002); “Defender’s Movie and Stage Page,” *Chicago Defender*, 14 November 1925.

5. Mitchell Armentrout, “An essential force in American history, *Chicago Defender* to stop print publication,” *Chicago Sun Times*, 5 July 2019; Ethan Michaeli, *The Defender: How the Legendary Black Newspaper Changed America* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2016); Lawrence Schenbeck, “Music, Gender, and ‘Uplift’ in the ‘Chicago Defender,’ 1927–1937,” *The Musical Quarterly* 81, no. 3 (1997): 344–70; Mark K. Dolan, “Extra! Chicago Defender Race Records Ads Show South from Afar,” *Southern Cultures* 13, no. 3 (2007): 106–24.

6. Carol McCabe Booker, ed., *Alone Atop the Hill: The Autobiography of Alice Dunnigan, Pioneer of the National Black Press* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2015); Jinx C. Brossard, *Giving a Voice to the Voiceless: Four Pioneering Black Women Journalists* (New York: Routledge, 2004); Rodger Streitmatter, *Raising Her Voice: African American Women Journalists Who Changed History* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1994).

7. During the age of Jim Crow many African American professionals sought to climb the social hierarchy within Black communities and prove themselves “respectable” and virtuous, as a tool to resist white subjugation. The “politics of respectability” as a theory in African American history has been articulated by historian Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham. Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women’s Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880–1920* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 187.

8. Kevin Gaines, *Uplifting the Race: Black Leadership, Politics, and Culture in the Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996).

9. Vivienne, “Theater Folks and Theatergoers: Parent’s Opinion,” *Chicago Defender*, 14 November 1925; Vivienne, “Theater Folks and Theatergoers: Commendable Conduct,” *Chicago Defender*, 21 November 1925.

10. The 1920s began with the violence of the Red Summer in 1919, included the Tulsa Riots in 1921, and saw the upsurge of the Ku Klux Klan as evidenced by their parade down Washington D.C.’s Pennsylvania Avenue in 1926. Cameron McWhirter, *Red Summer: The Summer of 1919 and the Awakening of Black America* (New York: Henry Holt, 2011); Lucy Moore, *Anything Goes: A Biography of the Roaring Twenties* (New York: Overlook, 2010). The “New Negro” refers both to individual African Americans who denounced the stereotypes associated with enslavement and fought against racial discrimination from the turn of the century until the 1930s, as well as a socio-cultural protest movement of the same period. For recent historical scholarship see Davarian L. Baldwin, *Chicago’s New Negroes: Modernity, the Great Migration, and Black Urban Life* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007); Henry Louis Gates and Gene Andrew Jarrett, *The New Negro: Readings on Race, Representation and African American Culture, 1892–1938* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007).

11. As mentioned in the introduction, the details of Vivienne’s professional life have been primarily pulled from her own articles. I then verified this information with archival material such as city directories, manuscript census, entertainer oral histories, playbills, etc. This particular discussion of the sacred-secular divide and Mary Gordon’s beliefs comes from Vivienne’s columns, census information, and city directory entries. Manuscript Census, Year: 1930; Census Place: *New Rochelle, Westchester, New York*; Page: 2A; Enumeration District: 0243; FHL microfilm: 2341397; Vivienne, “Theater Folks and Theatergoers: Parent’s Opinion,” *Chicago Defender*, 14 November 1925.

12. Thomas L. Riis, *Just Before Jazz: Black Musical Theater in New York, 1890 to 1915*, (Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1994), 141–49, 173–84, 195–96.

13. Vivienne, “Theater Folks and Theatergoers: Parent’s Opinion,” *Chicago Defender*, 14 November 1925.

14. Vivienne, “Theater Folks and Theatergoers: Chorus Girls Over the Top,” *Chicago Defender*, 10 October 1925.

15. Henry T. Sampson, *Blacks in Blackface: A Sourcebook on Early Black Musical Shows* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 1980), 92–93, 112–13; “Darkydom,” *New York Age*, 11 November 1915, 6. *Darkydom* starred famed Black comedians and producers Flournoy Miller and Aubrey Lyles who created *Shuffle Along* in 1921, one of the longest running all-Black Broadway musicals of the early twentieth century. David Krasner, *A Beautiful Pageant: African American Theatre, Drama and Performance in the Harlem Renaissance* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 240–49. The Lafayette Theater was the precursor to the contemporary Apollo Theater in New York. In the 1920s if a Black show succeeded on the Lafayette stage, it would be successful “anywhere in the world.” See Peg Leg Bates interview by Rusty Frank, April 4, 1993, Jazz Oral History Collection Program, Archives Center, National Museum of American History.

16. Vivienne, “Theater Folks and Theatergoers: Chorus Girls Over the Top,” *Chicago Defender*, 10 October 1925.

17. Sylvester Russell, “Musical and Dramatic: Miller and Lyles At the New Grand Song Novel,” *Chicago Defender*, 22 July 1911; Year: 1930; Census Place: *New Rochelle, Westchester, New York*; Page: 2A; Enumeration District: 0243; FHL microfilm: 2341397.

18. “A Note or Two,” *Chicago Defender*, 2 May 1925; Year: 1930; Census Place: *New Rochelle, Westchester, New York*; Page: 2A; Enumeration District: 0243; FHL microfilm: 2341397; Display Ad 23, *Chicago Defender*, 12 March 1921.
19. “Steppin’ High,” *Chicago Defender*, 20 September 1924.
20. “At the Theaters: Republic Theater,” *Chicago Defender*, 24 January 1925; Ragtime Billy Tucker, “Coast Dope,” *Chicago Defender*, 29 August 1925.
21. Strawberry Russell, letter to the editor, *Chicago Defender*, 20 December 1924.
22. Vivienne, “Theater Folks and Theatergoers: Chorus Girls Over the Top,” *Chicago Defender*, 10 October 1925; “The Movie and Stage Department,” *Chicago Defender*, 10 October 1925.
23. “The Stage,” *Freeman* (Indianapolis), 6 January 1900.
24. “Blacks in Chicago: Special Places,” *Chicago Tribune Magazine*, 22 January 1978, 36.
25. *Paper Trail: 100 Years of the Chicago Defender*, directed by Barbara E. Allen (Chicago: WTTW Public Television, 2005).
26. Larry Tye, *Rising from the Rails: Pullman Porters and the Making of the Black Middle Class* (New York: Henry Holt), 82–3.
27. Michaeli, *The Defender*, 39–80; “Stage Page,” *Chicago Defender*, 12 September 1925.
28. *Paper Trail: 100 Years of the Chicago Defender* (2005); Schenbeck, “Music, Gender, and ‘Uplift’ in the ‘Chicago Defender,’” 348.
29. “On the TOBA Circuit,” *Chicago Defender*, 25 September 1925.
30. Christopher Robert Reed, *The Rise of Chicago’s Black Metropolis, 1920–1929* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2014), 102.
31. Stage Page, *Chicago Defender*, 5 January 1924; “The Movie and Stage Department,” *Chicago Defender*, 10 October 1925; “The Movie and Stage Department,” *Chicago Defender*, 17 October 1925.
32. Schenbeck, “Music, Gender, and ‘Uplift’ in the ‘Chicago Defender,’” 348–49.
33. Agnes L. Johnson, “Our Stage Folks,” *Chicago Defender*, 26 September 1925; Lawrence Schenbeck, *Racial Uplift and American Music, 1878–1943* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2014), 171–205.
34. Maude Roberts George, “News of The Music World: Roland Hayes,” *Chicago Defender*, 12 January 1924; Schenbeck, “Music, Gender, and ‘Uplift’ in the ‘Chicago Defender,’” 349–53.
35. Treva B. Lindsey, *Colored No More: Reinventing Black Womanhood in Washington, D.C.* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2017), 2–18; Erin Chapman, *Prove it On Me: New Negroes, Sex, and Popular Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 9–14.
36. Salem T. Whitney, “Timely Topics: Leave ‘Em Alone,” *Chicago Defender*, 18 June 1927.
37. “Actors Pinched,” *Afro American* (Baltimore), 17 August 1923; “Picking Chorus Girls With ‘It,’” *Afro American* (Baltimore), 20 October 1928.
38. Bill Potter, “Theatrical Comment,” *Chicago Defender*, 26 September 1925.
39. Mary Church Terrell, “The Progress of Colored Women,” *The Voice of the Negro* 1, no. 7 (July 1904): 291–94. For more on the Black Club Women’s Movement see Paula Giddings, *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America* (New York: W. Morrow, 1984).
40. Fannie Barrier Williams, “The Club Movement Among Colored Women,” *Voice of the Negro* 1, no. 7 (July 1904): 99–102.
41. Nannie Helen Burroughs, *The Louisiana Weekly*, 23 December 1933, quoted in Gerda Lerner, ed., *Black Women in White America* (New York: Vintage Books, 1992), 552–53.
42. Baldwin, *Chicago’s New Negroes*, 103–6.
43. Mary Church Terrell (1863–1954) was a Memphis-born, college-educated activist and educator known for her work with Black communities in Washington D.C. She was the first president of the National Association of Colored Women (NACW). Fannie Barrier Williams (1855–1944) was a New York-born educator and activist who was instrumental in Black Chicago activities and later helped create the NACW and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). Nannie Helen Burroughs (1871–1961) was a Virginia-born religious leader and activist who helped found the Women’s Auxiliary of the National Baptist Convention and served the Black community of Washington D.C. as the founder of the National Training School for Women and Girls. See Wanda Hendricks, *Fannie Barrier Williams: Crossing the Borders of Region and Race* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2013); Cherisse Jones-Branch, “Mary Church Terrell: Revisiting The Politics of Race, Class, and Gender,” in *Tennessee Women: The Lives and Times*, vol. 1, ed. Sarah Wilkerson Freeman (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2009); 68–80; Sharon Harley, “Nannie Helen Burroughs: ‘The Black Goddess of Liberty,’” *The Journal of Negro History* 81, no. 1 (1996): 62–71.
44. “Helpful Hints” leaflet, Detroit Urban League Papers, 1918 in *Major Problems in African American History*, ed. Thomas C. Holt and Elsa Barkley Brown (Boston: Cengage, 2000), 132. The National Urban League was an organization founded in 1910 to “promote, encourage, assist and engage in any and all kinds of work for improving the economic, social and spiritual conditions among Negroes,” in urban areas throughout the northern United States. Minutes, National Urban

- League, 1910; *National League on Urban Conditions Among Negroes* (New York, March 1913), 10–11.
45. Bettye Collier Thomas, *Jesus, Jobs, and Justice: African American Women and Religion* (New York: Knopf, 2010), 160–61.
 46. Eileen Southern, *The Music of Black Americans: A History*, 3rd ed. (New York: W. W. Norton, 1997), 300–301.
 47. Jayna Brown, *Babylon Girls: Black Women Performers and the Shaping of the Modern* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 92–100.
 48. Claudia Johnson, “The Guilty Third Tier: Prostitution in Nineteenth-Century American Theaters,” *American Quarterly* 27, no. 5 (December 1975): 577–78; Karen Sotiropoulos, *Staging Race: Black Performers in the Turn of the Century America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 163–68.
 49. “Those Wicked Chorus Girls,” *Freeman*, 28 June 1902.
 50. Ramblings, *Freeman*, 13 November 1909.
 51. Ramblings, *Freeman*, 4 December 1909.
 52. Vivienne, “Theater Folks and Theatergoers: Stage Vulgarity,” *Chicago Defender*, 24 October 1925.
 53. Other African American women journalists of the 1920s included Thelma Berlack Boozer at the *Pittsburgh Courier* and *New York Amsterdam News*; Evelyn Crawford Reynolds at the *Pittsburgh Courier* and *Philadelphia Tribune*; and Eloise Thompson at *Opportunity*. See Jessie Carney Smith and Lean’tin L. Bracks, *Black Women of the Harlem Renaissance Era* (Lanham, MD: Roman & Littlefield, 2014), 35–36, 45, 171–72; Vivienne, “Theater Folks and Theatergoers: What Price Friendship,” *Chicago Defender*, 12 December 1925.
 54. Tim Owsley, “The Georgias,” *Chicago Defender*, 14 November 1925.
 55. Vivienne, “Theater Folks and Theatergoers: Chorus Girls Over The Top,” *Chicago Defender*, 10 October 1925.
 56. Sampson, *Blacks in Blackface*, 133.
 57. Vivienne, “Theater Folks and Theatergoers: Stage Vulgarity,” *Chicago Defender*, 24 October 1925; Vivienne, “Theater Folks and Theatergoers: Commendable Conduct,” *Chicago Defender*, 21 November 1925.
 58. Vivienne, “Theater Folks and Theatergoers: Chorus Girls Over The Top,” *Chicago Defender*, 10 October 1925.
 59. Vivienne, “Theater Folks and Theatergoers: Back Line Chorus Girls,” *Chicago Defender*, 17 October 1925; Sampson, *Blacks in Blackface*, 478–86; Programs and Playbills, 1920s, Negro Actors Guild of America records, box 36, folder 3, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, The New York Public Library..
 60. Vivienne, “Theater Folks and Theatergoers: Chorus Girls Over The Top,” *Chicago Defender*, 10 October 1925.
 61. Peg Leg Bates, interview by Rusty Frank, April 4, 1993, Jazz Oral History Collection Program, Archives Center, National Museum of American History.
 62. Vivienne, “Theater Folks and Theatergoers: Chorus Girls Over The Top,” *Chicago Defender*, 10 October 1925.
 63. Vivienne, “Theater Folks and Theatergoers: Chorus Girls Over The Top,” *Chicago Defender*, 10 October 1925.
 64. Vivienne, “Theater Folks and Theatergoers: Back Line Chorus Girls,” *Chicago Defender*, 17 October 1925.
 65. Vivienne, “Theater Folks and Theatergoers: Stage Struck,” *Chicago Defender*, 7 November 1925.
 66. Vivienne, “Theater Folks and Theatergoers: Stage Aspirant,” *Chicago Defender*, 6 February 1926.
 67. Vivienne, “Theater Folks and Theatergoers: Stage Struck,” *Chicago Defender*, 7 November 1925.
 68. Vivienne, “Theater Folks and Theatergoers: Stage Struck,” *Chicago Defender*, 7 November 1925.
 69. Vivienne, “Theater Folks and Theatergoers: Stage Aspirant,” *Chicago Defender*, 6 February 1926.
 70. Vivienne, “Theater Folks and Theatergoers: Back Line Chorus Girls,” *Chicago Defender*, 17 October 1925.
 71. Vivienne, “Theater Folks and Theatergoers: Parent’s Opinion,” *Chicago Defender*, 14 November 1925.
 72. Bessie Dudley, interview by Robert O’ Meally, June 29, 1992, Jazz Oral History Collection Program, Archives Center, National Museum of American History.
 73. Vivienne, “Theater Folks and Theatergoers: Stage Struck,” *Chicago Defender*, 7 November 1925.
 74. Emily Clark, *The Strange History of the American Quadroon: Free Women of Color in the Revolutionary Atlantic* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013); Kimberly Jade

Norwood, ed., *Color Matters: Skin Tone Bias and the Myth of a Post-Racial America* (London: Routledge, 2013).

75. Nannie H. Burroughs, “Not Color But Character,” *Voice of the Negro* 1, no. 7 (July 1904): 277–79.

76. Scholar Jayna Brown carefully contextualizes the popularity of the fair skinned Black women in Isham’s productions in relationship to the “sexual commodification of the mulatta” at the moment of 1890s American “urban development as well as imperial expansion.” Jayna Brown, *Babylon Girls*, 95, 112–18.

77. Charles H. Turpin, “Turpin Weeps,” *Chicago Defender*, 1 April 1922.

78. Benton Overstreet, letter to the editor, *Chicago Defender*, 8 April 1922.

79. Vivienne, “Theater Folks and Theatergoers: False Faces,” *Chicago Defender*, 13 March 1926.

80. Vivienne, “Theater Folks and Theatergoers: Corkless Comedy,” *Chicago Defender*, 31 October 1925; Vivienne, “Theater Folks and Theatergoers: False Faces,” *Chicago Defender*, 13 March 1926.

81. Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent*, 187–89; Collier-Thomas, *Jesus, Jobs, and Justice*, 160–61. Williard B. Gatewood, *Aristocrats of Color: The Black Elite* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2000), 185–91.

82. Vivienne, “Theater Folks and Theatergoers: Corkless Comedy,” *Chicago Defender*, 31 October 1925.

83. Vivienne, “Theater Folks and Theatergoers: Commendable Conduct,” *Chicago Defender*, 21 November 1925; Vivienne, “Theater Folks and Theatergoers: Doing More Than Their Share,” *Chicago Defender*, 30 January 1926.

84. Vivienne, “Theater Folks and Theatergoers: Stage Vulgarity,” *Chicago Defender*, 24 October 1925.

85. Vivienne, “Theater Folks and Theatergoers: Commendable Conduct,” *Chicago Defender*, 21 November 1925.

86. Sharon Ammen, *May Irwin: Singing, Shouting, and the Shadow of Minstrelsy* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2017); Andrew Erdman, *Queen of Vaudeville: The Story of Eva Tanguay* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2012); Jill Watts, *Mae West: An Icon in Black and White* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001); Vivienne, “Theater Folks and Theatergoers: Commendable Conduct,” *Chicago Defender*, 21 November 1925.

87. “The Griffin Sisters,” *Freeman*, 14 February 1914.

88. William Jones, “Gotham Grits,” *Chicago Defender*, 10 March 1923.

89. “Theatrical Notes,” *Chicago Defender*, 7 August 1926.

90. George Allen, letter to the editor, “Stage Vulgarity,” *Chicago Defender*, 7 May 1927.

91. Thomas Dorsey and Hudson Whittaker, “It’s Tight Like That,” Vocalian, 1928; Jodie Edwards, “He Likes It Slow,” Okeh, 1926.

92. Sampson, *Blacks in Blackface*, 79–80, 278. For a well-written biography on Williams, see Camille F. Forbes, *Introducing Bert Williams: Burnt Cork, Broadway and the Story of America’s First Black Star* (New York: Basic Civitas, 2008).

93. Blackface was a standard trope of American minstrelsy. American blackface minstrelsy was one of the most popular and profitable entertainment genres between the 1830s and 1910s. In its initial format minstrelsy consisted of white male performers who sang and danced about fictional depictions of Black enslaved laborers in the Southern United States, all while heavily masked in Black burnt cork makeup. After emancipation, African Americans joined the minstrel stage and while the plantation humor lessened in the acts of these “genuine negro” minstrels, both Black and white minstrels were expected to mask in burnt cork makeup. See Robert Toll, *Blacking Up: The Minstrel Show in Nineteenth Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977); Eric Lott, *Love & Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013); Brian Roberts, *Blackface Nation: Race, Reform, and Identity in American Popular Music, 1812–1925* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017).

94. Vivienne, “Theater Folks and Theatergoers: Corkless Comedy,” *Chicago Defender*, 31 October 1925.

95. Vivienne, “Theater Folks and Theatergoers: Power of Applause,” *Chicago Defender*, 28 November 1925.

96. Vivienne, “Theater Folks and Theatergoers: Corkless Comedy,” *Chicago Defender*, 31 October 1925.

97. Alain Locke, *The New Negro* (New York: Albert & Charles Boni, Inc., 1925), 4–5.

98. Vivienne, “Theater Folks and Theatergoers: Corkless Comedy,” *Chicago Defender*, 31 October 1925.

99. Vivienne, “Theater Folks and Theatergoers: Corkless Comedy,” *Chicago Defender*, 31 October 1925.

100. Vivienne, “Theater Folks and Theatergoers: Our Belief in God,” *Chicago Defender*, 24 April 1926.

101. Vivienne, "Theater Folks and Theatergoers: Our Belief in God," *Chicago Defender*, 24 April 1926; Vivienne, "Theater Folks and Theatergoers: Science and Religion," *Chicago Defender*, 1 May 1926.
102. Vivienne, "Theater Folks and Theatergoers: Our Belief in God," *Chicago Defender*, 24 April 1926.
103. Vivienne, "Theater Folks and Theatergoers: Parent's Opinion," *Chicago Defender*, 14 November 1925.
104. Krasner, *A Beautiful Pageant*, 12–14.
105. Locke, *The New Negro*, 15; James Weldon Johnson, "Race Prejudice and the Negro Artist," 1928, quoted in Gates and Jarrett, *The New Negro*, 349–50.
106. Jeffery C. Stewart, *The New Negro: The Life of Alain Locke* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 512.
107. Vivienne, "Theater Folks and Theatergoers: 5 for Best Essay," *Chicago Defender*, 5 December 1925.
108. "Strawberry and Vivienne," *Chicago Defender*, 3 April 1926; "At Home," *Chicago Defender*, 10 July 1926.
109. "P.G. Lowery's Band," *Chicago Defender*, 18 July 1931; Bob Hayes, "Here and There," *Chicago Defender*, 17 April 1937. Vivian and Ed returned from touring in England on March 18, 1930, during the height of the economic downtown. See Passenger Manifest, Year: 1930; Arrival: New York, New York; Microfilm Serial: T715, 1897-1957; Microfilm Roll: Roll 4696; Line: 22; Page Number: 117. As a professional team and perhaps as spouses, "Strawberry and Viv" stopped appearing together in 1937. Ed performed with new partners through the 1940s and continued performing until the late 1960s. ("Gigi's Hospital Concert For Actors Draws Praise," *New York Amsterdam News*, 21 January 1967.) There is no record of Vivienne performing after 1937 and the 1940 New Rochelle city directory lists a Vivian Russell as a domestic on 4 Railroad Place which was her mother's address. By 1950 there is no record of Vivienne or her mother in the New Rochelle directories. I have not located an obituary or death certificate. "Vivienne" the entertainer, and Vivienne Russell unfortunately faded into obscurity.
110. Vivienne, "Theater Folks and Theatergoers: Commendable Conduct," *Chicago Defender*, 21 November 1925.