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“Spectacular Opacities”: The Hyers Sisters’ Performances of Respectability and Resistance¹

. . . Each in your voice perfection seem,—
Rare, rich, melodious. We might deem
Some angel wandered from its sphere,
So sweet your notes strike on the ear.
In song or ballad, still we find
Some beauties new to charm the mind.
Trill on, sweet sisters from a golden shore;
Emma and Anna, sing for us once more;
Raise high your voices blending in accord:
So shall your fame be widely spread abroad.
—M.E.H., *Boston Daily News* (n.d.)

The Hyers Sisters, Anna Madah (1855-1925) and Emma Louise (1857-1899), were darlings of the nineteenth-century stage and famous for their soaring voices and original dramatic productions. As singers, they were heralded as musical prodigies, and impressed audiences with their vocal prowess and command of Western classical music traditions. As actors, they pushed boundaries of acceptable and expected roles for black and female performers by developing works that moved beyond stereotypical caricatures of African American life. Though absent from many histories of American theatre, the Hyers Sisters’ success has been noted by performance scholars, including John Graziano, Errol G. Hill and James V. Hatch, Henry T. Sampson, and Eileen Southern. These historians identify the sisters as the predecessors of early black musical comedy stars such as Bert Williams and George Walker, Aida Overton Walker, and the Whitman Sisters. Daphne Brooks also briefly cites the sisters as part of the generation of black performers who created spectacular performances of race and freedom in the postbellum era and at the turn of the last century.

Yet what remains missing from the Hyers Sisters’ record is a critical contextualization of their work as part of the movement of resistant performance being developed by African American performers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In this period of postwar “freedom,” reconstruction, South-to-North migration, industrial revolution, and trans-Atlantic cultural exchange, African American artists developed performances that sought to redefine blackness for audiences, create new paradigms of racial and self-definition, and enact resistance towards the systemic racism and residual subjugation of the peculiar institution of American slavery. In *Bodies in Dissent: Spectacular Performances of Race and Freedom, 1850-1910*, Brooks argues for a broad, cross-disciplinary reading of black performances of subjectivity through the lens of what she calls “spectacular opacity,” a way to think of these acts

as opaque, as dark points of possibility that create figurative sites for the reconfiguration of black and female bodies on display. A kind of shrouding, this trope of darkness paradoxically allows for corporeal unveiling to yoke with the (re)covering and rehistoricizing of the flesh. Dense and spectacular, the opaque performances of marginalized cultural figures call attention to the skill of the performer who, through gestures and speech as well as material props and

visual technologies, is able to confound and disrupt conventional constructions of the racialized and gendered body. . . . [T]his cultural phenomenon emerges at varying times as a product of the performer's will, at other times as a visual obstacle erupting as a result of the hostile spectator's epistemological resistance to reading alternative racial and gender representations. (Brooks 8)

Brooks's study hails a phenomenon of black performance that is created or read as a politically powerful renegotiation of black identity. Such events push against centuries of race, class, and gendered subordination to enable an emersion of empowered black subjects into the new modern era of American culture.

This essay contributes to previous historical studies of African American performance and furthers discourse on spectacular opacity by analyzing the Hyers Sisters' radical efforts to transcend social limits of gender, class, and race in their early operatic concerts and three major theatrical productions: *Uncle Tom's Cabin* performed in a mixed-race cast; *Peculiar Sam; or, The Underground Railroad*, a slavery-to-freedom epic written for the sisters by early African American playwright Pauline Hopkins; and *Urlina the African Princess*, the first known African American play set in Africa. As singers they were heralded as musical prodigies and impressed audiences with their vocal prowess and command of Western classical traditions. As actors they pushed boundaries of acceptable and expected roles for black performers by developing works that moved beyond stereotypical caricatures of black life. As sisters, they seized the familial advantage afforded them by being born into what W. E. B. Du Bois later called the "Talented Tenth" of the free African American community, and committed their personal and professional lives to the cause of racial uplift in the turbulent and transitional years of the Reconstruction era. Their professional work and their carefully constructed public representations of their personal respectability placed them squarely within the tradition of nineteenth-century black artists, activists, and scholars seeking to reappropriate and redefine white-constructed images of African Americans.

By employing traditionally white, Western aesthetic forms, the Hyers subverted and refashioned master narratives about blackness, enacting moments of spectacular opacity in which alternate realities and possibilities for African Americans were rehearsed, imagined, and achieved. These positive representations of African American life and love were strategic acts of resistance against the rampant racism of late-nineteenth-century America. The Hyers Sisters' pioneering productions enabled them to create early opportunities for themselves and other black artists in a white, male-dominated industry, and helped lay the groundwork for the growth and development of black theatre and popular entertainment in the decades to come.

Early Concert Careers

At ten and twelve years of age, the Hyers Sisters began their career giving recitals around San Francisco and Oakland (Hill and Hatch 70). Their first concert was at the Metropolitan Theatre in San Francisco in 1867, only two years after the end of the Civil War, and four years after the Emancipation Proclamation, and their later work featured dramatic productions of plays commissioned for them. The sisters' early concert repertoire of classical musical selections emphasized their formal skill and training as professional singers. Peter Hudson identifies the Hyers Sisters as some of the earliest African American "crossover artists" of the nineteenth century, who "transgressed the boundaries between high and low culture by playing the marginal American concert stages . . . as well as minstrel and vaudeville shows" in an attempt to gain success despite frequent restrictions from major (white) American

stages and touring circuits (1460). By singing traditional European concert music, the sisters identified themselves as versatile performers capable of performing well beyond the narrow stereotypes of minstrelsy, yet their ability to also perform black musical traditions, such as spirituals, served to underscore their identity as African Americans. Creating such a composite professional profile established the sisters' respectability as legitimate, versatile performers while simultaneously signified their embodied call for racial uplift for all black Americans.

The classical material the Hyerses performed enabled them to emphasize the vast differences in their vocal abilities. While Anna Madah possessed a soaring soprano voice, Emma Louise boasted a deep and rich contralto that extended far into the bass line. They capitalized on this range by performing female and male roles in duets, thus depicting heteronormative romantic pairings through song, which were relationships not permissible for black men and women to perform onstage together. In doing so, the siblings enacted what I call "aural drag," an audible, gendered "passing" as a mature man and woman, in the ears of their audiences. Through aural drag, the Hyerses created a mature vocal quality that listeners heard as adult, professional, and by virtue of the musical style, white. This aural drag was unlike the "aural passing" heard in the radio performances of the white Boswell Sisters during the segregated jazz era of the twentieth century, whose husky, syncopated, sexy, and disembodied vocal renderings made white broadcast listeners, already anxious about the threat of cultural miscegenation, uneasy about the possibility that they might be listening to—and enjoying—black female singers. The Hyers Sisters were performing in front of live audiences exclusively.² Their bodies, from which these cultivated vocal identities emanated, and which audiences simultaneously viewed while they listened, were undeniably adolescent, female, sororal, and black. These juxtapositions can be read as early moments of spectacular opacity, moments in which the Hyerses were "spectacularly circumscribed by race and gender" (Brooks 136-37). The Hyers Sisters' manipulations of their vocal sound and their audiences' aural reception of it, in combination with their corporeal identities, created an opaque performance event onto and into which audiences and critics could read a myriad of possibilities for the performers' artistic capacities and socially constructed identities.

As rarities in concert music, the Hyers Sisters elicited critical acclaim and fascination with their unusual vocal and dramatic talents.³ Because African Americans performing concert music during the early years of Reconstruction were a rarity, especially as adolescents, employing aural drag enabled the Hyers to gain recognition and credibility as the highly refined and trained performers they actually were. While they would not normally have been allowed access to upper-class white society because of their racial identity, their cultivated voices immediately opened doors and created access to stages and culture. The *San Francisco Chronicle's* review of their 1867 debut concert noted that:

Their musical power is acknowledged; and those who heard them last evening were unanimous in their praises, saying that rare natural gifts would insure for them a leading position among the prima donnas of the age. Miss Madah has a pure, sweet soprano voice, very true, even, and flexible, of remarkable compass and smoothness. . . . Miss Louise is a natural wonder, being a fine alto-singer, and also the possessor of a pure tenor-voice. Her tenor is of wonderful range, and in listening to her singing, it is difficult to believe that one is not hearing a talented young man instead of the voice of a young girl. (qtd. in Sampson 6)

The sisters' contrasting vocal talents were emphasized in performance and noted by listeners and critics, who immediately read gendered qualities into their spectacular sound. From the beginning of their careers, the Hyers presented themselves to audiences "as dark points of possibility that create[d] figurative sites for the reconfiguration of black and female bodies on display" (Brooks 8). By performing refinement and respectability, the sisters encouraged audiences to reconceptualize their

expectations and assumptions about black and female artists. Their positive critical and popular reception underscores the success of this performance strategy. Manipulating audiences' assumptions about African American ability and artistry enabled the sisters' achievement in the face of anticipated failure.

In their next major concert in Salt Lake City in 1871, the sisters performed English composer John Barnett's opera *The Mountain Sylph*, their first documented depiction of a romantic pair. The opera is the story of a fairy (performed by Anna), who falls in love with a young Scotchman (sung by Emma), who protects her from

By displaying their own personal lives in performative presentations of spectacular opacity, the Hyerses encouraged audiences to acknowledge the respectability of African American artists and citizens.

a competing and evil love interest by shielding her with a magic scarf. Professor John Tullidge's review in the *Deseret News* hailed the sisters' masterful performance, and noted:

The tenor, Miss Emma, conveyed the author's meaning truly, and her imitation of that voice took her to the F sharp below the staff. This note was intoned with perfect ease. In Miss Anna's part there are some beautiful rouladial passages, which were delivered by the young lady smoothly and distinctly; and, when she became spell-bound by the scarf, her *espressivo* and *energico* were fine. . . . Both of the sisters sing in the Italian with fluency and with correct pronunciation (qtd. in Sampson 11-12).

Tullidge's expert analysis of the sisters' performance and aural drag set them in juxtaposition to each other, invited comparison by the reader, and confirmed the legitimacy of their talents. His impressions were corroborated by the audience who, two days later, published an open letter to the sisters in the same paper extending "as a slight testimonial of our esteem . . . our influence and assistance in making a remunerative benefit, to take place at the Salt Lake Theatre at such time may suit your convenience" (qtd. in Sampson 12). By performing roles opposite each other, the sisters expanded their performance possibilities in classical repertoire. The significance of such aural drag and the resulting opacity it created provided examples of professional potential for blacks and females beyond extensions of servitude such as domestic or physical labor, or the grueling and demeaning work of the minstrel line.

The sisters' vocal prowess and ability to entice audiences to aurally suspend disbelief in their performances of gender extended further to a related dismantling of racial and class barriers in audiences' reception of their work. A couple of weeks after their successful 1871 Salt Lake City engagement, *The Daily Herald* of St. Joseph, Missouri, proclaimed Anna Hyers in league with famed soprano Jenny Lind, dubbed the "Swedish Nightingale," and the British singer Euphrosyne Parepa-Rosa, both of whom were so rare and precious in this anonymous reviewer's eyes (and ears) that they "flit across this planet like angels" (qtd. in Sampson 13). Such complimentary comparisons to contemporary white artists worked to erase racial boundaries that limited African American artists from classical repertoires, and encouraged audiences to patronize black performances with the same respect and admiration with which they esteemed white artists. The reviewer further described them as "two colored ladies, or girls, aged respectively sixteen and seventeen years; but their singing is as mature and perfect as any we have ever listened to" (qtd. in Sampson 12). For African American teenagers to be referred to as "ladies" by a newspaper in a former slaveholding state, just eight years after Emancipation, was remarkable and served to elevate the sisters' class status in the minds of audiences and readers.

During their first tour in New York, the Hyers Sisters continued to garner praise for their classical repertoire and musical abilities, and their reviews continued to reflect their steady ascension on the ladder of social respectability. These reviews demonstrate how the spectacular opacity of the Hyers' performances at times erupted "as a result of the hostile spectator's epistemological resistance to reading alternative racial and gender representations" (Brooks 8). While papers such as the *New York Evening Post* acknowledged the Hyers Sisters as colored, and attributed their ability to the racist presumption of "the musical instincts of their race [combined with] careful musical training" (qtd. in Sampson 15), they were obliged to move beyond their resistance to acknowledge the new and admirable form of blackness embedded in the sisters' performed opacity. The *New York Tribune* noted of the sisters' prestigious 1871 Steinway Hall performance that "these two young colored girls who have received a musical training in California, are by no means mere 'Jubilee' singers, as the programme of last evening clearly shows. It embraced several airs and duets from 'Martha' and 'Trovatore,' the last being the 'Miserere,' which called forth hearty applause" (qtd. in Sampson 15).⁴ The *Evening Telegram* corroborated this positive review, emphasizing the respectability due performers of the Hyers Sisters' caliber. "The selections last evening embraced a high order of music, operatic and otherwise; and were rendered with a taste and grace that elicited frequent applause. . . . [S]ingly or together, their execution is marked by a refinement, culture, and attractiveness that deserves first-class audiences and first-class appreciation" (qtd. in Sampson 15). Remarkably, these early reviews did not dwell on the Hyers Sisters' race. Ultimately, critics embraced the Hyers' spectacular opacity, and reviewed them on the basis of their abilities alone.

Early Dramatic Delineations

In addition to performing classical concert work, the Hyers toured with minstrel companies, such as the Callender's Minstrel Festival (1883). They also headlined major festivals, including P. S. Gilmore's Great Peace Jubilee (1872), where they led "a combination of 150 colored singers" (*St. Albans Daily Messenger*) and "their wonderful vocal powers made a decided impression" ("Hyers Sisters," *Daily Constitution* 2). Their earliest forays into dramatic works featured a production of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1880) with the racially integrated Ideal Uncle Tom's Cabin Company, "an indication of the respect accorded the Sisters by members of the theatrical profession" and a novelty at a time when "Tom shows" usually featured all-white casts in blackface (Hill 125). Audiences were assured a riveting production, spectacular not only for the sensationalism of the well-known story, but also for the composition of the cast itself. The *New Haven Evening Register* reported:

The principal characters, Uncle Tom, Topsy and Eliza Harris and all the slave characters will be represented by colored people, the others by a company of white actors. This is a novel feature in dramatic representations, and there is no reason why it should not be successful, as the Hyers Sisters and Sam Lucas are exceedingly clever people and possessed of a deal of talent which can be displayed to good advantage in such a play as this one. The company uses a prologue especially written for them by Mrs. Harriet Beecher Stowe. ("Entertainments" 4)

Advertisements heralded the show "in nature's own coloring, by the famous Hyers Sisters' Combination, in conjunction with a complete white dramatic company" (*Worcester Daily Spy*). While the sisters supplemented their incomes by performing limited engagements in such troupes, these appearances were secondary to their efforts to maintain their own company and careers. "The Hyers Sisters company may

not have been able to compete with the minstrel troupe in the salaries it offered, but it did provide opportunity for the gifted artist to perform materials that affirmed his human dignity and reflected his professional training” (Southern, “Georgia Minstrels” 171). Though the sisters’ concert material remained popular, they were still presenting it in juxtaposition to the phenomenon of minstrelsy. Traversing the lines between high and low culture was a matter of economic necessity and professional survival.

In contrast to their classical repertoire, their work with black minstrel shows, early dramatic performances in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, and in other pieces commissioned for them, such as *Peculiar Sam; or, The Underground Railroad* and *Urlina the African Princess* (detailed below), anticipated how, as David Krasner notes, late nineteenth-century “American cultural interest had shifted from minstrelsy to ‘racial authenticity.’ The preoccupation with authenticity within the dominant culture was, in fact, reflective of a much more widespread interest in racial Otherness, which arose from a fascination with marginalized elements of society” (22). Working within the dominant white culture’s demand for works that delivered such supposed authenticity, the Hyers negotiated a complicated resistance to participating in the damaging replication of derogatory black stereotypes. Instead, their early dramatic performances reinscribed white minstrel stereotypes in order to create spaces for alternative black expression. Drawing on Edward Said, Krasner explains that

for subordinate groups to achieve recognition, they must “rechart and then occupy the place in the imperial cultural forms reserved for subordination, to occupy it self-consciously, fighting for it on the very same territory once ruled by a consciousness that assumed the subordination of a designated inferior Other. Hence *reinscription*.” The territory, in this case, is the representation of African Americans onstage; reinscription describes the manner in which black performers entered into the blackface caricature and refashioned it. . . . Hence, reinscription in African American theatre defined a performative act requiring black actors first to imitate, and second to refashion, the bodily gestures of white minstrel performers. (26)

The Hyers Sisters reinscribed iconic black caricatures such as those in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, then infused those performances with the thumbprint of their own lived experience. In 1883, Emma Louise married bandleader George Freeman, “in full view of the audience on the stage of the Baldwin Theatre in San Francisco during a performance of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* by Callender’s Minstrels” (Hill and Hatch 75). This sort of blending of imagined blackness with actual life events generated further instances of spectacular opacity. Such “‘opacity,’” writes Brooks, “. . . characterizes a kind of performance rooted in a layering and creating a palimpsest of meanings and representations” (Brooks 350). Couching the explicit performative of a wedding ceremony within the framework of their theatrical performance, the Hyerses and their cast not only hailed themselves as full citizens and human beings, but also implicitly revealed the false authenticity of the stereotypes in which shows such as *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* traded. Simultaneously performing personal agency and actualization as well as the reinscribed stereotypes of minstrelsy, the Hyerses manifested a radical statement on the civil rights of blacks. By displaying their own personal lives in performative presentations of spectacular opacity, the Hyerses encouraged audiences to acknowledge the respectability of African American artists and citizens.

Out of Bondage; or, Before and After the War (1876), by white playwright and former Union soldier Joseph Bradford, was the Hyers Sisters’ first major theatrical production. It was commissioned for them by their management company, Redpath Lyceum Bureau, and embellished with the sisters’ contributions of improvisation, variable song selection, and characterization. *Out of Bondage* was one of the earliest dramatic works performed by blacks that attempted to portray sensitively the stories of enslaved African Americans through reinscribing familiar character types in order to please audiences. As Eileen Southern notes, “it was important to all concerned—Redpath, the troupe, and the playwright—that the kind of stage activity envisioned for the newly organized Hyers troupe differ sharply from the typical minstrel show

... the Redpath venture represented an abrupt break with the past” (Introduction xvi). The Hyerses found tremendous support from the abolitionist-minded Bradford and the Redpath group, who were aware of slowly shifting sensibilities regarding race, and the lucrative commercial possibilities for a popular and talented group such as the sisters themselves. The following excerpt from a private letter by one of the country’s most well-known authors and theatre enthusiasts appeared in Redpath’s 1877-78 season publicity: “I went a mile and a half in the most furious tempest of wind and snow that I have seen for five years, to see the plantation sketches of the Hyers Troupe and hear their exquisite music, and I would go three miles through just such a tempest to have that pleasant and satisfactory experience again. Your friend, Samuel L. Clemens [Mark Twain]” (qtd. in Southern, Introduction xli). Unlike minstrel shows at the time that depended exclusively on stereotypes and grotesque depictions of black life, *Out of Bondage* was billed by Redpath as “The Great Moral Musical Drama.” It was a melodrama that touched on the themes of freedom and slavery made popular by the phenomenon of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*.

Peculiar Sam; or, The Underground Railroad

Building on their success with *Out of Bondage*, the Hyers Sisters and Sam Lucas next collaborated with then-twenty-year-old playwright Pauline Elizabeth Hopkins, to present *Peculiar Sam; or, The Underground Railroad* (1879). This new play expanded the themes of slavery, freedom, and the African American family unit that the Hyerses previously depicted in *Out of Bondage*. *Peculiar Sam* was copyrighted and first produced in the same year as the Kansas Exodus, the earliest major migration of African Americans out of the South after the Civil War. Hopkins scholar Lois Brown notes that *The Underground Railroad* is a significant piece of black dramatic literature because it “provided American audiences with the first staged reenactments of slavery that were not offered through the lens of white imagination” (117).⁵ The Hyerses, Sam Lucas, and Hopkins created characters on the stage and page that challenged minstrel stereotypes through the reinscription of them. This production expanded the scope of cultural representations of African American experiences in three main ways: employing a more nuanced use of dialect to indicate individual experiences of black life rather than generalized stereotypes; introducing a black male hero performed by a leading black male star (Lucas); and dramatizing a realistic romance between black characters, an extension of their previous radical representations of romance between African Americans through their early performances of aural drag and Emma Louise’s onstage marriage.

This slavery-to-freedom epic portrayed the journey of one African American family from the bonds of captivity on a Mississippi plantation to freedom in Canada in a melodrama punctuated by jubilee songs, spirituals, and classical concert music. While the plot points are similar to *Out of Bondage*, Hopkins’s four-act dramatization treats slaves’ journeys on the Underground Railroad. The cast of characters is composed of Sam, described by the playwright as “a peculiar fellow,” and played by Sam Lucas; Jim, a black overseer; two field hands, Pete and Pomp; Virginia, Sam’s love interest, played by Anna Madah Hyers; Juno, Sam’s sister, played by Emma Louise Hyers; Mammy, Sam’s mother; and Caesar, a station master. In addition to depicting the ordeals of escaping slavery, the script provides one of the earliest portrayals of a romantic relationship between two black characters on stage—Sam and Virginia—and the first one written by an African American female and performed by an all-black cast. Although William Wells Brown, the earliest known African American playwright, depicted romantic love between a pair of runaway slaves in *The Escape; or, A Leap for Freedom* (1858), his play was never fully staged. In their self-generated

work, the Hyerses, Lucas, and Hopkins anticipated and achieved W. E. B. Du Bois's 1926 call for theatre "about us, for us, and near us" in this early and little-known landmark play.

When the white plantation master dies prior to the beginning of the play, his young heirs unceremoniously "wed" Virginia to Jim, the plantation's black overseer. This is not a union based in love. The news is brought to Sam's attention by Mammy, Juno, and Virginia herself. Mammy breaks the news:

For de Lorse' sake boy do you kno' what dey's gone an' done up to de big house? Dey's gone an' married dat dear chile, dat lamb ob a Jinny, to dat rascal ob an' oberseer Jim . . . yes, deys brund dat gal up like a lady, she neber done nuthin' but jes wait on Marse fambly, an' now ole Marse's dead deys gone an' married her, *their* way to Jim, an' de gal can't bar de sight ob him. Its de meanes' thing I eber seed. (Hopkins 122)

Virginia seeks solace from her loved ones, explaining what has happened, and why she plans to run away rather than stay on the plantation and enter into a marriage against her will:

Yes Mammy and Sam, I have come to say good-bye, its hard to leave the place where I was born, but it is better to do this, than to remain here, and become what they wish me to be. To fulfil this so called marriage.

Juno enters with Virginia and corroborates the details of the "ceremony":

Yes, Mammy, onlies' thing they done in do worl' was, Marse he say: "Jim, you want to marry Jinny?" Jim, he say yes, of course Jim say yes. Marse he say: "Jiny you want to marry Jim?" Jinny her say *no*, like to kno' what Jinny want of ignerunt ole Jim. Marse Say: "You man an' wife, an' Lor' hab mussy on you soul! Dat no kin ob weddin." (124)

Each woman vocalizes the news differently, using a range of dialects and tones to demonstrate the variety of characters, linguistic abilities, social positions, and educational opportunities inherent within the captive plantation population. Mammy evokes concern for the welfare of her family while providing exposition on the routinized treatment of captive women as interchangeable sexual commodities within the slave system. Virginia corroborates Mammy's story, but does so in genteel contrast to her elder's less-refined manner. Her language signals refinement and respectability, qualities that chafe against the harsh and brutish treatment to which she is subjected. Finally, Juno reinforces Mammy's emotional fervor over the situation while simultaneously providing some comic relief from the brevity of the conversation. Depicting this range of captive black female experience, the Hyerses and Hopkins worked to dismantle stereotypes established by white representation. While "stereotyping is a form of knowledge and identification that locates the subject as 'always already' fixed through repetition and reaffirmation . . . [and] rigidifies the position of the subject by confirming the subject's identity through repeated mimicry," these female characters dilute and destabilize stereotypes by resisting consistent repetition of them (Krasner 32). While they all articulate the events in their own way, they are united by the injustices of the situation and their allegiance to one another.

In this scene, the institution of marriage, and the human rights and privileges that it represents, provides a stark contrast to the civil rights withheld from black captives of the "peculiar institution," who, instead of privately choosing their mate, were often pressed into intimate relationships mandated by white masters. Such instances reflect what Saidiya Hartman describes as "the dual invocation of person and property [that] made issues of consent, will, and agency complicated and ungainly" (80). *Peculiar Sam* was one of the first dramatic portrayals of the dismay, danger, and disrespect suffered by African American women and men unwillingly forced into such circumstances. It was a radical and unprecedented performance of the fact that "master-slave relations were predicated upon the inability of the enslaved to exercise her will in any ways other than serving the master, and in this respect,

she existed only as an extension or embodiment of the owner's rights of property" (Hartman 82). Audiences witnessed Virginia's misery in her abuse, along with Sam's refusal to allow her to be married to Jim, and his vows of love and respect for his "Jinny," which spur him to act by "stealing" his family away to freedom.

Sam puts into action his long latent plans to transport his family to freedom in Canada. "Jinny you isn't 'fraid to trust ol' peculiar Sam, I know. Kase you see Ise allers willin' to die fer you. You need't bid any on us good bye, kase dis night I tends to tote you and Mammy and Juno 'way from hyar. Yas, an' I'll neber drop ye ill Ise toted you safe inter Canidy" (124). Reinscribing the thick dialect and linguistic performance tradition made popular by blackface minstrelsy (in which Lucas rose to fame), Sam articulates real human feelings of love and devotion not previously allowed to black male characters. Sam decisively acts as the head of his household, pledges devotion and love (rather than stereotypical, hypersexualized lust) to Jinny, and enacts a plan to extract his family from the clutches of captivity. The "peculiar institution" of slavery, the prejudice against black men that it fostered, and the negative stereotypes about blacks developed in minstrelsy are no match for Peculiar Sam. By engaging with contemporary performance practices, Hopkins manipulated stereotypes to subversively communicate alternative empowering messages of black capability and humanity, which were then seized on and embodied by the performers onstage. Indeed, Sam's "peculiarity" can be read as a form of spectacular opacity which "rewrite[s] the ubiquitous master narratives of minstrelsy, with its colonizing and constrictive figurations of grotesque and immobile 'blackness' " within a dynamic and mobilized black family populated by strong female characters and led by Sam, who "translates his 'peculiarity' and his alterity into a source of material liberation for himself and other characters" (Brooks 5-6, 287).

In the final act, which takes place six years later, after the end of the Civil War and on Christmas Eve, Sam is a newly elected congressman in Ohio, and Jim, now a successful lawyer in Massachusetts, releases Virginia from any obligation to their improper union so that she may freely wed Sam. While the play ends happily, the long and ominous shadow of slavery is nevertheless present in the reappearance of the old overseer, who must grant permission for Virginia to (re)marry. Such a scene makes evident the far reaches of the "peculiar institution" into the new lives of Peculiar Sam and Virginia, demonstrating the legacy of slavery through time, space, and souls.

Audiences of the time were not always prepared for or open to receiving the Hyers' treatment of the recent historical atrocities of slavery, their effects on the African American population, and the need to remember and overcome these horrors in order to achieve social progress in the form of racial equality and respectability moving forward. *Peculiar Sam; or, The Underground Railroad* was not as widely heralded by critics as the Hyers' earlier success, *Out of Bondage*. The *Minneapolis Tribune* criticized it as "a plot hung more or less on music and a portrayal of the slave life similar to that in *Out of Bondage* . . . written to afford Sam Lucas, formerly the chief attraction with the Hyers Sisters combination, an opportunity to display his comicalities" (qtd. in Brown 115). Sam Lucas himself observed that the "piece failed as the time was not propitious for producing such a play." While perhaps not the popular success that the Hyers Company had hoped for, Judith Halberstam notes, in her own application of spectacular opacity, what she calls "the queer art of failure"; namely, that there is efficacy in such moments of perceived underachievement, from which possibilities can emerge in unintended and unexpected ways. *Peculiar Sam* manifested resistance through its illumination of the knowledge that darkness, *i.e.*, blackness, is not only "an interpretative strategy," as Brooks notes, but is also, as Halberstam observes, "the terrain of the failed and the miserable" (Brooks 109, Halberstam 98). Examined in this vein, evidence of the play's cool reception points to instances wherein spectacular opacity becomes a "visual obstacle erupting as a result of the hostile spectator's epistemological resistance to reading alternative racial and gender

representations” (Brooks 8). While audiences may have failed to fully appreciate the work, the Hyers Sisters Combination Company, as “subcultural performers,” succeeded in becoming “an archive of improvised cultural responses to conventional constructions of gender, race, and sexuality, and the performance articulate[d] powerful modes of dissent and resistance” (Halberstam 97). The Hyerses, Hopkins, and Lucas attempted to portray the plight of blacks with humanity and respect, while their collaboration worked to lift one another’s careers out of the precariousness of uncertainty, and the trap of minstrelsy. It also served as a historical document, recalling and reenacting the trials of enslaved blacks, the struggle for freedom, and the ongoing quest for equality. Through remembering the injustices of slavery, the work focused attention on ongoing problems of prejudice still festering during Reconstruction.

By producing this work, the Hyerses took another important critical and artistic step towards beginning to wrestle theatrical representations of blackness from the grip of white prejudice and minstrel stereotypes. “It is important to bear in mind that for subordinated groups, changes tend to surface by degree. As Stuart Hall explains, cultural resistance to domination is . . . ‘a complex formation in modern societies which must become the focus of a number of different social contestations,’ ” of which *Peculiar Sam* was one (Krasner 28). Despite its critical reception, the show played in cities in the North and Midwest, including Boston, Chicago, Minneapolis, and Milwaukee. Its legacy as a resistant dramatic text that made the practice of reinscribing stereotypes possible in production can be seen in subsequent black theatrical works, including those of black musical theatre pioneers Bert Williams and George Walker, such as *A Trip to Coontown* (1898, also featuring Sam Lucas), and *In Dahomey* (1903), which was, fittingly, Anna Madah Hyers’s last major production.

Urlina, the African Princess

Like *Peculiar Sam*; or, *The Underground Railroad*, the Hyers’ next play, *Urlina, the African Princess*, debuted in 1879 and was performed in repertoire and on double bills with the sisters’ earlier works. The Hyers Sisters’ tours were lauded in advertisements by the Redpath Lyceum Bureau as “the only colored burlesque troupe in the world . . . whose fame has extended from Ocean to Ocean” (*Cincinnati Commercial*). Like the sisters’ previous productions, *Urlina, the African Princess* also toured widely, receiving acclaim as far north as Victoria, British Columbia. The *Daily* noted that “Victorians have seldom been afforded so good an opportunity for hearing admirable singing, witnessing very natural acting and beholding the most gorgeous and costly of costumes, as that presented by the Hyers Sisters combination last night at the Theatre Royal in their original oriental extravaganza entitled ‘Urlina, the African Princess.’ ” The play was billed as an “opera bouffe,” or comic opera, and told a love story of the beautiful African princess Urlina, who is kidnapped and whose claim to her father’s throne is thwarted by a rival king whose son, Prince Zurleska, falls in love with Urlina’s picture and decides to help her. With the aid of his servant Kekolah, Zurleska is united with Urlina and overthrows his evil father.

Urlina is the earliest known African American play set in Africa, and it suited the Hyers’ career-long mission to encourage racial uplift and pride. The press surrounding the production reported that they “claim to be of African extraction. [Additionally] the music is taking, the singing is good, the costumes are bright and the scenery is effective. . .” (*Chronicle*, qtd. in Sampson 34). *Urlina* is significant in the timeline of black theatre because it marks the beginning of a trend in African American theatrical performances characterized by a stylized longing and desire on behalf of black artists to acknowledge and celebrate their ancestral roots. Subsequent dramatic works that

upheld the noble heritage of peoples of African descent included plays such as Will Marion Cook's *Jes' Lak White Fo'kes* (1899), Williams and Walker's *In Dahomey*, and W. E. B. Du Bois's pageant *Star of Ethiopia* (1913). *Urlina* also corresponded to the widespread exoticization of diasporic African culture in Victorian performing and visual arts. Representations of Orientalism and "African" exoticism are also apparent in other musical works of the era, such as Giacomo Meyerbeer's *L'Africaine* (1864), and Gilbert and Sullivan's *The Mikado* (1885).

Gender, racial, and cultural identity crossings were prevalent features of the show. *Urlina's* characters and casting followed the edicts of English pantomime by featuring a young ingénue, a young male lover played by a woman as a breeches role, an older female dame played by a man, and a variety of comical characters (Hill and Hatch 73; Hill 122). The Hyerses used opera bouffe, a familiar Western genre, to present African royalty, a notion that was foreign to most audiences. In contrast to their earlier productions, which relied on reinscribing stereotypes from minstrelsy to create resistant instances of spectacular opacity, the Hyerses in *Urlina* presented unfamiliar material within a traditional performance style as a nonthreatening way to communicate their political message of racial equality and respectability. While the Hyers' early performances contested negative stereotypes of blackness by reinscribing such tropes in their acts, their strategy for achieving "spectacular opacities [that] contest the 'dominative imposition of transparency' systemically willed on to black figures," shifted to disidentification in *Urlina* (Brooks 8).

This production becomes particularly significant when identified as an early example of disidentificatory practices in early African American theatre. "Disidentification," queer studies scholar José Esteban Muñoz theorizes, is a

mode of dealing with dominant ideology, one that neither opts to assimilate within such a structure nor strictly opposes it; rather disidentification is a strategy that works on and against dominant ideology. . . . "[W]orking on and against" is a strategy that tries to transform a cultural logic from within, always laboring to enact permanent structural change while at the same time valuing the importance of local or everyday struggles of resistance. (11-12)

Depicting self-styled characters devoid of negative stereotypes while operating within the performance traditions of white hegemony and heteronormativity enabled the Hyerses to enact a (perhaps unintentionally queer) performance of romance that advocated for positive representations of heteronormative relationships in performance. Wrapped (literally and figuratively) in the reassuring velvets of Victorian gentility and enacted within the satirical possibilities of high European humor, the piece became acceptable, entertaining, and discursive.

While the play's text is not extant, production reviews and portraits exist that provide powerful iconographic clues as to the ways these performers and characters could be read by their contemporary audiences and today's historians. In figure 1, Anna Louise is depicted as the Princess *Urlina*. Reclining upon a botanical heap, Anna Madah endows *Urlina* with a kind of calm power. She stares directly at the camera, returning the gaze of the viewer, and acknowledges the full landscape of her body, made accessible to the observer by her pose. Her costume is both exotic and erotic, showcasing her legs with Romanesque sandal-like shoes that lace up her calves, a short, side-slitted skirt falling open towards the camera which highlights her legs, and a fitted, sleeveless bodice that exposes her toned arms ensconced in decorative metal bands. She is heavily accessorized with jewels and wears an elaborate head-dress, symbols of both her own as well as her character's value, power, and wealth. Her costume would have played to audience's desires to access the black and female body while at the same time remaining respectable, and perhaps avoiding association with the emerging, less-refined "leg show" burlesque genre by withholding additional bodily exposure. According to the *Daily Colonist*, Anna Madah's "acting last night was unassuming, but as lifelike as possible." Her characterization was a concerted attempt at a realistic, respectful, regal representation of black femininity.



Fig. 1: Anna Madah Hyers as Urlina in *Urina, the African Princess* (1879). Courtesy of The Huntington Library, San Marino, CA.



Fig. 2: Emma Louise Hyers as Prince Zurleska in *Urina, the African Princess* (1879). Courtesy of The Huntington Library, San Marino, CA.

Prince Zurlaska, as played by Emma Louise, “a very pleasing actress, full of that dash and vivacity requisite to render the character thoroughly successful,” is a more complicated read (*Daily Colonist*). In figure 2 she poses in her breeches costume, embodying the lovelorn prince. She channels masculine confidence while maintaining a kind of feminine restraint, leaning against a large draped urn, while folding her arms across her bosom and exposing her legs at the ankles. Unlike the hyper-feminine Anna Madah’s direct confrontation of the viewer through an open, prone body position, the more masculine Emma Louise averts her eyes to an unseen point of interest, remaining physically upright yet distanced from the viewer, despite her very revealing costume. Such a role maintains echoes of Emma Louise’s earliest critical reviews, in which listeners express amazement that “it is difficult to imagine that one is not hearing a talented young man instead of the voice of a young girl.” (*Chronicle*, qtd. in Sampson 6).

Through these regal and romantic roles performed within a white, Western aesthetic, the Hyerses demonstrated how disidentification serves as a means of

recycling and rethinking encoded meaning. The process of disidentification scrambles and reconstructs the encoded message of a cultural text in a fashion that both exposes the encoded message’s universalizing and exclusionary machinations and recircuits its workings to account for, include, and empower minority identities and identifications. (Muñoz 31)

The Hyerses were successful at this alternative recoding precisely due to their own corporeal identity as black sisters, who in their portrayal of heterosexual love and power “critically defamiliariz[ed] their own bodies by way of performance in order to yield alternative racial and gender epistemologies” for black citizens and artists (Brooks 5). As noted previously, black male performers in the late nineteenth century were restricted from performing serious romantic lead roles; indeed, even Sam Lucas’s performance as the hero and love interest in *Peculiar Sam; or, The Underground Railroad*, while remarkable and groundbreaking, was only possible via constant performative references to his success on the minstrel stage. And in *Urlina* the male cast members were relegated to playing either villains or cross-dressed and comedic supporting roles.⁶

By assuming the role of the male suitor, however, Emma Louise Hyers created a black romantic male hero precisely because that is what she is not. She remained unhindered by the social limitations, prejudices, and fears inherent in white America’s demonization of black male sexuality. Her transvestite embodiment of that which was lacking in the theatre, and that which was discouraged and diminished in reality, is what Marjorie Garber calls “both a signifier and that which signifies the undecidability of signification. It points towards itself—or, rather, toward the place where it is not” (37). By assuming the male costume within the widely accepted Western tradition of English pantomime and breeches roles, Emma Louise’s performance can be read as what Garber describes as

transvestism [as] a trickster strategy for outsmarting white oppression, a declaration of differences . . . The use of elements of transvestism by black performers and artists as a strategy for economic, political, and cultural achievement . . . marks the translation of a mode of oppression and stigmatization into a supple medium for social commentary and aesthetic power. (303)

Beginning with the aural drag techniques featured in their early classical concerts as adolescents and continuing through *Urlina*, the Hyers Sisters negotiated social barriers in their representations and expressions of black romance, love, and human emotion. By creating an alternate onstage reality peopled with African royalty swathed in the fabrics and framework of Victorian gentility and romance, for the Hyers Sisters, “in the fantasy ethnoscape” of *Urlina*, “the world [was] rewritten through disidentificatory desire” (Muñoz 23).

Critical reviews point to the failure of some viewers to accurately read the spectacular opacity inherent in the sisters’ disidentification. One critic wrote that “they are

an earnest pair, but really dead earnest is not exactly the spirit in which to approach burlesque" (*Argonaut*, qtd. in Hill 127). But such seriousness may have been indicative of their desire to represent black humanity and respectability in performances of love and devotion, while maintaining their own reputations in the public eye. Such critical reviews point to the sisters' negotiation of how "disidentification can be understood as a way of shuffling back and forth between reception and production. . . . [D]isidentification is the hermeneutical performance of decoding mass, high, or any other cultural field from the perspective of a minority subject who is disempowered in such a representational hierarchy" (Muñoz 25). Regardless of its reception, *Urlina* and the Hyers Sisters performances are a critical, yet underacknowledged component of the tradition of black female performers commanding respectability and visibility for black sexualities. Their work stands in concert with the performances and political agendas of artists, including Aida Isaacs Menken, whose cross-dressing and racially ambiguous performances pushed at the boundaries of identity categories and attracted female and male admirers and critics across the color line; Aida Overton Walker's famous rendition of Salome, as well as her cross-dressing turns as substitute for her ailing husband in Williams and Walker sketches; the cross-dressing practices employed by Harriet Jacobs and Ellen Craft to enact their successful escapes from captivity to freedom; and later Harlem Renaissance and Chitlin' Circuit acts such as the Whitman Sisters, Gladys Bentley, and Jackie "Moms" Mabley, all of whom featured cross-dressing and disidentification as part of their own spectacular performances. The Hyers Sisters, their contemporaries, and those who performed in their wake, harnessed their opacity and occluded their own identities in order to represent alternative ways of viewing and understanding black experience, potential, and humanity.

Daphne Brooks notes that artists such as the Hyerses were "aware of their agency as 'multipositional historical actors' [and] they produced work that engaged with multiple and imbricated cultural sites of knowledge." In doing so, they "experimented with ways to interrogate the politics of 'diasporic consciousness' through performance" (7). The Hyerses' efforts were noted time and again in the press as exceptional in a field saturated with imitation acts. In 1889, Chicago's *Inter-Ocean* praised them by saying that "there is an indescribable charm, an originality and feeling of reality about the songs of these dark-skinned artists which is positive relief from the hackneyed rubbish of the bogus, cork-grimed variety man" (qtd. in Sampson 58). The Hyerses "employ[ed] their own bodies as canvasses of dissent in popular performance culture" to present to audiences an authentic representation of black life that transcended grotesquely exaggerated stereotypes (Brooks 6). In doing so, they contributed to the cultural project of dismantling such negative representations and to creating new and spectacular opportunities for black and female artists creating lives in the theatre.

Notes

1. See Brooks.
2. For aural passing analysis, see Laurie Stras, "White Face, Black Voice: Race, Gender, and Region in the Music of the Boswell Sisters," *Journal of Society for American Music* 1.2 (2007): 207-55.
3. The Hyers Sisters were part of a very small group of African American performers giving concert style performances or singing opera. The Fisk Jubilee Singers began touring in 1871, four years after the sisters' debut, and Matilda Sisseretta Joyner Jones, or "Black Patti," didn't make her New York debut until 1888.
4. The 2,000-seat Steinway Hall opened in 1866 and was the heart of the New York concert community, serving as the home of the New York Philharmonic until Carnegie Hall opened in 1891. See "Steinway & Sons History," n.d., *Steinway Showrooms*, Web.
5. For a history of the Kansas Exodus, see Nell Irvin Painter, *Exodusters: Black Migration to Kansas after Reconstruction* (New York: Norton, 1992).
6. Black minstrel star Willie Lyle, a famed female impersonator, played a maid while Billy Kersands triumphed in multiple roles including an "Irish missionary, a pigtailed Puritan and a Christian Chinaman"

(Graziano 90). While maintaining their reputations as producers of entertainment with cultural cachet, the Hyerses' collaboration with Kersands and Lyle contributed additional star power to the show. Kersands and Lyle also lent their expert comedic natures, which must have contrasted well with the sisters' more serious performances.

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