



The Cotton Club: How Black Performers Faced and Confronted Oppression

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The Cotton Club was a popular nightclub in Harlem that operated between 1923-1935, located on the corner of 142nd Street and Lenox Avenue. My essay explores the peak of the club between 1927-1935.¹ This essay aims to show that whilst white owners oppressed black performers, black performers still found ways to overcome and refashion their experiences in the club. Ultimately, the Cotton Club became a unique site where there existed an undercurrent of agency from black people. Firstly, my essay explores how white owners mistreated black employees at the club. Secondly, I analyse the ‘white gaze’ and notions of exotica, and the ways black performers subverted this gaze to channel their own self-expression. Next, I examine policies of segregation at the club and other areas in Harlem but also argue that segregation at these places could be flexible. Finally, I explore depictions of the Cotton Club in newspapers and briefly explore black-owned clubs in Harlem and their association with the Cotton Club.

Mistreatment And Conditions In The Cotton Club

White owners and patrons of the Cotton Club built up a reputation of exploiting and mistreating black performers. In his memoir, Howard Eugene (‘Stretch’) Johnson, a dancer and activist, claimed that the affiliations between the white owners and mobsters amplified the “racist attitudes toward the performers”.² Johnson’s memoir is particularly useful as Johnson himself performed in the club. This provides rare insight from a black perspective, offering a distinctive voice and confronting premise that gives an immediate sense of the poor conditions and mistreatment he and other black performers experienced. For instance, he writes that mobsters selected members of the chorine to join them for after-show drinks and ‘entertainment’ in such a manner that Johnson argues echoed the selection process of a slave market.³ Such conditions were further exemplified behind the stage, where female performers like Lena Horne recalled that owners underpaid and overworked them, discouraged the use of the only female bathroom (reserved for white women), and placed them in unventilated dressing rooms “reeking of...stale perspiration”.⁴ Furthermore, Dempsey J. Travis’ memoir, described the mob-owners of the club as 20th-century versions of slave masters, comparing how the club’s owners ‘chained’ jazz musicians to the club “in the same manner as slaves were shackled to the cotton

¹ Howard E. Johnson and Wendy Johnson, *A Dancer in the Revolution: Stretch Johnson, Harlem Communist at the Cotton Club* (New York: Fordham University, 2014), 3.

² Johnson and Johnson, *Dancer*, 29.

³ Johnson and Johnson, *Dancer*, 29.

⁴ Shane Vogel, *The Scene of Harlem Cabaret* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2009), 90.

and tobacco plantations in the antebellum south”.⁵ Specifically, Travis writes how the club’s owner, Owey Madden, refused to let Duke Ellington leave the club unless Ellington “agreed to pay the orchestra that replaced him” with his own money.⁶ Such circumstances reinforce both Johnson and Travis’ view that black performers in the club faced not only mistreatment but also a form of commercial enslavement that echoed both British slavery and the practice of purchasing manumission in Dutch slavery (given the conditions of Ellington having to purchase his way out of the club).⁷

However, some sources highlight another view of the Cotton Club that suggests white patrons did not exploit or belittle black performers. For instance, a 1927 review of the Cotton Club by Abel Green, claimed that the black staff appeared to be “far from servile in its behaviour toward the white clientele”, arguing that the staff “seems to take the attitude that...it can assert itself in native territory” and describing the overall service as “dubious”, implying that staff displayed a degree of agency.⁸ Moreover, in the 1931 book, *Nightclubs*, the authors described Harlem as a centre of white trade but also commented that black people did not “give a second thought to it” because it brought “a lot of loose cash into the neighbourhood.”⁹ However, in cases like the Cotton Club, monetary flows never really reached black people, but rather went to its white owners.¹⁰ Conversely, in Langston Hughes autobiography, *The Big Sea*, Hughes criticised “the influx of white people”, since they took up “prime seats” in nightclubs and “stared at the Negro customers—like amusing animals in a zoo”.¹¹ Hughes also noted that black people did not object to the “influx” out of politeness, which only further contributed to white people believing black people wanted them in Harlem.¹²

Importantly, it is interesting to assess the authors of these primary sources. Both Abel Green and the authors of *Nightclub* (Jack Kofoed and Jimmy Durante) are white, whilst Langston Hughes is black. The white authors here present the Cotton Club and its Harlem surrounds in a positive light and both comment on their interpretations of the black experience. However, black sources like Langston Hughes’ *The Big Sea*, along with other black writers from the time like Stretch Johnson or Dempsey J. Travis, paint a portrait that is significantly different to their white counterparts. This not only demonstrates the failure of white authors in capturing an accurate representation of the black experience but importantly, exemplifies the need to locate black voices like that of Hughes’ to grasp a sharper understanding of the Cotton Club.

The White Gaze

The Cotton Club’s white audience exoticized and projected the ‘white gaze’ onto its black performers, illustrating that the club did not merely provide entertainment, but reaffirmed white ideals of ‘black exotica’.¹³ For instance, the owners styled the club to evoke images of the

⁵ Dempsey J. Travis, *The Duke Ellington Primer* (Chicago: Urban Research Press, 1996), 26.

⁶ Travis, *Primer*, 33.

⁷ Ira Berlin and Leslie M. Harris, “A World of Possibilities: Slavery and Freedom in Dutch New Amsterdam,” in *Slavery in New York* ed. Ira Berlin et al. (New York: The New Press, 2005), 47.

⁸ Charlotte Greenspan, *Pick Yourself Up: Dorothy Fields and the American Musical* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 55.

⁹ Jimmy Durante and Jack Kofoed, “Today’s Harlem is Red-Hot,” in *Nightclubs* ed. Alfred A. Knopf (New York: Knopf Publishing, 1931), 116.

¹⁰ Johnson and Johnson, *Dancer*, 34.

¹¹ Langston Hughes, *The Big Sea* (London, Pluto Press Limited, 1986), 225.

¹² Hughes, *Sea*, 225.

¹³ Johnson and Johnson, *Dancer*, 26.

antebellum southern mansion, using fluted white columns, images of cotton fields and slave quarters, and backdrops painted with weeping willows.¹⁴ This suggests that the white owners and patrons wanted to recreate an environment where “they felt liked they were being catered to and entertained by black slaves”.¹⁵ Johnson’s memoir contends that the ‘jungle music’, a style of music evoking stereotypical African themes played by black performers, ‘pandered’ to its upper-class white audience.¹⁶ The academic and poet, Sterling Brown, even went to the extent of claiming that such music merely presented the likes of Ellington as a “jazzed up version” of a “contented slave”, adding that the décor of such cabarets were merely substitutes of slave cabins.¹⁷ However, Brown’s observations do indeed hold merit. For example, female dancers like ‘Minnie the Moocher’, who performed ‘exotic’ belly dancing rituals like the ‘hoochy coochy’ fuelled the libidinous fantasies of the club’s patrons.¹⁸ Specifically, these dances conveyed imperial images of “oriental corruption”, opium dens, and a rejection of American “bourgeois respectability”.¹⁹ Whilst patrons demanded performances and dancers like Minnie the Moocher, they simultaneously denounced such performances and the images they conveyed as “racialised wickedness”, exposing an innate hypocrisy common among white patrons.²⁰ Importantly, this highlights that the Cotton Club represented a “culturally constructed notion of exotic escape” for its audience—a place where the white gaze could be exercised to its fullest extent.²¹

However, many performers in the club found ways to subvert the gaze cast by white audiences. Johnson, for instance, recalls how black performers like Ellington “extracted vitality” and “emotional strength” in their performances by drawing on images of “life in the ghetto” and responding to “their own oppression”.²² Ellington achieved this by subverting the popular ‘jungle-style’ music, which consisted of pounding tom-toms, unusual harmonies, and ‘growling’ bass lines.²³ Specifically, Ellington and his band “pushed sound, rhythm, and instrumentation into more stylistically experimental registers”, thereby creating subtle musical changes designed to undermine the ‘primitive ethos’ associated with jungle music.²⁴ Thus, Ellington claimed that his music transcended the crass notion of the ‘jungle-style’ celebrated by whites and demanded by his employers, but instead, used his music as an “expression of his relationship to the African Diaspora”.²⁵ Likewise, female dancers overcame the white gaze by surpassing typical images of exoticism imposed onto their bodies by “mastering their bodies” through “mastering the Orient”.²⁶ In other words, they rejected the label of “racialised wickedness” but instead appropriated such labels to empower themselves whilst on stage.²⁷ Thus, performances and music at the Cotton Club needed to possess a dual effect: in that, it upheld the “humorous, sexualised, and caricatured” qualities sought after by its white

¹⁴ Travis, *Primer*, 26.

¹⁵ Vogel, *Cabaret*, 81.

¹⁶ Johnson and Johnson, *Dancer*, 26.

¹⁷ Vogel, *Cabaret*, 83.

¹⁸ Fiona I.B. Ngo, *Imperial Blues: Geographies of Race and Sex in Jazz Age New York* (Duke University: Duke University Press, 2014), 2.

¹⁹ Ngo, *Imperial*, 2.

²⁰ Ngo, *Imperial*, 2.

²¹ Tim Wall, “Duke Ellington, Radio Remotes, and the Mediation of Big City Nightlife, 1927 to 1933,” *Jazz Perspectives* 6, no. 1 (2012): 207.

²² Johnson and Johnson, *Dancer*, 29.

²³ Vogel, *Cabaret*, 98.

²⁴ Vogel, *Cabaret*, 98.

²⁵ Kimberly H. Teal, “Beyond the Cotton Club: The Persistence of Duke Ellington’s Jungle Style,” *Jazz Perspectives* 6, no. 1 (2012): 149.

²⁶ Ngo, *Imperial*, 2.

²⁷ Ngo, *Imperial*, 2.

spectators, whilst being able to hold “authentic” and “rhetorical power” for the artists on stage.²⁸ Thus, for black performers at the Cotton Club, the reinvention of artistic styles and subversion of the ‘white gaze’ provided rare opportunities for self-expression.²⁹

Additionally, many sources note that Ellington and other artists were aware of the “ridiculousness” of performing a “jungle persona”.³⁰ Rather, historians like Kimberly Teal argue that the music in Ellington’s ‘jungle-style’ reflected the environs of the Cotton Club itself and not of “a true African jungle”.³¹ This sentiment is also echoed in Johnson’s memoir, where he vehemently argues that Ellington’s musical style actually referred to Harlem, specifically, Ellington’s ‘primitive’ jungle music meant to capture the environment of the Cotton Club and the mob-owners themselves.³² Thus, the subversion of the gaze also served as a critique of the club itself and symbolised the “the jungle on two levels.”³³

Segregation

The owners of the Cotton Club often refused black patronage, which also triggered many other clubs to adopt similar positions.³⁴ Segregation in the Cotton club seemingly fuelled the club’s success, as it became an environment where “white authority contained black wildness”,³⁵ and where such “racial lines...prevented possible trouble...and the chances of a war are less if there’s no mix”.³⁶ The success of the Cotton Club and its ability to attract “floods of white patronage” via their rules of segregation enticed several other clubs in the Harlem area, who hoped to boost their own businesses, to adopt similar policies of exclusion.³⁷ For example, in an article by Rudolph Fisher, a physician and writer, Fisher expresses his sense of surprise at smaller nightclubs like ‘Barron’s’ refusing black patronage but employing black workers.³⁸ What makes Fisher’s source unique is that he spent the first half of the 1920s studying medicine in Washington. Thus, when he returned to Harlem, Fisher expresses his astonishment when he sees “Caucasians storming Harlem” during the Harlem Renaissance, communicating a sense of cultural shock absent from other sources.³⁹ Moreover, Fisher says that Barron’s, like many other clubs following the footsteps of the Cotton Club, became a “cabaret run by Negroes for whites”.⁴⁰

However, writing in his autobiography, Hughes highlighted that such clubs “made the grievous error of barring their own race...quickly losing business and folding up”.⁴¹ Thus, Hughes suggests that a pivotal element to the success of such cabarets lay in the fact that white New Yorkers visited Harlem and its clubs to “simply watch the coloured customers amuse themselves”, meaning that clubs upholding rules of segregation defeated the very premise that

²⁸ Teal, “Beyond,” 126.

²⁹ Vogel, *Cabaret*, 98.

³⁰ Teal, “Beyond,” 125.

³¹ Teal, “Beyond,” 128.

³² Johnson and Johnson, *Dancer*, 29.

³³ Teal, “Beyond,” 126.

³⁴ Hughes, *Sea*, 224.

³⁵ Teal, “Beyond,” 132.

³⁶ Durante and Kofoed, “Red-Hot,” 115.

³⁷ Hughes, *Sea*, 225.

³⁸ Rudolph Fisher, “The Caucasian Storms Harlem,” in *The American Mercury* (New York: Mercury Publications, 1927), 395.

³⁹ Fisher, “Storms,” 393.

⁴⁰ Fisher, “Storms,” 395.

⁴¹ Hughes, *Sea*, 225.

attracted white patrons in the first place.⁴² The Cotton Club, however, managed to overcome its segregation policies and maintain its commercial success due to its “extravagant floorshows” and its ability to attract well-known black performers (impossible for smaller establishments), essentially, still allowing white patrons to watch black people “amuse themselves”, but on a much more theatrical level.⁴³ In other words, segregation still posed potential barriers for the Cotton Club, however, the club’s wealth effectively meant that they could overcome this barrier by employing black people themselves to ‘amuse’ its white audience.⁴⁴ Thus, to an extent, the Cotton Club succeeded not because the owners set it up to be an exclusive space for white patrons, but rather, part of its success is attributed to the club’s offerings of black entertainment to ‘amuse’ white audiences.⁴⁵

However, segregation in the club is a nuanced issue, with many sources pointing out several exceptions posed by the club. For instance, the club admitted black celebrities like the boxer, Jack Johnson, and tap dancer, Bill Robinson.⁴⁶ Also, well-regarded performers of the club like Duke Ellington and his status as an “outsider-within”, inadvertently strengthened his bond with the mob-owners, therefore, those in charge granted privileges to Ellington by allowing members of his family and his ‘respectable Negro’ friends to watch Ellington perform.⁴⁷ Additionally, black patrons with lighter skin that “could pass for white” and wealthy black patrons were also exempt from the club’s segregation policies.⁴⁸ The 1927 review of the club by Abel Green described the club’s patrons as “a conglomerate mixed audience”, which further illustrates the club’s somewhat loose stance on its ‘whites-only’ policy.⁴⁹ Thus, segregation remained a flexible policy at the club, showcasing that the ‘whites-only’ policy represented a “matter of perceived practicality rather than ideology”.⁵⁰

Other Modes of Experiencing Nightlife

For the many others barred from entering the Cotton Club, newspapers became an alternative method for experiencing the shows at the club. The *New York Amsterdam News* (NYA), a newspaper targeting black readers, regularly published reviews of the club, most of which created a sense of excitement and buzz around the establishment. The NYA claimed that the Cotton Club was “the best of its kind anywhere in the country”,⁵¹ had a “star-studded cast”,⁵² and that “the cotton club chorus is the most beautiful and best-trained coloured chorus in the world”.⁵³ The NYA can be regarded as a major source for black people to learn about the club since many reviews about the club occasionally took up a headline or a large share of space in the paper.⁵⁴ Such enthusiastic treatment of the black performers, however, remained somewhat limited to just the NYA. For instance, other newspaper sources like the *New York Times* (NYT), written for a white audience, wrote about the club with a much more indifferent quality, with

⁴² Hughes, *Sea*, 225.

⁴³ Vogel, *Cabaret*, 98.

⁴⁴ Hughes, *Sea*, 225.

⁴⁵ Hughes, *Sea*, 225.

⁴⁶ Johnson and Johnson, *Dancer*, 32.

⁴⁷ A.H. Lawrence, *Duke Ellington and His World: A Biography* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 156.

⁴⁸ Vogel, *Cabaret*, 80.

⁴⁹ Greenspan, *Pick Yourself*, 55.

⁵⁰ Greenspan, *Pick Yourself*, 55.

⁵¹ “Cotton Club Revue Repeating Success This Week,” *The New York Amsterdam News*, June 9, 1926, 6.

⁵² Allan McMillan, “Harlem Night Club Stages Another Fine Show,” *The New York Amsterdam News*, July 27, 1935, 7.

⁵³ “Success,” 6.

⁵⁴ McMillan, “Fine Show,” 7.

most of the articles being a simple advertisement about shows in the club, usually squished among many other articles.⁵⁵ Thus, the real estate given to the club in the *NYA* and *NYT*, specifically articles praising the black performances and not the club itself, reveals the significance of the club for its black and white readers. Ultimately, it suggests that the club existed simply as another outlet of entertainment and ‘amusement’,⁵⁶ for white people, whilst at the same time it represented an example of black artistry for black people. Comparing these two prominent newspapers highlights the different perceptions of the club for black people and white people, but importantly, for the *NYA*, it represents a rare source that provides a glimpse into the relations between black people (writers, readers, and the performers) and not strictly the tensions between black and white.

Outside the Cotton Club, smaller clubs run by black people for black people became a primary source of nightlife and entertainment for many residents of Harlem.⁵⁷ Small, working-class establishments like ‘The Nest Club’ or ‘Rhythm Club’ attracted late-night patrons, especially those finishing work at white clubs like Cotton.⁵⁸ Whilst these clubs lacked the extravagance and spectacle of the Cotton Club, they offered economic and social support for smaller black artists.⁵⁹ Moreover, black cabarets represented an antithesis to white clubs, in that they redefined notions of ‘blackness’ for many of their patrons and performers.⁶⁰ Specifically, the likes of the Cotton Club constructed and engraved a certain ‘truth’ onto black bodies concerning ideas of the primal and sexually deviant.⁶¹ However, since black people ran black clubs for black patrons, performances produced a dynamic of reciprocity between the performer and the spectator, which countered the one-way relationship in the Cotton Club between the black performer and white spectator.⁶² In other words, black clubs redefined the ‘truths’ engraved onto black performers in clubs like Cotton, and instead, black clubs hosted less constricted performances, encouraged impromptu acts; and therefore, produced a degree of authenticity and pleasure absent from white-owned clubs.⁶³ Moreover, Vogel writes that several black artists like Langston Hughes took inspiration from the black-owned clubs in Harlem for their works. For example, Vogel notes that some of Hughes’s jazz poems evoke the “pulse” and “beat” of the people dancing at black-owned nightclubs, highlighting how the energy of Harlem contributed immensely not just to the employees of the nightclubs but also local artists and writers alike.⁶⁴ Put simply, black-owned clubs fostered considerable direct and indirect support for black people.

The Cotton Club was a site of tension between black people and white people. Issues including mistreatment, segregation and the white gaze are important points to consider to gain a more layered and in-depth understanding of black experiences during this period. Whilst oppression seemed to be the norm in the club, black performers found effective ways to subvert and redefine their experiences, illustrating a strong sense of agency. Importantly, by exploring these varied experiences and differences of the club, we gain a more nuanced understanding of the Cotton Club, ultimately learning that issues of oppression were not black and white

⁵⁵ “Molly Picon at Palace,” *The New York Times*, July 21, 1934, 14.

⁵⁶ Hughes, *Sea*, 225.

⁵⁷ Vogel, *Cabaret*, 84.

⁵⁸ Vogel, *Cabaret*, 84.

⁵⁹ Vogel, *Cabaret*, 84.

⁶⁰ Vogel, *Cabaret*, 85.

⁶¹ Vogel, *Cabaret*, 85.

⁶² Vogel, *Cabaret*, 91.

⁶³ Vogel, *Cabaret*, 85.

⁶⁴ Vogel, *Cabaret*, 90.

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