4

Beyond the Rue Pigalle: Recovering Ada 'Bricktop' Smith as 'Muse', Mentor and Maker of Transatlantic Musical Theatre

Maya Cantu

A Myth at the Margins: Modernism and Musical Theatre

With her brazen red hair and bolder presence, the expatriate African American nightclub hostess and performer Ada 'Bricktop' Smith has occupied a distinctive place in chronicles of Lost Generation Paris. During the 1920s, Bricktop's eponymous Montmartre nightclub attracted the legendary likes of T.S. Eliot, Man Ray, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and John Steinbeck. At '*Bricktop's*', Smith – born in 1894 in Alderson, West Virginia – entertained both 'high' and café society. European aristocracy, Broadway celebrities, and luminaries of the Harlem Renaissance alike flocked to a club that was at once democratic and exclusive. As Tyler Stovall notes, 'By 1932, Bricktop had become not just a Parisian institution, but the darling of the international elite. The pages of her autobiography read like a *Who's Who* of the leading wealthy, famous and dissolute individuals of the Western world.' (1996, p. 87)

Yet, for much of the twentieth century, Bricktop has remained a myth at the margins of modernism: her club is memorialized by Fitzgerald in *Babylon Revisited* as the irresistible nightspot where protagonist Charlie Wales 'had parted with so many hours and so much money' ([1931] 2011, n.p.). While remembering Bricktop as one of the era's most fabulous hostesses, many twentieth-century accounts of Paris's 'moveable feast', by Fitzgerald, Woody Allen, and others, have minimized her role in creating the cultural banquet itself. As Tracy Denean Sharpley-Whiting comments, 'American cultural and intellectual history of this period seems riveted on maleness and whiteness' (2015, p. 8). In 1983's *Zelig*, Allen summoned Bricktop as a magnetic, yet peripheral, living legend. In the film, Bricktop (as an 89-year-old woman) comments on Leonard Zelig's occasional appearances at her democratically exclusive club: 'Everyone used to be at my place; that is, everyone who was someone.' (Allen, [1983] 2006) After her 30-second-long spot, the film's focus returns squarely to the shape-shifting, world-famous Zelig.

Recent scholarship, including Stovall's *Paris Noir: African Americans in the City of Light* (1996) and Sharpley-Whiting's *Bricktop's Paris: African American Women in Paris between the Two World Wars* (2015), has persuasively shifted Bricktop's role from a glittering footnote to a central force of 1920s modernism. As Sharpley-Whiting observes, 'Bricktop served as both anchor and magnet for an expatriate community of African American women' (2015, p. 12) that included Josephine Baker, Elisabeth Welch, and Ethel Waters, and artists and writers such as Gwendolyn Bennett and Eslanda Goode Robeson. Though playing host to a predominantly white cultural elite, Bricktop carved an enduring career as an entertainer and entrepreneur, while creating a powerful sense of professional and communal solidarity among dozens of African American artists, musicians, and entertainers in Paris between the two World Wars.

Yet even as Bricktop gains prominence in histories of modernism, she remains an overlooked presence in histories of musical theatre, to which she made significant contributions as a maker, mentor, and agent of artistic inspiration (traditionally constructed in the passive, female-gendered terms of the 'muse'). Her relative omission from musical theatre studies demonstrates the exclusion of many figures who have contributed to shaping the form, even while working outside traditional models of musical theatre performance. Additionally, Bricktop eluded easy categorizations due to a complex mix of factors. These include her transatlantic career performing in vaudeville and nightclubs rather than on Broadway or the West End; the complex nature of her identity as a nightclub hostess rather than a performer on the 'legitimate' stage; and the marginalization of African American performers in many twentieth-century, historical narratives of the stage and screen musical.

Bricktop herself acknowledged she was difficult to categorize. Loved by Cole Porter and others for her ineffable charm and charisma at her nightclubs on the Rue Pigalle, she confounded New Yorkers after leaving Paris for Manhattan in 1939. She suggested that New Yorkers didn't comprehend the model of the hostess-entertainer: 'I baffled the audience. I wasn't a torch singer, a funny girl, or a blues singer. I wasn't even a singer.' (Smith, with Haskins, 1983, p. 214) A figure of Parisian café society who sang Broadway showtunes and Harlem jazz numbers, and an American who immersed herself in French culture (with later, long interludes in Italy and Mexico), Bricktop drew upon a stylistic and cultural eclecticism that may have distanced American audiences in her native country. A series of Broadway and Hollywood crossover attempts in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s failed to introduce Bricktop to wider audiences, and also contributed to her relative obscurity within the discipline of musical theatre studies.

In this essay, I'll focus upon three aspects of Bricktop's career in, and contributions to, transatlantic musical theatre. As a performer, she embarked upon a lengthy career in American vaudeville and nightclubs from 1908 to 1924, culminating in her work with the Panama Trio: a group that also included Cora Green and Florence Mills. As a mentor, Bricktop played a significant role in the lives and careers of Mills, for whom she arranged the replacement second lead role in *Shuffle Along* (1921); Josephine Baker, to whom she provided guidance and support as Baker transitioned into a superstar; and cabaret legend Mabel Mercer, whose career Bricktop launched. Finally, I consider Bricktop's cultivation of not only musical theatre performance, but songwriting, as an influential close friend to Cole Porter. Bricktop inspired one of the Broadway composer-lyricist's most iconic songs, 'Miss Otis Regrets', during a period in which Porter – as a Jazz Age expatriate – engaged in complex emotional and professional relationships with African American artists. Over the course of over seven decades – upon American vaudeville stages and in nightclubs throughout Chicago, New York, Paris, Mexico City and Rome – Bricktop built an extraordinary performance career defined by acts of racial, cultural, and national border-crossing.

Bricktop as Maker

Endowed with the remarkable name Ada Beatrice Queen Victoria Louise Virginia Smith – a family concession to multiple officious relatives – Bricktop was born in Alderson, West Virginia on 14 August 1894. Later describing herself as a 'one-hundred percent American Negro with a trigger-Irish temper' (Smith, with Haskins, 1983, p. xv), Ada Smith was the youngest child of Thomas Smith, a barber who served a segregated white clientele, and his independent-spirited wife, Harriet. In her memoir, Smith vividly described her early years, the emotional support that her mother provided in encouraging her in her ambitions, and her keen awareness of racial difference (1983, p. 23).

> My father had dark brown skin [...] My mother was seven-eighths white [...] Then along I came with white, white skin like my mother's, and red-gold hair.
>
> (Smith, with Haskins, 1983, p. 4)

Bricktop developed another distinctive physical characteristic at the age of three: the freckles and red hair for which she became known (Smith, with Haskins, 1983, p. 5).

While navigating the complexities of her racial identity, Bricktop became saloon-struck. At the age of six, after Thomas's death, Harriet moved the family to Chicago, where she operated a boarding-house – and where young Ada avidly explored the city and its attractions. Ada gravitated towards State Street's many saloons, where she peeked her head under doors to see the crowds and musicians (Smith, with Haskins, 1983, p. 19). When her sister, Ethel, had the chance to perform, she was envious. However, at this point, Ada was more interested in being in the audience of the saloons than performing (p. 19).

Instead, Bricktop turned her attentions to Chicago's varied and bustling theatre scene, and particularly to the Pekin Theatre (Smith, with Haskins, 1983, p. 19). At the Pekin, Chicago's first African American professional stock company, Ada 'dragged' her mother and siblings to the Sunday matinees, while reserving her greatest enthusiasm for African American superstars Bert Williams and George Walker, and Aida Overton Walker, as well as for the Jewish American 'Last of the Red Hot Mamas', Sophie Tucker, a favourite of hers to whom she would later be compared (p. 23). Now determined to enter show business herself, Ada and a number of school friends heard rumours of a need for children for a new show. Cast in the ensemble, Ada was soon pulled out of the Pekin show by a truancy officer (p. 21).

After turning 16, Ada professionally entered show business, embarking upon a career in American vaudeville and nightclubs that lasted until her move to Paris in May of 1924. Learning that the comedy team of Flournoy Miller and Aubrey Lyles, then Pekin Theatre regulars, needed children for the chorus, the 16-year-old Ada prepared to go on the road with Miller and Lyles's new show. As Bricktop remembered in her 1983 memoir, their act, performed in blackface with dance and a fight scene, was imitated by other vaudeville acts (Smith, with Haskins, 1983, p. 24). While Bricktop didn't identify the title of the Miller and Lyles act in her memoir, this show may have been 1909's *The Colored Aristocrats*, a musical comedy set in Jackson, Tennessee. According to Henry T. Sampson, it was in this show that Miller and Lyles 'first introduced the characters of Steve Jenkins (Miller) and Sam Peck (Lyles) that would become famous a decade later in their Broadway hit production of *Shuffle Along*' (Sampson, 2013, p. 72). Sylvester Russell's *Indianapolis Freeman* review of *The Colored Aristocrats* refers not only to a 'chorus of very young people especially proficient in dancing', but to 'Miss Ada Smith, who sang "Pleading Eyes," [but] was not mentioned on the program' (Russell, 1909, p. 706).

Over the next few years, Ada Smith performed consistently in vaudeville, primarily on the Theatre Owners Booking Association (TOBA) circuit, and sometimes crossing over into semi-integrated vaudeville circuits that played to predominantly white audiences. Like the Miller and Lyles show in which she made her debut, the vaudeville acts in which Ada Smith appeared shared much with the 'black musical comedies in the first forty years of the twentieth century [that] had their roots in the early minstrel shows of the postbellum period', as described by Sampson (2013, p. 1). Yet even while these shows, on the surface, conformed to demeaning white stereotypes of African American culture, they also offered sizeable professional opportunities to black performers. Many subtly subverted and undermined textual stereotypes through the 'sardonic subterfuge' of performance, as Daphne Brooks describes Bert Williams and George Walker's work as, respectively, Shylock Homestead and Rareback Pinkerton in 1903's *In Dahomey* (2006, p. 210). *In Dahomey* joined other early black musicals that 'played with both re-inscribing and undoing racist tropes while also bearing the burden of their contiguity with a bygone (white) minstrelsy era' (Brooks, 2006, p. 211). It is likely that Smith's vaudeville acts shared some of these strategies.

As recounted in her memoir, Smith followed the Miller and Lyles show with, successively, performances with McCabe's Georgia Troubadours, the Oma Crosby Trio (billed in the early 1910s as 'Oma Crosby's Kinkies'), the Ten Georgia Campers, and the Kinky-Doo Trio. Touring 'around Illinois and the neighboring states' (Smith, with Haskins, 1983, p. 25) with the popular black minstrel troupe McCabe's Georgia Troubadours, Smith – who regarded herself as a natural dancer (p. 26) – drew enthusiastic notice from newspaper reviewers. On 16 December 1909, the *New York Age*'s Lester A. Walton observed:

> Ada Smith is the life and joy of the company, always bringing sunshine whenever there seems a cloud of discontent. She is the pet of the first part, and is doing a red-hot double turn with Jack Windbush in the olio.
>
> (Walton, 1909)

Touring on the TOBA circuit in 1910 with a trio headed by Oma Crosby, one of the original members of the Pekin Theatre stock company, Smith also attracted reviewers' praise: 'Miss Crosby's partner, Ada Smith, makes a good teammate, and both girls are very pretty and dress nicely, both in their singing, dancing and jungle scenes' (Russell, 1910, p. 191).[1] During her time playing a booking at New York's Gibson Theater, Smith paid a visit to one of Harlem's most famous nightspots, Barron Wilkins' Exclusive Club, where the titular Barron, admiring Smith's red hair, dubbed her with a new professional identity: 'I think I'll call you Bricktop.' (Smith, with Haskins, 1983, p. 34) While touring with Oma Crosby, Bricktop also experienced doubts about the direction of her performing career – and decided to leave vaudeville. Far from a glamorous life, she saw it as 'a world of dingy theaters, sudden cancellations, and [. . .] getting stranded' (p. 25).

Still a vaudeville trouper, Bricktop left the Oma Crosby Trio and joined the Ten Georgia Campers, another singing and dancing group. After performing with the Ten Georgia Campers on the 'big-time' Pantages Circuit (Smith, with Haskins, 1983, p. 35), Bricktop then, in 1911, joined a final vaudeville troupe: the Kinky-Doo Trio, made up of Madeline Cooper, Lola Wicks and herself, who toured predominantly on the TOBA circuit (1983, p. 37).

Realizing her early dream to become a professional 'saloon singer', Bricktop spent the next 10 years performing in nightclubs throughout Chicago and in Harlem. According to Bricktop, her nightclub career – which she initiated in the back room of Roy Jones's smart saloon at 21st Street and Wabash Avenue (Smith, with Haskins, 1983, p. 39) – brought her both a higher salary and greater creative freedom. Here, Bricktop sang and danced to solo piano accompaniment – often for large tips that would be shared between performers and the band (p. 40). At Roy Jones's, Bricktop was noticed by Jack Johnson, then internationally famous as the first African American world heavyweight boxing champion after defeating white boxer Jim Jeffries in a 1910 'fight of the century'. In 1912, Johnson hired Bricktop for his Café de Champion (shortened to Café Champ). Remembering the athlete-entrepreneur with great fondness in her memoir, Bricktop praised Johnson for giving Chicago an elegant saloon that was racially integrated (Smith, with Haskins, 1983, p. 44). Yet Café Champ's liberalism as an integrated nightclub – and Johnson's interracial romances with Etta Duryea and Lucille Cameron – drew animus from white authorities. A 1912 crime of passion enabled a shut-down of the club when one of Johnson's spurned lovers shot him; its liquor licence was withdrawn and business closed (p. 49).

Bricktop's next major Chicago nightclub engagement, at the Panama Club, marked a new professional pinnacle. In 1914, she joined the Panama Trio alongside Cora Green and Florence Mills. Bricktop noted that this was one of best in the city, and again played to integrated audiences (Smith, with Haskins, 1983, p. 53). Teaming up with Cora Green after meeting her at Gertie Jackson's Theatrical Boardinghouse, Bricktop also recounted her discovery of Florence Mills as the third member of the trio. Mills was tired of the multiple shows a day in vaudeville, and asked Bricktop to help her get a cabaret job (p. 54). The Panama Club's owner

Isadore 'Izzy' Levine expressed reservations that the lithe, silvery-voiced Mills was 'too skinny' and a soprano (something he wasn't keen on). However, Bricktop persuaded him, proudly seeing it as her contribution to Mills' escape from vaudeville (p. 54).

The Panama Trio is significant to the history of the American musical not only for nurturing three of the most prominent black women performers of the Harlem Renaissance era, but for the collective performance innovations of Mills, Smith, and Green. While Florence Mills would become a legend as 'Harlem's Little Blackbird' after her 1921 breakout performance in *Shuffle Along* (a casting in which Bricktop also played a substantial role), Cora Green also established a notable career in vaudeville and on Broadway (in 1922's *Strut, Miss Lizzie* and 1924's *Dixie to Broadway*, also with Mills), and gave a dynamic lead performance as Mandy Jenkins in Oscar Micheaux's landmark, backstage musical *Swing!* (1938). As Bricktop recalled, the Panama Trio were early adaptors of close-harmony vocal techniques before other groups popularized the style (Smith, with Haskins, 1983, p. 55). Playing the Pantages Circuit in 1919, the Panama Trio received billing as the 'Syncopated Maids', and praise as 'very good jazz singers [...] they are a hit' (Josephs, 1919, p. 22). However, by now, Bricktop had definitively made up her mind to pursue her career in nightclubs, because she wanted to be able to interact with and see her audience (Smith, with Haskins, 1983, p. 61).

Leaving the Panama Trio in 1917, as the United States entered World War I, Bricktop concluded her American nightclub career in New York at two of Harlem's most famous nightclubs (Smith, with Haskins, 1983, p. 75). Fresh from gigs at speakeasies in Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Atlantic City, Smith was hired in 1922 at Barron Wilkins' Exclusive Club, the nightclub run by the same colourful figure who had dubbed her Bricktop. Unlike the Café Champ, the Panama Club, and Bricktop's own Parisian nightclubs later, Barron's was not racially integrated (she recalled that only 'light-skinned Negroes' and celebrities for whom exceptions were made, such as Jack Johnson or Bert Williams, were able to attend (p. 75)). In 1923, Bricktop received a call from Connie Immermann, the owner of Connie's Inn, who invited her to appear as a soubrette. Dancing in as a 'red rose' at the end of a revue flower number, she was soon promoted to headliner (p. 81).

While performing at Connie's Inn, Bricktop received a career-changing request from Sammy Richardson, one of the few African Americans to have already established a performing career in Paris. Richardson relayed an offer for Smith to replace the singer-dancer Florence Jones as the headliner of Le Grand Duc nightclub in Paris. Bricktop recalled that Palmer, Florence's husband, suggested her to the manager, Gene Bullard, as a replacement, on the basis that she was not a great singer, but had 'the damndest personality, and she can dance. She'll be a big success over here' (Smith, with Haskins, 1983, p. 82).[2] In May of 1924, Bricktop arrived in Paris. On the raffish Montmartre street of the Rue Pigalle, she then embarked upon the fabled second chapter of her performing career as the hostess of Le Grand Duc, and then the hostess and manager of *Bricktop's*, a role in which mentoring would play a significant part.

Bricktop as Mentor

A 1961 proposal for a television programme to be entitled 'Bricktop's Ball' described the entertainer as 'the top-talent picker of her time, bringing the best new artists and comedians to television screens' (Prospectus for 'Bricktop's Ball', 1961). While 'Bricktop's Ball' wasn't picked up for TV, she was nevertheless keenly attuned to the guidance and promotion of talented peers, particularly other African American women. As Sharpley-Whiting observes, Bricktop's mentorship ranged from offering communal camaraderie at her nightclub to one-on-one professional assistance to a diverse network of expatriate and visiting African American women artists, musicians, writers, and performers in Paris:

> For many, such as the poet-painter Gwendolyn Bennett and portrait artist Laura Wheeler, Bricktop's was the last stop on a night out. Composer and singer Nora Holt and performance artist Florence Mills frequently dined with the saloonkeeper during their time in the city. Bricktop counseled Josephine Baker in her early days in Paris, helping her to read and write, and offered refuge to a homesick Ethel Waters who, tired of croissants and beurre blanc, desperately wanted a place to cook.
>
> (Sharpley-Whiting, 2015, p. 12)

For Florence Mills, Josephine Baker, and Mabel Mercer, Bricktop's mentorship would be particularly significant in contributing to the history of both musical theatre and American cabaret. With all three women, but particularly Mills and Mercer, Bricktop can be viewed as a collaborative factor in their professional success, despite never being formally involved on a Broadway or West End producing team.

On a number of occasions, Bricktop provided direct career advancement to Florence Mills. Most momentously, Bricktop's assistance led to the latter's star-is-born casting in *Shuffle Along*. While briefly performing with Bricktop at Barron Wilkins' Exclusive Club in 1921, Mills benefited not only from Bricktop's initiative and generosity as a 'talent picker' but the latter's expanding professional network, which drew together brilliant colleagues from both Bricktop's first vaudeville tour and the Panama Trio. Bricktop recommended Mills to Harriet Sissle (composer Noble Sissle's wife) of *Shuffle Along* when its lead, Gertrude Saunders, went into burlesque to make more money (Smith, with Haskins, 1983, p. 79). Concerned that Mills 'was not the right type' for the ingénue second lead of Ruth Little, Noble Sissle saw Mills through a long series of auditions. On the strength of Bricktop's recommendation, Harriet Sissle continued to advocate for Mills, and on her first performance in the role she had 'seventeen encores' (p. 79). As Zakiya R. Adair observes, Mills' sensational successes in London and Paris revues such as *Dover Street to Dixie* (1923) and the 1926 edition of *Blackbirds* (*Les oiseaux noirs*) 'helped open the door for subsequent trans-Atlantic African American women performers like Josephine Baker and Adelaide Hall' (2013, p. 21).

While Bricktop facilitated Mills in her professional opportunities, resulting in the latter's *Shuffle Along* stardom, she worked with Baker from a different angle. With Baker having already exploded upon Paris's consciousness in 1925's epochal *La Revue Nègre*, Bricktop took the sensitive young woman under her wing. She helped Baker negotiate her rapidly growing, intensely eroticized celebrity during the period that Bricktop described as *Le Tumulte Noir*. In her memoir, Bricktop observed how young Baker was when she became famous, and that the reputation she gained for performing in the nude obscured her actual talent as a performer (Smith, with Haskins, 1983, pp. 107–108). While Bricktop recounts helping Baker with some specific matters of personal etiquette (i.e. concealing her early lack of schooling with an autograph stamp; teaching her 'how to take care of nice things', including Baker's Poiret gowns), the older woman also made herself available for more encompassing emotional support: 'I became her big sister. [...] She'd say, "Bricky, tell me what to do." She wouldn't go around the corner without asking my advice.' (p. 108)

Bricktop's mentoring friendship of Baker soured significantly with the entrance of Pepito Abatino. Spurious in his impersonation of an Italian aristocrat (Bricktop famously referred to him as the 'no-account count' (Smith, with Haskins, 1983, p. 109)), Abatino was nonetheless a shrewd businessman who succeeded Bricktop as Baker's mentor. At the same time, he assumed new roles as her manager and husband – though one of controlling, Pygmalionesque tendencies. Bricktop recalled that while Abatino played a role in re-establishing Baker's fame, and tried to give her an education, Baker could have accomplished this by herself (p. 110).[3] While Bricktop and Baker did not resume the closeness of their former friendship, the two remained on sufficiently admiring terms for Bricktop to introduce Baker at the latter's legendary 1973 concert at Carnegie Hall.

While Bricktop provided Mills with professional connections, and Baker with emotional guidance and support, she engaged in her most equitable and mutual mentorship with Mabel Mercer. One of the founding mothers of American cabaret, and the namesake of the Mabel Mercer Foundation (sponsoring the New York Cabaret Convention), Mercer was born in Staffordshire, England in 1900, the daughter of a white chorus girl and a black musician. Once again, Bricktop drew upon her keen sense of 'talent-picking' to hire Mercer at her new location of a larger *Bricktop's* location at 66 Rue Pigalle.[4] Opening the new Bricktop's in November 1931, Bricktop recalled she needed assistance and turned to Mabel Mercer, one of the few black women she recalled seeing in Paris (Smith, with Haskins, 1983, p. 159). Drawn to Mercer's alluring poise – complementing her own entrepreneurial hustle – Bricktop took Mercer on as featured singer and partner.

At 66 Rue Pigalle, Mercer began her own rise to cabaret stardom under the aegis of Bricktop. While Mercer had performed in vaudeville, small nightclubs, and in the chorus of Paris revues (as well as in the 'Negro chorus' of the 1928 London production of *Show Boat*), Mercer's hiring by Bricktop proved pivotal to the former's career. As Bricktop recalled, with her customary pride, the two helped each other: Mercer with her audience-pleasing elegance, and Bricktop in her coaxing of Mercer as a star (Smith, with Haskins, 1983, p. 160). At *Bricktop's*, Mercer excelled in performing the songs of Cole Porter, and also introduced 'Love for Sale' to Parisians shortly after its debut in 1930's *The New Yorkers* (p. 179).

If Bricktop mentored the vulnerable 17-year-old Josephine Baker on a personal and emotional level, while leaving Baker to her own spectacular onstage devices, she helped Mercer in more performance-oriented ways. Working with Bricktop, Mercer gained both assertion and intimacy in her engagement with a cabaret audience, skills that would prove invaluable when, in 1938, Mercer moved to New York, and started singing at the 'first of a series of New York supper clubs over which she reigned over the next thirty years', as Ben Yagoda notes (2015, p. 224). Despite the initial disappointment that Mercer's vocal style – an elegantly clipped soprano – was not immediately popular with audiences (Smith, with Haskins, 1983, p. 161), Bricktop guided Mercer to chat and mingle with her audiences, and also assuaged Mercer's self-doubts about her abilities (p. 161).

While Mercer, like Bricktop, later focused on cabarets and nightclubs rather than the Broadway or West End musical stage, she went on to play a crucial role in the canonization of the 'Great American Songbook', and of many interwar Broadway showtunes by Porter, Rodgers and Hart, and the Gershwins, among others. 'Will Friedwald writes that Mercer and similar singers "were virtually the only artists to keep performing the great songs of the twenties and thirties into the forties and fifties, like monks hiding manuscripts in the Dark Ages"', Yagoda (2015, p. 225) writes of Mercer's under-the-radar, yet immensely influential appeal as a mid-century cabaret stylist who influenced a generation of singers of the American Songbook.

> Being a devotee of hers was like being a member of an exclusive club; she became famous for being unknown. One prominent member of the club was Frank Sinatra, who in 1955 was quoted in Walter Winchell's column in the *New York Mirror*: 'Everything I learned I owe to Mabel Mercer.'
>
> (Yagoda, 2015, pp. 224–225)

At the same time, Mercer learned much from her mentor. Bricktop wrote in her memoir, 'Mabel will tell you even today, "If I know anything about taking care of people, I got it from Brick"' (Smith, with Haskins, 1983, p. 161). Meanwhile, the nightclub hostess also served as inspiration to several artists – in particular, Cole Porter.

Bricktop – And *Bricktop's* – As 'Muse'

While Bricktop became an inspiring presence to her close friend Cole Porter, her nightclub itself provided creative fuel for the many Broadway and Harlem talents who carved out transatlantic careers – or merely visited Paris – between the two World Wars. If Bricktop herself called her nightclub a 'combination mail-drop, bank, rehearsal hall, clubhouse – even a neighborhood bar' (Smith, with Haskins, 1983, p. 125), the rehearsal hall element often took precedence. Le Grand Duc, and then *Bricktop's*, sparked performances and new songs from dozens of visiting stars and songwriters, of both Broadway and Harlem stages (overlapping if distinct social worlds throughout the 1920s). While *Bricktop's* entertained visits by Ethel Waters, Paul Robeson, Florence Mills, and the latter's *Shuffle Along* co-star Lottie Gee,[5] Broadway and West End theatre celebrities both sought entertainment and entertained at *Bricktop's*, at which Smith herself played hostess-headliner. Bricktop counted performers Fred and Adele Astaire, Helen Morgan, and Marilyn Miller, as well as producers Dwight Deere Wiman and J.J. Shubert, among her regulars, along with Irving Berlin and Noël Coward. Indeed, she remembered Coward trying out new songs at the club (Smith, with Haskins, 1983, p. 122).

Yet if composer-lyricists like Berlin and Coward favoured Bricktop, the hostess was most deeply and closely associated with Cole Porter during her time in Paris. If Bricktop would later serve as Porter's inspiration, he was also her most influential patron. F. Scott Fitzgerald had already popularized Bricktop's earlier performance venue, Le Grand Duc, as a destination for the jazz-craving Montparnasse set.[6] Yet it was Porter's promotion of Smith and Le Grand Duc that established the latter as the rage of Parisian nightlife, due to the parade of European aristocrats and Broadway and Hollywood celebrities that Cole and Linda Lee Porter attracted to the club. At their first meeting in the winter of 1925 – when a 'slight, immaculately dressed man' (Smith, with Haskins, 1983, p. 100) eating corned-beef hash with a poached egg revealed himself to be Cole Porter – the songwriter and hostess immediately established a rapport. Impressed by Bricktop's performance of his 'I'm in Love Again', unwittingly sung before the song's composer, Porter asked Bricktop if she could dance the Charleston. As Bricktop recounted, the dance had not made it to Europe, but she had already learned it in the US. After Bricktop performed the Charleston for Porter, the songwriter told her that she had 'talking feet and legs', and assured her they would meet again (p. 101).

Before long, Porter enlisted Bricktop to teach the dance – and soon after, the Black Bottom – at 'Charleston parties' at his spectacular house on 13 Rue Monsieur. The Parisian and New York press avidly chronicled Bricktop teaching the Charleston to Lady Mendl (the former Elsie de Wolfe), the Duke of York, and the Aga Khan, among others. Bricktop recounted that the Charleston launched her as a 'saloonkeeper [...] It caught on and I caught on, Cole Porter standing right there behind me and never leaving me, until I became Bricktop, the one and only' (Smith, with Haskins, 1983, p. 102).

In her memoir, Bricktop characterized her relationship with Cole Porter as one of deep mutual love and respect. She recalled that he was a good friend, 'one of the best I ever had' (Smith, with Haskins, 1983, p. 112). At the same time, her affectionate memories of Porter hint at complex racial undertones – and inequitable power dynamics – in the relationship. During a Jazz Age in which Paris and Venice – arguably more than New York – served as Cole Porter's home-bases, the composer-lyricist forged a number of beneficial and meaningful friendships and professional relationships with black European, and expatriate black American, performers and musicians who spurred his songwriting craft: most notably, the American-born Elisabeth Welch (who played a featured role in Porter's racy 1933 London musical *Nymph Errant*), as well as cabaret/nightclub performers Leslie 'Hutch' Hutchinson, Mabel Mercer, and Bricktop. The latter's nightclub served as a songwriting workshop space for Porter, as well as Noël Coward. Bricktop suggested that 'Night and Day', 'Begin the Beguine', and 'Love for Sale' all started at the nightclub (Smith, with Haskins, 1983, p. 179). Journalist Eslanda Goode Robeson, too, recounted going to *Bricktop's*, where she took in 'Cole Porter's previewing of the song "Mr. and Mrs. Fitch" accompanied by Bricktop' (Sharpley-Whiting, 2015, p. 151). Only later, in November 1932, did the song debut on Broadway in *Gay Divorce*.

At the same time, Bricktop's memoir leaves little doubt that she served not only as a musical inspiration, but as a professional asset to the aristocratic, Midwestern WASP Porter. Through her Charleston lessons and the pair's friendship, Bricktop conferred upon Porter cultural capital and cool during a Parisian Jazz Age of '*Négromanie*', in which 'the Negro was in vogue' (in the words of Langston Hughes, [1940] 2002, p. 175), and many of Broadway's songwriters – including George Gershwin and Porter – worked to import the rhythms of jazz into their stage hits. When Bricktop, in 1939, was forced by the Nazi invasion of Paris to depart her beloved adopted city, Cole Porter could only offer limited assistance, as a patron to Bricktop, within the context of a deeply segregated American society. As Sharpley-Whiting observes: 'Porter, too, known to be gracious but equally persnickety, may have realized that the social barriers crossed in Europe did not apply in America.' (2015, p. 34) In her memoir, Bricktop recounted her first taste of racism in New York in 1939, and being coldly snubbed by Cole Porter's receptionist at the Waldorf Towers. Porter's minimizing of the incident disappointed her; he regretfully advised that Bricktop would continue 'to see more of that' in the United States (Smith, with Haskins, 1983, p. 209).

If the relationship between Porter and Bricktop was shaped by external forces of structural racism, as well as abiding mutual admiration and respect, both aspects of the friendship expressed themselves in the song for which Bricktop famously served as Porter's inspiration: 'Miss Otis Regrets'. Famous as a cabaret number, though introduced on stage in the 1934 London revue *Hi Diddle Diddle*, 'Miss Otis Regrets' is famous as a murder-ballad about a scorned society woman: 'Miss Otis regrets she's unable to lunch today.' After shooting her unfaithful lover with a gun from 'under her velvet gown', Miss Otis is then dragged away by a mob, and 'strung up on the willow across the way' (quoted in McBrien, 2011, p. 239).

Though the song has become associated with a wide array of both black and white performers – from Ella Fitzgerald and Ethel Waters to

Marlene Dietrich and Bette Midler – Bricktop discussed the song's submerged racial subtext as an anti-lynching narrative. In 1932, as Bricktop recounted, Porter walked into *Bricktop's* and told her he had a song for her. On hearing the name, Bricktop recalled asking Porter, 'Where on earth did you get that title?' He replied:

> 'From you. Don't you remember the other day we were talking about a lynching down South, and you said, "Well that man won't lunch tomorrow."'
>
> (Smith, with Haskins, 1983, p. 178)

Porter told her he had returned to his apartment and written his song that evening. This exchange might indicate a glib interpretation of Jim Crow violence in the American South, given the song's ultimate context as a soigné cabaret standard. Yet Bricktop recounted that she took very seriously her frequent performances of the song with which she became closely associated for the remainder of her career. Of 'Miss Otis Regrets', which Porter composed in a more bluesy style than many of his songs, Bricktop noted that the song is a tragic one, and is rarely properly performed: 'The pronunciation, the pauses and things are very important.' (Smith, with Haskins, 1983, p. 178) Noting that Porter preferred for Bricktop, and other singers, to 'use our imaginations' in interpretation and delivery of his songs, Bricktop remembered that she felt the singer was a maid, and inserted a bow at the end of the song, and then 'raised my hand in a cut across the neck to suggest a lynching' (p. 178). 'Miss Otis Regrets' portrays the actions of a high-society woman along the lines of Porter's aristocratic social set. Yet, in choosing to draw focus upon the narration of a character she identified as Miss Otis's maid, Bricktop may have intended to blur the lines of the audience's identification, and the lines between a conventionalized, high-society crime of passion and the very real racial violence in the American South. That the song remained such a staple of Bricktop's repertoire suggests not only the care and skill with which she performed it, but also its multivalence of interpretation.[7]

Along with 'Miss Otis Regrets', Bricktop continued to perform numerous songs of Cole Porter, and relive their fond friendship, at her eponymous nightclubs in Mexico City (where she resided from 1943 through 1949) and Rome (where she operated a *Bricktop's* on the Via Veneto from 1951 through 1964). Bricktop performed a repertoire of dozens of songs that included Porter's 'Easy to Love', 'Just One of Those Things', 'Get Out of Town', and 'It's Alright with Me', along with jazz standards (i.e. 'Saint. Louis Blues' and 'Sweet Georgia Brown') and camp parodies (i.e. the Gershwins' 'The Man I Love', transformed into 'The Man We Love', a duet with Gimi Beni ('Annotated list of song repertoire, c. 1976–1977)).

Bricktop's Legacy: Race and Identity

In her work as a nightclub performer and hostess, Bricktop not only crossed boundaries among musical genres, and the 'legitimate' and 'illegitimate' stage, but also troubled culturally constructed categories of race and performance. Bricktop functioned as a powerful source of solidarity and support to expatriate African American artists in Paris. Harlem nightclubs, such as the Cotton Club and Barron Wilkins' Exclusive Club, offered spectacles of black performance to largely well-heeled white audiences. By contrast, *Bricktop's* audiences were racially integrated, if economically restricted by the nightclub's steep prices, though she 'reserved her warmest welcomes for African American celebrities like Paul Robeson and Jack Johnson' (Stovall 2005, p. 232).

While creating a welcoming community for African Americans in Paris, Bricktop created a performance persona that was uniquely her own. As Tyler Stovall notes, Bricktop carefully negotiated the demands that many African Americans in 1920s Paris faced in balancing 'black community' with 'black spectacle' oriented to the white gaze. Stovall writes that, while Bricktop might have played host to 'a series of white aristocrats', she, Josephine Baker, and other peers 'also resisted the pressures of performance as spectacle, striving to perform their art on their own terms' (2005, p. 232). Bricktop committed cultural acts of resistance not only in the racial integration of her nightclub, but in the eclecticism and cosmopolitanism of her performances. While famous for songs like 'Miss Otis Regrets', Bricktop drew upon the Broadway musical stage, French cabaret, jazz and blues traditions, and the black vaudeville circuit in which she had learned her craft.

Bricktop's verbal resistance to her home country's poor treatment of African Americans must also be considered in assessing her performance legacy. While not directly involved in political activism during her career, Bricktop spoke candidly and powerfully about racism in the United States. In one 1960 interview, given after her return to Europe from the United States (and embracing a new home in Rome), Bricktop told the *New York Post* that Miss Otis, indeed, had some regrets about her home country:

> I always say that there are only two real Americans – the Indians because they owned the joint, and the Negroes, because they were invited here, and those that didn't want to accept the invitation and were *brought*. But freedom is anywhere you find it. We're making strides and even though it's taking too many tomorrows, I'm glad to say I'm an American until I die.
>
> (Smith, with Haskins, 1960, p. 41)[8]

Unfortunately, Bricktop – who moved back to the United States in the early 1970s – failed to cross over into large-scale American success, one of multiple factors that may have contributed to her marginalization in histories of musical theatre, despite her reclamation as a central figure in African American and modernist studies.

Bricktop in Musical Theatre History

The 1983 publication of Smith's memoir, *Bricktop*, crested a late-career renaissance in the 1970s and 1980s. However, Bricktop never reached mainstream American celebrity. With her Carnegie Hall and other Broadway appearances, Josephine Baker would become a legend back in the United States in the 1960s and 1970s. By contrast, Bricktop struggled to cross over into mainstream American success. She made few song recordings, never appeared in a Broadway (or West End) musical, and remained indelibly associated with her nightclub hostess career to those who knew of her work in Paris, Mexico City, and Rome. Ed Sullivan (1961) mentioned in *The New York Daily News*, 'Back home, in the United States [...] the Negro entertainer and nightclub singer isn't very well-known.'

Yet, in the later years of her career, Bricktop did attempt crossover into high-profile American show business, as well as film and television, to limited success. A planned 1962 Carnegie Hall benefit concert dissolved due to inaction from the pledged co-sponsor, the Duchess of Windsor (Smith, with Haskins, 1983, p. 274). Similarly, a proposed movie biopic (in which Bricktop hoped for Pearl Bailey to play her) did not come to fruition (Hoefer, 1960). Television networks also failed to pick up two TV variety show proposals. These were 1961's 'Bricktop's Ball' and a self-titled 1977 programme that might have shifted Bricktop's stature from that of a cult figure to a household name.

The proposal for the latter programme presents a tantalizing alternative history in which Bricktop had introduced herself to a much larger, mass American audience – and possibly become more visibly and centrally represented in historical narratives of musical theatre. Housed at Bricktop's papers at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, the proposal touted Bricktop as an 'international social potentate' and the programme as 'one of the hottest variety programs of the year'. As produced by Oracle Productions Group, the show was intended to feature a mix of entertainment by Bricktop and her guests, choreography by Alvin Ailey and sketches by the comedy ensemble Disclaimer, as well an 'unprecedented repertoire of electronically produced graphic and animated images'. A cross-generational mix of entertainers was also proposed, with Frank Sinatra, Carol Channing, Lena Horne, Fred Astaire, Eubie Blake, Sammy Davis, Jr., Richard Pryor, Stevie Wonder, Cher, Liza Minnelli, and Michael Jackson listed among over four dozen guest stars (Prospectus for 'Bricktop's' television program, c. 1977).

At the same time, she became increasingly memorialized as a mythic symbol of Lost Generation nostalgia. The National Urban League Guild honoured 'The Legendary Bricktop' at a Beaux Arts Ball gala entitled *Broadway '76–77 – The Great Black Way*, celebrating a season that included *for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf*, *Your Arms Too Short to Box with God*, and an all-black revival of *Guys and Dolls*, among others (Programme for *Broadway '76–77*, 1977). Yet other representations of Bricktop focused on her Parisian nightclub as a backdrop for white, literary, and theatrical legends. While Smith appeared as one of the multiple 'talking heads' reminiscing about the protean Leonard Zelig in Allen's 1983 film, she also appeared as a supporting character (played by Jonelle Allen) in Randy Strawderman's 1979 revue, *Red, Hot, and Cole*, at the Variety Arts Theatre in Los Angeles. Here, the fictional Bricktop recounts her memories of meeting Cole and Linda Porter in Paris, and leads a medley of 'Anything Goes' and other Porter songs. Although Allen drew praise for her 'electric presence' (Hunter, 1979), Smith's remarkable life and varied performing career suggest her story as subject matter for a spectacular 'Bricktop' musical of her own. Given her transatlantic trajectory from Chicago vaudeville and Harlem nightclubs, and from Paris to Mexico City and Rome, this imagined *Bricktop! The Musical* might not necessarily debut on the mainstages of New York or London.

In its cosmopolitan span and fluidity, the career of Ada 'Bricktop' Smith suggests rich possibilities for reframing models of musical theatre scholarship, and in rendering its history more expansively mobile. Radiating from the bohemian enclaves of Paris, Bricktop's career challenges notions of musical theatre history as anchored in the United States and England; as confined primarily behind the proscenium stages of the 'legitimate' musical stage; and – given Smith's distinctive role as a 'hostess-entertainer' – as synonymous with the performances of traditional Broadway-style 'triple threats'. Tapping into contemporary understandings of the musical in 'a global context' (Wolf, 2016, p. 1), Bricktop's performances invite scholars to continue investigating musical theatre history not only beyond the geographical centralities of Broadway and the West End, but as part of a wider circuit of spatial multiplicities. These include the nightclubs and cabarets that ranged in the 1920s and 1930s from Harlem to Greenwich Village, and from Montmartre to Berlin's Kurfürstendamm.

At the same time, Smith's life and work centralize the agency of African American women as not only performers, but enterprising producers and creative catalysts, within a musical theatre historiography that has often marginalized their innovations. In her work at *Bricktop's*, and in her collaborations with artists like Florence Mills, Josephine Baker, Mabel Mercer, and Cole Porter, Smith broadened the representational strategies, and professional opportunities, available to African American performers. She contributed a powerful performance legacy drawing upon a fluid navigation of racial, cultural, and national identities. Significant to musical theatre history – if unknown to the stages of Broadway – Ada 'Bricktop' Smith sets a model of border-leaping that resonates well beyond the Rue Pigalle.

Notes

1. Such 'jungle scenes' reflected white, primitivist constructs of blackness rooted in the stereotypes of American minstrelsy – which commonly restricted African American performers and characters to such locations as Southern plantations and African jungles. The 1924 Lew Leslie-produced revue, *Dixie to Broadway*, conflated the two locales, as Florence Mills, dressed 'in an elaborate feathered costume as a Zulu dancer', performed 'Jungle Nights in Dixieland' (Egan, 2004, p. 110).
2. According to Tracy Denean Sharpley-Whiting (quoting Taylor, with Cook, *Alberta Hunter: A Celebration in Blues*, 1988), Bricktop may not have recounted the story of her call from the Grand Duc, and Gene Bullard, truthfully in her memoir. Sharpley-Whiting discusses speculation that the telegram was intended for stage performer and blues singer Alberta Hunter, though sent care of Eve Blanche when Hunter was on the road: 'Bricktop picked up [from Blanche] the telegram for Alberta, saying she was going to deliver it, read it instead and took off immediately for Paris. As Harry [Watkins] said, "In those days, you had to survive. You got a job wherever you could, however you could"' (2015, p. 23).
3. Abatino also wrote the film scenario for the 1935 Baker star vehicle *Princess Tam-Tam*, illustrating the Pygmalion narrative of a Tunisian shepherdess, Alwina (Baker), who is coached and transformed by a white French novelist, Max de Mirecourt, into the glamorous aristocrat of the title – a metamorphosis that turns out, by the film's end, to have been a fantasy sequence from Max's novel, *Civilization*.
4. Starting at Le Grand Duc, at 52 Rue Pigalle in 1924, Bricktop then operated the Music Box nightclub in 1926, before managing her own *Bricktop's* nightclub in 1927, and then moving to a larger location, at 66 Rue Pigalle, in 1931.
5. Artist and writer Gwendolyn Bennett described the community-building nature of Gee's performance at the nightclub: 'Then at 4:15 A.M. to dear old Bricktop's .... and Lottie Gee sings for Brick her hit from *Shuffle Along*, "I'm Just Wild About Harry." Her voice is not what it might have been and she had too much champaign (sic), but still there was something very personal and dear about her singing it and we colored folks just applauded like mad.' (Sharpley-Whiting, 2015, p. 99)
6. Bricktop quoted Fitzgerald: 'My greatest claim to fame is that I discovered Bricktop before Cole Porter.' (Smith, with Haskins, 1983, p. 98)

7. Bricktop's definitive account of Porter writing 'Miss Otis Regrets' for her is disputed by Porter's biographer, William McBrien. McBrien cites several alternate origin theories for the song, including one newspaper cutting that 'claimed "Miss Otis" was inspired by a bad cowboy lament he heard at a party at a private home' (2011, pp. 239–240). While considering other accounts of the writing of 'Miss Otis', Bricktop's close relationship with Porter, and the trust she placed in their friendship, suggests the persuasiveness of her own story, and its credibility as a song with an anti-lynching subtext.
8. According to producer Jack Jordan, James Baldwin briefly considered Bricktop as the subject of a prospective book, but the project never materialized (Jordan, 1979).

References

Adair, Z.R. (2013) 'Respectable Vamp': A Black Feminist Analysis of Florence Mills' Career in Early Vaudeville Theatre. *Journal of African American Studies*, 17(1), 21.

Allen, W. ([1983] 2006) *Zelig, DVD*. Los Angeles, CA: MGM.

Annotated list of song repertoire (c. 1976–1977). Ada 'Bricktop' Smith DuConge (1894–1984) Papers, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library, Harlem, New York, Box 5, Folder 21.

Brooks, D. (2006) *Bodies in Dissent: Spectacular Performances of Race and Freedom, 1850–1910*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Egan, B. (2004) *Florence Mills: Harlem Jazz Queen*. Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press.

Fitzgerald, F.S. ([1931] 2011) *Babylon Revisited*. London: Penguin UK, Google Books.

Haskins, J. (1983) Introduction. In Smith, Ada 'Bricktop', with Haskins, J., *Bricktop*. New York: Atheneum Press.

Hoefer, G. (1960) The Hot Box. *Downbeat*, 23 June. Ada 'Bricktop' Smith DuConge (1894–1984) Papers, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Harlem, New York, Box 7, Folder 4.

Hughes, L. (1940) When the Negro Was in Vogue. *Autobiography: The Big Sea*. In McLaren, J. (ed.) (2002), *The Collected Works of Langston Hughes* (Vol. 13, pp. 175–182). Columbus, MO: University of Missouri Press.

Hunter, G. (1979) A Hot Attraction. *The Burbank Daily News*, 9 May. Ada 'Bricktop' Smith DuConge (1894–1984) Papers, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Harlem, New York, Box 2, Folder 2.

Jordan, J. (1979) Letter to Bricktop, 4 August. Ada 'Bricktop' Smith DuConge (1894–1984) Papers, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Harlem, New York, Box 2, Folder 21.

Josephs, J. (1919) Show Reviews: Pantages, San Francisco. *Variety*, 8 October, p. 22.

McBrien, W. (2011) *Cole Porter*. New York: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group.

Programme for '*Broadway '76–77 – The Great Black* Way' (1977), National Urban League Guild, 4 February, Ada 'Bricktop' Smith DuConge (1894–1984) Papers, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Harlem, New York, Box 5, Folder 4.

Prospectus for 'Bricktop's Ball' (1961) Ada 'Bricktop' Smith DuConge (1894–1984) Papers, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Harlem, New York, Box 7, Folder 3.

Prospectus for 'Bricktop's' television program (c. 1977) Ada 'Bricktop' Smith DuConge (1894–1984) Papers, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Harlem, New York, Box 5, Folder 4.

Russell, S. (1909) *The Colored Aristocrats* Review. *Indianapolis Freeman*, 4 September. In Sampson, Henry T. (2013), *Blacks in Blackface: A Sourcebook on Early Black Musical Shows* (p. 706). Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press.

Russell, S. (1910) Oma Crosby's Kinkies Review. *Indianapolis Freeman*, 17 December. In Sampson, H.T. (2013), *Blacks in Blackface: A Sourcebook on Early Black Musical Shows* (p. 191). Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press.

Sampson, H.T. (2013) *Blacks in Blackface: A Sourcebook on Early Black Musical Shows*. Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press.

Sharpley-Whiting, T.D. (2015) *Bricktop's Paris: African American Women in Paris between the Two World Wars*. Albany, NY: SUNY University Press.

Smith, Ada 'Bricktop', with Haskins, J. (1960) The life and times of Bricktop: 'Miss Otis' has no regrets. *The New York Post*, 8 May, p. 41. Ada 'Bricktop' Smith DuConge (1894–1984) Papers, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Harlem, New York, Box 7, Folder 4.

Smith, Ada 'Bricktop', with Haskins, J. (1983) *Bricktop*. New York: Atheneum Press.

Stovall, T. (1996) *Paris Noir: African Americans in the City of Light*. New York: Houghton Mifflin.

Stovall, T. (2005) Black Community, Black Spectacle: Performance and Race in Transatlantic Perspective. In Elam, H.J., Jr & Jackson, K. (eds.), *Black Cultural Traffic: Crossroads in Global Performance and Popular Culture* (pp. 221–241). Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.