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SOCIAL AND CULTURAL INCLUSION OF QUEERED AND RACIALIZED PERFORMANCE DURING  
CHICAGO'S BLACK PANSY CRAZE

A Thesis

Presented in

Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

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BY

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### Introduction

*If you want to have a real good time  
 Mean place to dance and dine  
 "Mae" producin' shows that's grand  
 Kinsley with his red hot band  
 You hear hot numbers sang by Stella  
 The way she croons is really mellow  
 Waiters see to smile at me,  
 bartenders mixin' drinks with ease.  
 There's Joe and them,  
 They sing and dance.  
 Cute colored girls put you in a trance.  
 The 'Boston Wives' are very nice,  
 And that's the place they don't have fights.  
 There's Jimmy singing his jazz-jazz,  
 Impersonators do the rest.  
 You buy whiskey,  
 Any blend.  
 You don't need much dough to spend.  
 There's the best of class, brand new friends,  
 Down at the Cabin Inn, Oh yeah.  
 Down at the Cabin Inn.*

(Lyrics from "Down at the Cabin Inn" performed and recorded by Dick Barrows, Chicago-based Female Impersonator, September, 29, 1936)

This paper charts the social experience and historical legacy of queer performers of color working in Chicago's entertainment venues during the "pansy craze" of the 1920s-30s. The period is named for "pansy" performances, or entertainment involving male entertainers performing in feminine personas suggestive of homosexual performativity. During the "pansy craze" markedly queer performance and entertainment gained notable popularity throughout major cities in the United States, including New York City and Chicago. This period ushered in unusual opportunities for queer performers within the realm of popular entertainment and left a lasting legacy worth historical homage. Public fascination with "sexual inversion," or "queer" performativity combined with the popularity of speakeasies, night clubs, cabarets, and dance

halls during Prohibition, facilitated greater tolerance of queerness within broader urban society during this period.

My use of “queer” here reflects both its use at the time to denote gender subversion in performance as well as my lens as a historian uncovering queer histories. During the early decades of the twentieth century, the term “queer” applied to a multiplicity of gender subversions as well as individuals whose self-expression featured overt femininity (if male) or masculinity (if female). Pansy performance popular during this era embodied a distinctively charged sense of individualized modernity and created a style that enraged prohibition bureaucrats while thrilling audiences from around the city of Chicago. From the night club tables slick with champagne to the dry pages of morning newspaper headlines, Black pansy performers electrified audiences, both within nightlife entertainment and daily culture otherwise dominated by racist, homophobic, and classist discourse. This paper illuminates how queer performers of color asserted social agency by cultivating a visibly queer and racialized culture amidst both a homophobic and racist national discourse.

Despite the popularity, glamour, and importance of these innovative performers, the existing academic research focused on Black queer entertainment in this era is limited in troubling ways and marginalized in pansy scholarship. The most accessible historical accounts, both scholarly and popular, lack an intersectional lens regarding Black queer performance during the craze and are overwhelmingly concerned with analysis of the practice of white “slumming” prevalent during the period. As in many disciplines, history often fails to describe positive narratives of Black queer excellence, ignoring their contributions and cultural significance. This project seeks to remedy the conspicuous absence of such narratives within prominent scholarship regarding the pansy era. The positive cultural reception of Black pansy performance is

historically dwarfed by the scholastic attention concerning white narratives and experiences during the craze, and the most accessible secondary source scholarship fails to center the emancipatory quality of these transgressive entertainers and their performances. In this project, I center the remarkable visibility and agency achieved by Black queer performers in this era, through their radical defiance of the white supremacist racial and gender norms that sought to limit their agency. I am specifically focusing my analysis on the significance of the social and cultural inclusion of queer and racialized performers despite the disciplinary and oppressive discourse of the 1920s and 1930s.

In scholarship that does address the contributions of Black queer performers, the tendency is to focus on the Harlem “pansy” scene in New York City, making Chicago’s “pansy” performers peripheral. By contrast, Chicago’s Black queer cabaret circuit is my central focus in this project. The dance halls and cabarets in neighborhoods such as Bronzeville offered “mixed audiences” a space to mingle, but more importantly it provided a social space legitimizing and celebrating queer and racialized cultures. So-called “Black-and-Tan” clubs attracted racially, sexually, and economically diverse audiences, allowing the “full range of cross-racial sexual encounters” characteristic of the socially integrated spaces.<sup>1</sup> An undeniable sense of visible queer community and culture arose despite social and ideological standards forbidding “racial mixing” and gender/sexual transgression, temporarily allowing “mixed-audiences” to engage in subversive subcultures in a socially legitimized fashion.

By the mid-1930s, legal actions pressured queer communities to revert to locations in society’s underground, leading many scholars of the pansy craze, such as George Chauncey and Shane Vogel, to mark the era’s conclusion with the repeal of Prohibition. However, my

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<sup>1</sup> Chad Heap, *Slumming: Sexual and Racial Encounters in American Nightlife, 1885-1940* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), Introduction, Kindle.

investigation into this period affirms Chad Heap's periodization of the pansy craze beyond the 1930s, as Black queer performers on Chicago's South Side continued to achieve acclaim through their gender-bending cabaret performances well into the 1940s—far longer than their white counterparts on the city's north side. In the years following the end of Prohibition, Bronzeville became the site of queer Black performance due to reform efforts shifting all queer performances from the north side of Chicago to the Black neighborhoods of the South Side. Pervasive policing upholding standards of heteronormativity and white supremacy both criminalized homosexuality and vilified people of color within the scope of “respectable” white society. Instead of extinguishing queer culture, heavy policing of the Loop and the north side of the city drove sexually subversive entertainment to take refuge in the largely Black neighborhoods on Chicago's South Side. I will show that Chicago's Bronzeville was in fact the birthplace of the nation-wide “pansy vogue” and that the popularity of this cabaret style, originated by Black queer performers, also survived well past the craze's historically-accepted end date of 1933. The Black pansy performers working the cabarets and dance halls in the Bronzeville neighborhood, located on the South Side of Chicago, provided a queer re-envisioning that defied the exclusionary reality existing within white-only cabarets.

I hope to demonstrate the unprecedented forms of social agency queer performers of color achieved despite extensive policing and surveillance, and continual racist, homophobic, and classist discursive violence.<sup>2</sup> Queer studies scholar Jose Estabén Muñoz powerfully theorizes how queer people of color have survived oppressive systems through a subversion of white supremacist norms, a process which he calls “disidentification.” Refusing to assimilate or fully reject dominant white standards of beauty, behavior, or expression, people of color have often

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<sup>2</sup> Ellis Cashmore, *Black Culture Industry* (Routledge: London, 1997), 67.

instead embraced a position of “disidentification,” “misrecognizing” themselves within narratives meant to exclude or denigrate them. According to Muñoz, in this process of disidentification with racist and heteronormative narratives and aesthetic preferences, queer performers of color morph, alter, tease, and toy with these aesthetics to develop a unique and revolutionary form of expression. Many Black queer entertainers on the South Side of Chicago during the era obtained increased social agency and cultural inclusion by performing disidentification, playfully mimicking and satirizing famous white starlets who were well known in popular white culture during the period. By leaning upon and twisting the tropes recognized widely by all audiences, Black “pansy” performers achieved notoriety and acclaim for their boldness and fearlessness in turning white expectations on their heads. Through this queering of entertainment and cultural standards, these radical performers created a space for queer Black culture and identity to exist in an otherwise exclusionary social/cultural discourse. As this thesis will demonstrate, Black pansy performance actively subverted societal norms regarding race and sexuality. They appropriated the power historically associated with *white gender performativity* while completely disidentifying from it and remaking it as an unapologetically Black cultural expression.

This project offers original research of queer performers of color working in Bronzeville during this period in order to shed much-needed light on their contributions, subjectivities, and legacy. The preservation and accessibility of this heritage is important as queer communities of color and their cultural influence remain underrepresented in scholarship. The creation and promotion of any form of queer history flouts the oppressive social attempts to erase and silence the existence of queer people in the historical narrative. Through my research and analysis, I demonstrate how queer performers of color were able to publicly express their personal gender

transgressions while providing a path toward greater inclusion of queer people of color in the cultural consciousness of the U.S..

I feel that it is pertinent to position myself as a researcher engaging with this topic. I identify as a white, non-binary historian of sexuality focused on Chicago's queer community. I am extremely privileged in a multitude of ways, and the opportunities I have accessed pursuing degrees in higher education in the humanities have greatly influenced my ontological focus. My research reflects an academic expression of my own political priorities as a queer co-struggler passionately involved in the momentous protests demanding racial justice spearheaded by the Black Lives Matter movement. As a proud advocate and champion of Chicago's Black queer community and its multiple facets, I have found that entertainment is an accessible vehicle for coalition building and bridging racial difference through a shared sexual cultural identity. Black-queer cultural products unique to the city of Chicago such as The Vixen's monthly "Black Girl Magic" drag show, and the intentional formation of Chicago's Black Drag Council serve as examples of wisdom, cultural depth, and power manifested by the Black queer community in Chicago as a means of acquiring emancipation from oppressive disciplinary discourses.

Largely as a result of my studies and experience living in a nation that continues to uphold archaic white-supremacist ideology, one can easily understand why I am compelled to de-center "the white experience" within this project. I am producing this historical narrative not out of a reactionary desire to remedy a lingering sense of "white guilt" but as a demonstration of both my preferred academic lens and investments. This project is a praxis of my own politics, in which I seek to de-center the white experience in my examination of the pansy craze that has largely dominated the leading canonical histories of the era. As a researcher intending to illuminate the historical narratives and experiences belonging to a minority group not my own, I

intentionally rely on primary and secondary sources allowing queer performers of color entertaining during the Pansy Craze a post-mortem voice through which they assert their own emancipatory, self-determining power as entertainers and cultural curators. My role as a researcher is to present the narratives that coalesce from the evidence I have found to support my thesis in a manner that illuminates the experiences of these significant creators of culture during this brief historical moment in Chicago.

### **Historical Context**

For this project I draw on existing historical scholarship concerning queer performers of color during the Pansy Craze. Specifically, I rely on the work of scholars and public historians including Chad Heap, St. Sukie de la Croix, Amber Absher, George Chauncey, and Shane Vogel, all of whom have written extensively about the thriving queer culture of the 1920s and 1930s in major cities across the United States. While the scholars I engage with for this project primarily center white queer performers, the archives of the pansy craze that these scholars compile provide significant footholds for my research.

Chauncey's work recovers queer history between 1890 and the dawn of World War II; he identifies three central myths regarding homosexual subjectivity during this period, including "the myth of isolation"—a notion which erases the experiences, cultural contributions, and visibility of queer individuals and communities in the face of oppression and societal policing.<sup>3</sup> Furthering Chauncey's observation of this myth in mainstream scholarship claiming the isolation of queer performers of color and over-policed, I will offer evidence of an abundance of language found in newspapers published during the pansy craze revealing that queer identities,

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<sup>3</sup> George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1899-1940* (New York: Basic Books, 1995), 2, Kindle.

presentations and communities during the 1920s and 1930s were remarkably visible and that an integration of queerness existed in the public imagination at the time.

In the early decades of the twentieth century, the term “queer” applied to a multiplicity of gender subversions as well as individuals whose self-expression featured overt femininity (if male) or masculinity (if female). The various terminologies concerning the visible performance of sexuality and gender during the era often marked a person as either normative or non-normative. The colloquial understanding of queerness primarily centered on a transgressive *performance* of gender, although it was also understood as linked to non-normative sexuality. Queer-delineated male homosexuals adopted effeminate dress, gestures, and speech that marked them as specifically “queer” sexual subjects. In contrast, masculine-performing homosexual men were not considered “queer” during this time, and their normative gender expression allowed them to retain the status of “normal men.” Masculine, “passing” homosexuals benefited from this social protection, which allowed them to engage in “extensive sexual activity with other men without risking stigmatization.”<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, queer individuals were visually identifiable by their “abnormal,” “devious,” (fashionably) “salacious,” or otherwise “anti-normative” gender performance and appearance (perhaps donning makeup or a feminine neck scarf).<sup>5</sup> The subversion of gender displayed by these various “queer” subtypes represents a blatant defiance of societal norms whose existence was certainly not invisible or segregated from mainstream culture—indeed, queer culture imprinted on public consciousness through representation in entertainment and within broader culture.

Queer historian Chauncey coined the term “Pansy Craze” to describe the era marked by increased tolerance and acceptance of queer performance in cultural spaces, particularly in New

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<sup>4</sup> Chauncey, *Gay New York*, 13.

<sup>5</sup> Chad Heap, *Slumming*, Introduction.

York City, spanning from the late 1920s and concluding around 1933.<sup>6</sup> However, this periodization erases the continued broad popularity of overtly queer performances which thrived throughout the entire decade of the 1930s in Black neighborhoods such as Chicago's Bronzeville. Thus, as noted above, I subscribe to the periodization used by Heap, who argues the end-date for the pansy craze does not occur until the early 1940s, culminating in the Black neighborhoods of New York and Chicago where it reached its zenith.<sup>7</sup> Heap argues that the "Pansy and Lesbian Craze" is best understood as the final wave in a series of "slumming vogues" which spread through urban centers during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, each punctuated with desperate attempts by urban reformers to curb "vice" in American cities. The phenomenon of slumming emerged around the turn of the century as the middle class grew and entertainment became increasingly democratized. Heap's work explains how public night spots took the place of private formal balls and amusement parks offering modern alternatives to legitimate stages such as opera houses asserting new "vice districts" offered cultural productions curated by immigrant, racialized, and working-class demographics to normative white patrons seeking thrills such as burlesque and vaudeville constituting the progressive centerpieces of U.S. popular culture.<sup>8</sup> The affluent white patrons voyeuristically engaged in various degrees with racial mixing and performances of gender subversion. Slumming in the early twentieth century was driven by a white fascination with the influx of what they considered racially and sexually exotic populations in major cities like L.A., New York City, Chicago, and San Francisco.

By the turn of the century in Chicago, an area called "the Levee" emerged as Chicago's unofficial red-light district and earned an international reputation for providing salacious

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<sup>6</sup> Chauncey, *Gay New York*, 348.

<sup>7</sup> Heap, *Slumming*, Chap. 6.

<sup>8</sup> Heap, *Slumming*, Chap. 1.

entertainment thanks to the subversive entertainment featured at the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in the city. The Levee sat on the eastern bank of the Chicago River, bordered by State Street to the east, Van Buren Street to the north, and what is now Roosevelt to the South. The Levee rose to particular prominence as a slumming destination because, as it served as an easily accessible red-light district to Chicago residents and visitors to the city.<sup>9</sup> As a result, the Levee, and the city of Chicago, earned a reputation for slumming and vice. Entertainment producers, along with brothel and venue owners, capitalized on the viewer's curiosity about the "perverse" and simultaneously ignited a social confrontation between white hegemony and the subversive, racially mixed, and sexually deviant culture of the Levee.

Despite laws criminalizing homosexuality and enforcing racial segregation dating back over a century, slumming destinations such as the Levee were generally tolerated by local authorities until the second decade of the twentieth century.<sup>10</sup> Among the many enticements of the Levee was the opportunity it afforded for the white middle-class to experience and gawk at people of racial and sexual minorities, and in some cases to even experiment with racial integration and sexual expression. The Levee comprised "notorious" dance halls, brothels, saloons, exhibiting public, interracial, class-crossing, commercial subversive sexuality and facilitated sites for diverse demographics to mingle without concern for social respectability.<sup>11</sup> In the Levee, one could visit resorts facilitating interactions between whites, various immigrant communities and Black populations and establishments catering to voyeurism of sexual "perversions." The resorts specifically catering to clientele seeking homosexual prostitution and featuring "female impersonators" and "fairy entertainers" became so pervasive in Chicago that

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<sup>9</sup> Heap, *Slumming*, Chap. 1.

<sup>10</sup> Heap, *Slumming*, Chap. 1.

<sup>11</sup> Amber Absher, *The Black Musician in the White City: Race and Music in Chicago, 1900-1967* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2014), 20.

by 1910, the city's municipal Vice Commission commenced large-scale investigation of a 'definite cult' of feminine men and male impersonators in the Levee's venues.<sup>12</sup> As they grew in popularity, these spaces of sexual and racial integration posed a threat to dominant ideology that justified racial segregation and attracted the increased scrutiny of public officials.

The growing concern with moral decay and sexual impropriety which characterized the first two decades of the twentieth century coincided with significant changes in the racial demographics of the city and led to major shifts in the geography and character of "vice" in Chicago. Then as now, Chicago is sometimes called a "city of neighborhoods," which, as Absher points out, is "a polite way of saying that it [is] a segregated city."<sup>13</sup> In the early twentieth century, this segregation into neighborhoods was enforced via legislation and "redlining" that confined racial minorities to various neighborhoods. Along with the Levee, the "slums of vice" which deeply concerned religious leaders and social reformers were located in the Customs House (in the Loop), Chinatown (south of the loop), and the Little Hell neighborhood (north of the Loop)<sup>14</sup>—all neighborhoods populated with immigrant groups and racial minorities flooding the city during these decades.

In particular, the Great Migration of southern Black Americans to northern cities meant a rapidly increasing Black population in Chicago. By 1910, there were approximately 44,000 people living in the "Black Belt"—a narrow section of the city between the "South Loop" and Hyde Park. The population of the Black Belt nearly doubled by 1920 to around 80,000 people<sup>15</sup> (a number that would explode to 234,000 by 1930).<sup>16</sup> As with other neighborhoods populated

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<sup>12</sup> Heap, *Slumming*, Chap. 1.

<sup>13</sup> Absher, *Black Musician*, 1.

<sup>14</sup> Absher, *Black Musician*, 20.

<sup>15</sup> The city's total population in 1920 was 2,701,705.

<sup>16</sup> Absher, *Black Musician*, 9.

with racial and ethnic minorities, this area had already come to be associated with vice in the 1910's. In fact, a good portion of the Black Belt actually lie within the Levee district.<sup>17</sup> As Chicago became a major population center for Black Americans, these communities were gaining political and cultural influence, not to mention economic power, from their proximity to and (for many) employment in slumming venues.



Fig. 1: 47th Street in Bronzeville, 1941 (Chicago Historical Society).

Perhaps most unsettling for the moral crusaders of the era was the proximity of this population to the downtown business district as the Black population began to push at the borders of the South Loop. For decades, as Heap explains “municipal officials actively encouraged the extralegal persistence of the city’s red-light districts,” accepting bribes to protect various businesses from police raids and “adopting an unofficial policy of segregation that sought to isolate prostitution [and other vices] from the city’s commercial center and affluent white residential neighborhoods.”<sup>18</sup> The Levee’s proximity to the downtown business district, its scandalous entertainment offerings, and the booming Black population soon drew the attention of moral crusaders and urban reformers, alike. The Committee of Fifteen, formed by the Republican-controlled Illinois State senate, lead a popular moral crusade which turned its attention to policing social “respectability” in entertainment venues, condemning the “immorality” of “the cabaret” and underscoring the “indecentcy” of the entertainment found in such venues.<sup>19</sup> Additionally, laws introduced in 1919 resulted in the policing of “vagrant”

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<sup>17</sup> Heap, *Slumming*, Chap. 1.

<sup>18</sup> Heap, *Slumming*, Chap. 1.

<sup>19</sup> Heap, *Slumming*, Chap. 2.

homosexuality and prostitution in the city, encouraging prison sentences of up to ten years to “justly” condemn those found guilty of participating in non-reproductive sexual acts.<sup>20</sup> These efforts proved devastating for the vice industry in the Levee, as businesses were shuttered, proprietors arrested or fined, and patrons began to avoid the area out of fear of legal repercussions.

Yet, these crackdowns did not succeed in eliminating vice from the city. Rather, vice establishments fled south, relocating deeper in the Black Belt. Accepting that vice would persist in the city, reformers settled on segregating the vice economy and the growing Black population within the same area, effectively segregating brothels, dance halls, and gambling venues in the part of the city with the least political power.<sup>21</sup> On the South Side, the vice district reorganized along South State Street, between 26<sup>th</sup> and 39<sup>th</sup> Streets, where it took on new significance as the center of Black business and entertainment in Chicago known as “the Stroll.” For a brief time, white slumming was slowed and tamed; more respectable establishments on the North Side offered entertainment catering to a white-only clientele, and in much smaller numbers.

Perversely, it was the advent of Prohibition which revitalized the vice industry, fueled white Chicagoans’ appetites for slumming, and ultimately set the stage for the Negro Vogue and Black pansy crazes unique to Chicago shaping Bronzeville’s rise to cultural prominence. The 18<sup>th</sup> Amendment, ratified in 1919, prohibited the transportation, manufacturing, and sale of alcohol. Upon its implementation via the Volstead Act in 1920, police and anti-vice organizations lost significant control over public social life, in particular socialization across race and class divisions. Heap describes how, “[b]ecause the criminalization of liquor effectively

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<sup>20</sup> George Painter, “The Sensibilities of Our Forefathers: The History of Sodomy Laws in the United States,” last modified Aug. 10, 2004, <https://www.glapn.org/sodomylaws/sensibilities/illinois.htm> .

<sup>21</sup> Absher, *Black Musician*, 19.



Fig. 2: White patrons at Club DeLisa on Chicago's South Side, 1930s (Chicago Historical Society).

rendered all urban nightlife illegal, the distinction that many middle-class whites had earlier drawn between attending high-class cabarets and undertaking slumming expeditions to less reputable establishments became increasingly irrelevant.”<sup>22</sup> Under these circumstances, “vice” venues that illegally sold alcohol cultivated a

culture of embracing social, sexual, and recreational “deviance” and created a bridge for racial integration. Prohibition created the conditions for establishing spaces which permitted and even encouraged subversive performativity, including gender transgression and racial integration.

During Prohibition, white, middle-class slummers began frequenting South Side neighborhoods like Bronzeville, where liquor and entertainment were more freely available. Since vice had come by this time to be inextricably linked to racial and ethnic “Others” by this era, law enforcement often overlooked the illegal sale of alcohol in the Black Belt. Significantly, the Black-and-Tan clubs of the South Side challenged laws and norms of segregation by facilitating the intermingling of individuals of varying backgrounds. The Vice Commission’s investigation of these establishment found that “both whites and Blacks frequented the clubs and . . . members of these groups would leave their local areas and travel throughout the city to visit the establishments.”<sup>23</sup> By welcoming mixed audiences, comprised of multiple races, genders, sexualities, and classes, Black-and-Tans created spaces for disparate demographics to engage with one another.

During this time, white slummers became intensely obsessed with Black cultural production. Although the black-and-tan clubs were popular in the late Levee district, they had

<sup>22</sup> Heap, *Slumming*, Chap. 5.

<sup>23</sup> Absher, *Black Musician*, 31.

existed alongside other “adventurous” resorts that allowed white patrons to engage with a variety of racially and ethnically “exotic” peoples. This new Negro Vogue, according to Heap, was “unlike the multifaceted focus of the earlier craze” in that “this new vogue was centered exclusively on black nightlife and on the sizable new black neighborhoods.”<sup>24</sup> The Negro Vogue ushered in a growing broader cultural popularity of jazz music and slang among white audiences.

While this fetishization of Blackness during the Negro Vogue presented circumstances ripe for white exploitation, Bronzeville was remarkably successful at resisting white control of what was quickly becoming an autonomous Black cultural sphere. Although racial mixing provided the essential thrill for white slummers, racial segregation was still ubiquitous throughout the city outside of the black belt.<sup>25</sup> Yet, the cultural institutions and civic leadership of Bronzeville was remarkably robust and prepared to assert Black ownership and autonomy on the Stroll. Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, Black leadership promoted a series of lawsuits followed by successful boycott campaigns against discriminatory and exploitative business practices, embracing W.E.B. DuBois’s belief in adopting economic strategies for building race consciousness and fighting inequality. Black night-club owners and gambling operations joined the NAACP, the Black press, and other business leaders in efforts to establish Black control of Bronzeville.<sup>26</sup> In this way, even conservative elites within these Black communities supported the Black “vice” venues as they attracted revenue to the community and fostered a commitment to an economically and socially self-sufficient Black cultural zone. Bronzeville’s cultural and economic prosperity during this time speaks to the strength of Black cultural institutions in

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<sup>24</sup> Heap, *Slumming*, Chap. 6.

<sup>25</sup> In his regular column in *The Chicago Defender*, the “Wise Old Owl” observes that “[t]he Caucasians who are getting rich through the patronage of a race of people whom they shun as absolutely inferior . . . are wise enough to realize that by putting popular young members of the race in their entertaining rooms and behind their bars, they are making a strong bid for the trade necessary to sustain their business.” (The Wise Old Owl, “Patronize Worthy Race Enterprises Along ‘The Stroll’,” *Chicago Defender*, May 8, 1915, 4.

<sup>26</sup> Absher, *Black Musician*, 36-7.

Chicago, as well as the leaders and community builders that promoted Black autonomy. Thus, Bronzeville fostered a booming cultural and economic sphere under the control of the Black population.

Meanwhile, the pansy craze was attracting crowds throughout the nation, sweeping through the entertainment circuits of major cities and featuring prominently on silver screens<sup>27</sup> in every region of the United States. With the popularity of pansy performance, the visibility of queer people in major cities, including Chicago, became more prominent. The pansy craze ignited a social confrontation between heteronormative and queer cultures. Entertainment producers capitalized on white, middle-class audiences' curiosity and fascination with "perversity." Venues across the city relied on entertainment acts with suggestions of "deviant" sexuality, featuring homosexuality, hyper-sexualized Black entertainment, and, of course, the pansy performance. Due to the "bohemian" social capital attached to engaging with pansy and queer performances and nightlife, "[b]y the early 1930s, slummers' participation in the pansy and lesbian craze was becoming the ultimate mark of cosmopolitan sophistication."<sup>28</sup> The city allowed such entertainment on the Near North Side and even the large, mainstream cabarets in the Loop because it attracted audiences in droves, assisting the city's economic recovery during the Depression. Consequently, white slummers frequented the Black-owned cabarets of the South Side less frequently in favor of the new and enticing entertainments found closer to home.

In majority-white areas of the city, such as Towertown and other Near North Side locales, queer speakeasies and cabarets enforced strict racial exclusivity in their audiences and featured

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<sup>27</sup> Queer representation in Hollywood films was pervasive before the Hays Code was introduced in 1934; see also Richard Barrios, *Screened Out: Playing Gay in Hollywood from Edison to Stonewall* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 2; Aubrey Malone, "Introduction," *Queer Cinema in America: An Encyclopedia of LGBTQ Films, Characters, and Stories* (Santa Barbara, CA: Greenwood, 2020), xiii

<sup>28</sup> Heap, *Slumming*, Chap. 6.

predominately white performers.<sup>29</sup> The return of many slummers to racially segregated venues and attractions led to a growing fixation on differences of sexuality rather than race. According to Heap, “this new craze for things homosexual provided well-to-do white amusement seekers with an opportunity for defining and policing the newly emergent boundaries of acceptable behavior.”<sup>30</sup> Through their experiences in the bohemian nightclubs and cabarets of the Near North Side, the middle- and upper-classes shaped new identity formations to contrast themselves with the queer underworld, understanding themselves for the first time as heterosexuals.

The Near North Side’s pansy craze died out, like that in New York, with the repeal of Prohibition. Chicago began incriminating spaces of queer sexual expression and spectacle in 1933. In 1934, under increasing pressure to clean up Towertown and similar areas, Mayor Edward J. Kelly began an aggressive purge of nightclubs and burlesque theaters featuring male and female impersonation as well as striptease acts. Kelly pressed for an ordinance from the city council “forbidding the impersonation of one sex by the opposite sex on any stage or place of amusement in the city of Chicago.”<sup>31</sup> While it is unclear if the city council complied, police launched a campaign of massive raids and arrests on the Near North Side and carried out orders to padlock many of the area’s most prominent queer nightclubs. Yet, this newly-intensified intolerance did not end the public’s demand for queer cultural experiences and entertainment. Instead, as with the advent of Prohibition and the Vice Committees of earlier slumming waves, the pansy craze relocated south and concentrated in the “black belt.”

Unlike in New York, where Harlem’s “pansy craze” largely died out by the mid-1930s, in Chicago’s Bronzeville, the pansy craze only grew in popularity over the course of the decade,

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<sup>29</sup> Heap, *Slumming*, Chap. 6.

<sup>30</sup> Heap, *Slumming*, Chap. 6.

<sup>31</sup> “Four More Niteries in Chi Get Sluffoed,” *Variety*, January 8, 1935, 9.

lasting into the early years of the 1940s. Amidst its own barrage of police raids, Bronzeville's queer nightclubs and cabarets continued to feature queer performances and provide vital spaces for queer socialization. In addition to revitalizing the area's nightlife with an influx of capital, "queer black and tans provided the most prominent, and, in many respects, the most protected public spaces where white lesbians and gay men could socialize openly."<sup>32</sup> The safe haven that neighborhoods like Bronzeville presented for the queer community was not unique to Chicago. In the introductory chapter of *Gay New York*, Chauncey situates the most prominent "gay" visibility of the early twentieth century within African-American and immigrant identified neighborhoods.<sup>33</sup> Even at the height of the white pansy craze, white queer communities never enjoyed the level of acceptance, or at least tolerance, that queer communities of color were experiencing in their own neighborhoods. As Heap explains; "Because they shared a history of racial discrimination and residential segregation with their heterosexual neighbors, black lesbians and gay men often experienced a greater level of acceptance, or at least toleration, in their broader community than white homosexuals did."<sup>34</sup> Thus, as queer white Chicagoans traveled south to the nightclubs of Bronzeville, where they were joined by white slummers, they encountered a thriving, autonomous queer culture specific to the Black community.

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<sup>32</sup> Heap, *Slumming*, Chap. 6.

<sup>33</sup> Chauncey, *Gay New York*, 10.

<sup>34</sup> Heap, *Slumming*, Chap. 2.

As the existing queer Black cultural sphere absorbed the audiences previously frequenting establishments in Towertown and other neighborhoods to the North, Chicago experienced what Heap refers to as the “darkening” pansy craze. Even as the South Side absorbed the North Side’s pansy craze, the dominant cultural discourse of South Side neighborhoods like Bronzeville remained unapologetically Black as “the districts’ nightlife impresarios soon created a distinctively Black version of the pansy craze” simultaneously satisfying slummers’ emerging fascination with homosexuality while “reinvigorating the Negro vogue.”<sup>35</sup> Queer speakeasies and cabarets in Bronzeville catered to the sensibilities of Black queer performers and audiences “who had developed their own vibrant communities in response to their exclusion from the cities’ white homosexual worlds.”<sup>36</sup> In turn, the new racially and sexually integrated audiences stimulated a visible queer and Black performativity and culture.

Thus, Bronzeville entertainments provided a niche in popular culture for queer performers of color within the national imaginary despite the “deviance” attached to their gender subversion and race. This less-studied wave of the pansy craze is remarkable for more than its inclusion of Black



*Fig. 3: Nightlife in Bronzeville (Photograph by Russell Lee, 1941. Chicago Historical Society).*

homosexuals in popular entertainment. Ultimately, performers working in the entertainment circuits of the South Side of Chicago acted as visible subjects of resistance, defying the hegemonic discourses of both the Black and white middle classes. Neighborhoods such as Bronzeville provided spaces which empowered individuals with agency for resisting, decolonizing, and reimagining Blackness and queerness. Unlike earlier iterations of the pansy

<sup>35</sup> Heap, *Slumming*, Chap. 6.

<sup>36</sup> Heap, *Slumming*, Chap. 6.

craze in white neighborhoods for white audiences, Bronzeville's "sepia" queer cultural sphere fostered a growing diversity of social and sexual interactions.<sup>37</sup> Rather than reinforcing the scaffolding for ever more rigid binaries, performers and audiences alike created discourses which challenged power dynamics surrounding race, sexuality, and gender.

### **Methodology**

This historical project seeks to document the under-explored history of the pansy craze as it occurred in Chicago's South Side neighborhoods, particularly Bronzeville. By engaging with primary source materials which document this period in Chicago, I illuminate and explore the agency queer performers of color were able to access through social and cultural inclusion via entertainment, despite subjection to the white-supremacist and heteronormative hegemony dominant in American culture. I draw on existing historical scholarship concerning the pansy craze and what some historians call the "Negro Vogue." More specifically, I rely on the work of scholars and public historians, including Chad Heap, St. Sukie de la Croix, George Chauncey, and Shane Vogel, all of whom have contributed essential insight into the pansy craze and its significance during the 1920s and 1930s. Their works provide significant footholds for my research, yet often fail to center Black queer performers' experiences and the social and cultural agency afforded to many of them during the time. In addition, much of this historical literature focuses primarily on people and events in New York City, offering less analysis of the pansy craze in Chicago. Nonetheless, these scholars provide foundational historical literature speaking to the period's legacy and provide models of critical engagement through the analysis of primary sources. In what follows, I identify and assess the historical methods which I draw from these researchers and my own approach to engaging my primary source material.

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<sup>37</sup> Heap, *Slumming*, Chap. 6.

Chauncey's book *Gay New York* offers the first queer historical work regarding the situated sense of social inclusion experienced by queer performers during the pansy craze.<sup>38</sup> As a landmark of queer history which speaks to the cultural climate which allowed queer entertainment to thrive in major cities across the nation, his text provides key historical context for the period. In particular, Chauncey identifies what he calls the "myth of isolation," or a popularized (and harmful) understanding of history which denies the existence of visible homosexual activities and culture between 1890 and the dawn of World War II. To correct this erasure from the historical narrative, Chauncey compiles historical evidence cataloguing the rich legacy of courage, resistance, and survival in queer communities during the period. Although Chauncey's scholarship centers the pansy craze in New York City, it offers crucial historical interrogations regarding social economic, racial, and gendered policing in public spaces. While Chicago's pansy craze differs in important ways from what Chauncey uncovers in New York City, both cities' queer entertainment "booms" emerged during the same period and amidst similar confrontations with a largely racist and homophobic national discourse. Chauncey's work offers an integral perspective regarding the resilience, resistance, and visibility of queer individuals living within the period which proves useful for my research.

Similarly, Vogel's *The Scene of the Harlem Cabaret: Race, Sexuality, and Performance* provides an essential history concerning the era in focus and crucially demonstrates the significance of entertainment and representation amidst contemporary debates regarding "racial uplift" in the Black community. In reaction to a dominant culture which stigmatized Black subjects and rendered them inferior, criminal, and deviant, Vogel analyzes calls for the development of a visible Black middle class to facilitate collective advancement and "to combat the perceived threat to the race of urban pathology."<sup>39</sup> It is within this context that Vogel examines the "Black Vogue" of the 1920s that blossomed in the cabarets of Harlem in New York City during the premiere decades of the twentieth century. The "vice" associated

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<sup>38</sup> Chauncey, *Gay New York*, 8.

<sup>39</sup> Shane Vogel, *The Scene of the Harlem Cabaret: Race, Sexuality and Performance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 7.

with the more risqué entertainment in these cabarets, in particular pansy performance and queer visibility, was a cause for concern among Black elites concerned with racial uplift. Yet, the critical tradition of the “Cabaret School,” as Vogel argues, situates cabaret as a transcendent space allowing for a re-envisioning of Black cultural inclusion lacking politics of respectability.<sup>40</sup> Vogel’s work narrates and captures an intimate legacy of prominent Black and queer artists in New York City which can be usefully compared in Bronzeville’s own version of the Black Cultural Renaissance during the pansy era, and Vogel’s discussion of Harlem’s nightclubs sheds light on similar establishments in Chicago, namely the black-and-tans which populated Chicago’s South Side. Although I rely on Vogel’s scholarship concerning this time period and utilize some of the methodological tools and racial historical context provided by his work, I make important adjustments to his critical lens to account for the differences I discovered in my research of Chicago’s Black pansy craze. In particular, the divisions Vogel highlights within New York’s Black communities regarding cabaret and queer performance do not appear to have been of great significance for Chicago’s Black communities. My own research has led to a wealth of primary source material which suggests that Chicago’s Black elites largely enjoyed and celebrated the economic benefits of their inherited “vice” district while also negotiating the cost to the community in the form of increased policing. Indeed, extensive coverage of pansy entertainers and their art found in *The Chicago Defender* and other prominent Black Chicago-based newspapers suggests that many queer entertainers of color served as significant players within the Black community during Bronzeville’s Pansy Craze, complicating the relationship between Black queer performance and Black elites concerned with racial uplift. Nonetheless, Vogel’s text offers an essential critique of the socio-political implications for queer and racialized subjects confronting respectability norms and charting new paths and identities.

Renowned journalist and public queer historian St. Sukie de la Croix’s widely acclaimed monograph *Chicago Whispers* assisted my research by providing an accessible historical narrative and source material documenting queer life and culture in Chicago. De la Croix’s book chronicles queer

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<sup>40</sup> Vogel, *Scene of Harlem Cabaret*, 7.

history in Chicago beginning in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, before the establishment of the city, and ending with the Stonewall Riots of 1969. While not a traditional scholar, de la Croix relies on documented primary sources from which I was able to draw important information. I use this text to contextualize the social, economic, and political atmosphere for queer communities and individuals during the pansy craze. I rely primarily on chapters concerning the decades of the 1920s-30s, in which de la Croix geographically locates queer-identified spaces throughout the city, including the venues known for offering entertainment by queer performers of color to integrated audiences. Additionally, de la Croix documents attempts by city officials and law enforcement to police cabarets<sup>41</sup> and also provides (some) emancipatory narratives regarding queer performers of color. For instance, de la Croix's inclusion of historical narratives involving queer performers like Harry Winston, the female impersonator known as "Sepia Gloria Swanson" provides examples and references of individual significance within the period.<sup>42</sup>

Another text which significantly impacted my approach to this project, both in the primary documents used and methods of analysis, is Heap's book *Slumming: Sexual and Racial Encounters in American Nightlife (1885-1940)*. This book, too, provides valuable context involving the social climate and systemic policing of gender transgression during the period. Heap documents the voyeuristic consumption of homosexual culture by normative audiences "slumming" in cities across the United States. Many of his primary sources and the connections he drew between them proved essential for my own research and subsequent analysis of the pansy craze in Chicago. Although Heap's analysis of the pansy craze in Chicago focuses on the experiences of heteronormative white audiences consuming, and subsequently commodifying, queer and black culture through entertainment, his primary source analysis provides important scaffolding for my own. Heap's analysis of primary sources conveys personal accounts describing the development and maintenance of a unique queer Black culture working within and against dominant discourses which marginalize and erase queer and Black bodies. I imitate Heap's

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<sup>41</sup> de la Croix, *Chicago Whispers*, 146.

<sup>42</sup> de la Croix, *Chicago Whispers*, 106.

method for queer historical analysis of primary documents but with an aim toward uncovering and centering the experiences of Black queer entertainers performing in Chicago's Bronzeville neighborhood.

In contrast to the scholars and researchers whose work I outlined above, my analysis focuses on the experiences, performances, and achieved acclaim of the queer performers of color entertaining in Chicago's South Side neighborhoods such as Bronzeville spanning the late 1920s into the early 1940s. Thus, my chief historical approach in this project involves engagement with primary sources, including newspaper articles, theatrical reviews, sociological studies conducted at the time, and a few first-hand accounts from witnesses and participants in relevant events. I engage with narratives of performers, performances, and the cultural nuances recorded within the vast collection of primary sources accessible through the newspaper and archival databases of DePaul University, the University of Chicago, and the University of Illinois at Chicago. In particular, I draw from the Black press of the time, especially the leading Black national newspapers. I rely heavily on archives of *The Chicago Defender*, a nationally-renowned Black publication that began printing in 1905 and continues today. Additionally, I read through nearly a decade's worth of scanned digital copies of *The Chicago Whip*, another popular Black newspaper at the time, available through Newspapers.com. Both of these publications provided vital information about the performers, venues, dates, and popularity of the phenomena I am investigating as well as shedding some light on the details of the performances and lives of the historical figures I investigate. Additional access to publications such as *The Afro-American* (Baltimore, MD), *The Pittsburgh Courier*, *The New York Amsterdam News*, *The Atlanta Daily World*, *New York Age*, and *Variety* through university archives helped to shed light on the far-reaching impact of performers of color from Chicago at this time.

I gleaned additional information from first-hand accounts of individuals who either witnessed or were involved in these historical events, including Bruce Nugent's remarks on his

friendship with “Sepia” Gloria Swanson, which are published in a collection of his writings.<sup>43</sup>

My project also makes use of the significant historical data provided in the Ernest Watson Burgess papers at the University of Chicago. Considered among the founders of the discipline of sociology, Burgess collected and produced data, information, and theories across many topics relating to urban sociology, crime, sexuality, and family structures. This massive archive includes a range of materials, from case studies and interviews, to teaching and course materials, and student papers and research notes spanning from 1916-1952. Of particular usefulness for my purposes were interviews, field notes, and papers produced by Burgess’s students in their study of female impersonators, the Black community in Bronzeville and nearby neighborhoods, vice, and non-normative sexual behaviors which provide first-hand accounts of places, events, behaviors, and cultural attitudes regarding Black queer culture and entertainment on the South Side of Chicago during the time period.

### *Theoretical frameworks*

To investigate Bronzeville’s Black pansy craze, my project draws on post-structuralist, post-colonial, feminist, and queer theoretical lenses to recover narratives of self-empowerment through performance as reflected in Black pansy entertainment. These theoretical approaches provide frameworks for investigating race and gender as primary categories for historical analysis. Interrogating the historical narrative of the pansy craze along these lines of inquiry reveals how queer performers of color inhabited ways of being that were unobtainable within hegemonic discourse, reworked categories of identity, and challenged white supremacist and heteronormative power structures. Ultimately, these theoretical models offer ways of

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<sup>43</sup>*Gay Rebel of the Harlem Renaissance: Selections from the Work of Richard Bruce Nugent*, edited by Thomas H. Wirth (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002).

understanding the subversive power of queer and racialized performance and its capacity to provide a sense of liberation from the contemporary social and cultural limitations determined by ideological (family, church, media, etc.) and repressive (military, police) state apparatuses.

Employing gender as a category for historical analysis, as feminist historian Joan Scott argues, provides opportunities for new investigations of accepted historical narratives and categories which aim “to disrupt the notion of fixity, to discover the nature of the debate or repression that leads to the appearance of timeless permanence in binary gender representation.”<sup>44</sup> Instead of understanding gender as a pre-existing binary ordering social life by sexual difference or as simply an effect of economic or political forces, Scott argues for an understanding of gender as a central organizing principle of social relationships, a means of representing and signifying power relations, and a mode through which meaning is established, contested, and negated. Through the analysis of symbols and their attached normative meanings, along with social institutions and subjective identity, gender can illuminate the complicated relationships of power which interpolate history.

Some scholars of the pansy craze use a post-structural understanding of power to unpack these complex and shifting dynamics, yet engage gender at the expense of race. Scott argues that “we need to replace the notion that social power is unified, coherent, and centralized with something like Foucault’s concept of power as dispersed constellations of unequal relationships, discursively constituted in social ‘fields of force.’”<sup>45</sup> Indeed, Chauncey’s engagement with Foucauldian methodology offers a way of identifying the various apparatuses and practices which both constrain and enable the social practices of homosexuality during the pansy craze.

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<sup>44</sup> Joan W. Scott, “Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis,” *American Historical Review* 91, no. 5 (December 1986): 1068.

<sup>45</sup> Scott, “Gender,” 1067.

Through attention to the “meaningful everyday practices in the construction of identities,” Chauncey accesses the discourse of sexuality and gender which these practices constitute and through which queer entertainers challenged normative understandings of gender and sexuality. However, Chauncey’s analysis is centered on the experiences of white performers and audiences, investigating gender as a category at the expense of race. In her ground-breaking 1989 article “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex,” feminist legal scholar and theorist Kimberle Crenshaw asserts the need for intersectional analysis to better understand the forces of power which act on marginalized subjects. Crenshaw argues that “focus on otherwise-privileged group members creates a distorted analysis of racism and sexism because the operative conceptions of race and sex become grounded in the experiences that actually represent only a subset of a much more complex phenomenon.”<sup>46</sup> In failing to adopt an intersectional lens, the experiences of queer performers of color are negated, ignored, or erased from the historical narrative of the pansy craze. In contrast, my analysis is rooted in an intersectional approach to account for the multiple marginalities of queer performers of color.

Through their performances, Black queer entertainers were able to exploit this intersection of race and gender for their own empowerment. Theories of performance and its liberatory practice by people of color, particularly “dis-identification,” provide a framework for investigating its use during the pansy craze. In a collection of essays entitled *Blacktino Queer Performance*, E. Patrick Johnson and Ramón H. Rivera-Servera bring together scholarly work which elucidates “performance as method, object, and trope [which is] useful in enunciating

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<sup>46</sup> Kimberle Crenshaw, “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory, and Antiracist Politics,” *University of Chicago Legal Forum* 1989, no. 1 (1989): 140.

identity as a complex and contested site.”<sup>47</sup> Performance deploys a multiplicity of functions intersecting at the praxis of expression, the production of entertainment for public consumption, and the reflection and disruption of hegemonic categories and systems of meaning. The theoretical framing of racialized culture and its convergence with white normativity within the American cultural imaginary allows us to access the integrated spaces fostering racially “Othered” and sexualized culture. Through the vehicle of queer entertainment forms, “queer ethnoracial minorities, especially when working class and/or the working poor, converge at the margins of homonormative white culture.”<sup>48</sup> This framework provides an entrypoint for analyzing the work and performative expressions of queer performers of color during the pansy craze.

A particularly important concept arising from this school of performance theory is José Esteban Muñoz’s theory of “disidentification,” a complex maneuver “through which queer artists of color work on and against a system in which they are always already entrenched.”<sup>49</sup> With disidentification, Muñoz conceives of racialized forms of performance as intrinsically caught between the intersection of racist ideologies of exploitation and reclaimed ownership of identity and racialized culture. This concept is crucial to my analysis of primary sources as it allows me to uncover the mechanisms by which queer performers of color actively subverted societal constraints regarding race and sexuality, creating space for experimentation with new cultural forms and identities.

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<sup>47</sup> E. Patrick Johnson and Ramón H. Rivera-Servera, “Introduction: Ethnoracial Intimacies in Blacktino Queer Performance,” in *Blacktino Queer Performance*, eds. E. Patrick Johnson and Ramón H. Rivera-Servera (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 6, Kindle.

<sup>48</sup> Johnson and Rivera-Servera, “Introduction.”

<sup>49</sup> José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), Introduction, Kindle.

The liberatory potential of entertainment based on gender illusion has been regarded with a justified skepticism. The pansy craze, an era marked by the broad popularity of pansy performance and female impersonators, coincides with the period when modern categorical understandings of sexuality emerged and began to solidify in Western culture. Slumming is often understood as the mechanism for the production and affirmation of white middle-class hegemony, reinforcing the identities and cultural practices that protect gender and race relations. Scholars such as Newton and Heap have argued that the tension created at the intersection of queer and heterosexual culture that hinges on the practice of drag performance facilitates the labeling and policing of sexual “deviance,” reinforcing heteronormative identities and disciplining non-normative identities.<sup>50</sup> Therefore, in visibly and publicly rejecting hegemonic categories of race, sex, and gender, queer performers of color are reinforcing the oppressive structures which work to discipline them.

Yet, this dynamic only holds true if we understand the work of these performers as acts of pure counteridentification, or outright rejection of the ideology which produces them as second (or even third) class citizens. Rather than attempting an outright refusal of white supremacist and heteronormative ideology, queer performers of color in Bronzeville engaged in performances of disidentification, inserting themselves into discursive categories reserved for white and heteronormative subjectivities. This disidentification destabilizes hegemonic identity formations and produces a cultural imaginary inclusive of Black and queer subjectivities.

### **Primary Source Analysis**

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<sup>50</sup> Esther Newton, *Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972), 3; Heap, *Slumming*, Chap. 3.

Queer entertainers of color utilized artforms such as gender illusion and pansy performance within racialized spaces during Chicago's pansy craze, and they subsequently gained social and cultural agency not only local to the South Side; their prominence in Chicago's cultural imaginary is widely evident in the contemporary popular press. Gender illusion and other manifestations of queer performance allowed queer entertainers of color social and cultural inclusion through disidentification via entertainment and spectacle. Black queer entertainment in Bronzeville flourished in popularity, infatuating a vast and diverse audience and catalyzing celebrity status for its Black pansy performing stars. *The Chicago Defender* not only regularly reviewed the pansy floorshows found in the night spots located on Chicago's South Side, but the press frequently reported on matters concerning the personal lives belonging to the premiere Black pansy entertainers, demonstrating their celebrity and stardom.<sup>51</sup> This type of intimate coverage within nationally circulated news publications such as *The Chicago Defender* reflects a height of fame and cultural inclusion achieved by many Black pansy performers during the period.

### ***Prominence of Black Queer Performers in the Black Community and Chicago at Large***

Queer entertainers of color used artforms such as gender illusion and pansy performance in Black-owned venues during Chicago's Pansy Craze. These performers resided and performed largely on the South Side of Chicago in the black and tan clubs of Bronzeville and acted as social and cultural curators and served as visible queer members of society. They flaunted their queer and racialized selfhood through pansy entertainment and public spectacle both on, and sometimes off, the legitimate stage. Despite the controversial nature of their work, which

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<sup>51</sup> Both the *Defender* and the *Chicago Whip* featured reviews of performances by female impersonators and pansy performers, advertisements for clubs featuring such entertainers, and even updates on their careers on a nearly daily basis.

challenged normative standards regarding class, sexuality, and race, queer gender illusionists and pansy performers of color were wildly successful and influential culturally. The popularity of these performers allowed them remarkable social and cultural agency, not only on the South Side, but throughout the city.

Their prominence in Chicago's cultural imaginary is widely evident in the contemporary popular press. A newspaper article from a 1931 issue of *The Chicago Defender* reports a car crash involving gender illusionist and actor Dick "Mae West" Barrows.<sup>52</sup> The clipping speaks to the amount of fame that Barrows achieved as a well-regarded and respected Black drag performer during the pansy craze. The article claims that the drag performer and "four other occupants" suffered injuries after their automobile crashed while traveling home from a Fourth of July celebration in Omaha back to Chicago, where Barrows performed regularly and carried great cultural and social clout. This very detailed report includes a play by play of the events leading up to the crash and notes the performer's cultural influence. The article also references the drag performer's fame and recent work, noting that "'Mae West' just closed a long engagement at the Annex Café,"<sup>53</sup> a popular black and tan club in Chicago's Bronzeville neighborhood. *The Chicago Defender* was the most prominent national Black publication as well as widely-read on Chicago's South Side.<sup>54</sup> The mere existence of this



Fig. 4: "Dick (Mae West) Barrows." In *Chicago Defender*, April 16, 1938, 18.



<sup>52</sup> "Dick (Mae West) Barrows Hurt When Auto Crashes: 4 Other Occupants Injured Near Omaha, Nebraska," *Chicago Defender*, July 17, 1937, 10.

<sup>53</sup> "Dick (Mae West) Barrows Hurt," 10.

<sup>54</sup> Other popular Chicago-based Black newspapers with a national circulation at this time included *The Chicago Whip* and *The Chicago Bee*. However, the *Defender* was widely considered the most influential Black newspaper at the start of World War I, with the majority of its readership living outside of Chicago (St. Clair Drake and Horace R. Clayton, *Black Metropolis: A Study of Negro Life in a Northern City* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1970)

news suggests a demand, at least within the African American community, for access to this kind of information.

Barrows was not the only Black drag performer who achieved a level of celebrity at the time that warranted public interest in his personal life. Another news clipping featured in *The Chicago Defender* from May 30, 1931 reports on the illness of “Sepia Gloria Swanson’s” mother demonstrating the fame achieved by the female impersonator.<sup>55</sup> The celebrity of Gloria Swanson is reflected in the article’s attention to the drag performer’s mother, indicating that even the drag performer’s kin is assumed to be known and of interest to the reading public. Moreover, such an article could have (or may have been intended to) rally support for the performer in the face of hardship. On another occasion, *The Chicago Defender* even reported about Gloria Swanson’s purchase of a car.<sup>56</sup> Thus, both Sepia Mae West and Sepia Gloria Swanson, like many other popular Black queer performers, found social and cultural inclusion and influence as not only openly queer community members, but also as celebrities both locally, and to some extent, nationally. Indeed, Sepia Mae West eventually made her way to New York City after gaining national fame from her work on the cabaret circuits of Chicago. Ultimately, both articles speak to the social and cultural influence that drag performers of color attained through their art.

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<sup>55</sup> “Gloria’s Mother Sick,” *Chicago Defender*, May 30, 1931: 5.

<sup>56</sup> Clifford W. MacKay, “Going Backstage with the Scribe: Seen and Heard,” *Chicago Defender*, May 30, 1931, 5.

These evidently newsworthy headlines demonstrate that female impersonators performing in the nightspots of Bronzeville and elsewhere on Chicago's South Side had a strong impact on and support from the Black community at large. Reviews and articles in Black newspapers like *The Chicago Defender* from this time are written in a way that assumed the reader would be familiar with these stars. In a review for a 1937 show at the Cabin Inn, columnist Bob Hayes reports that female impersonator "Valda Gray, once more excels in the masterful presentation of 'her' latest floor show 'Swingin' at the Cabin Inn' which features those famous female impersonators, Joanne Crawford, Carol Lee, Frances Dee, and Billie McAllister."<sup>57</sup> The description of these performers as "famous" in a nationally-circulated newspaper speaks to the celebrity these performers had achieved.



Fig. 5: Petite Swanson (left), another Chicago female impersonator who earned national celebrity status (appeared with article "Female Impersonators: Unique Chicago Night Club Features Make-Believe Ladies as Entertainers." In *Ebony*, March 1948, 61).



Fig. 6: Billie McAllister ("At Cabin Inn." *Chicago Defender*, December 10, 1938).

<sup>57</sup> Bob Hayes, "Cabin Inn Celebrates 4<sup>th</sup> Anniversary with Red Hot Show and Plenty 'Imps'," *Chicago Defender*, July 10, 1937, 10.

Female impersonators and pansy performers of color were much more than a novelty attraction for the Black community, as they were viewed in mainstream entertainment for white audiences. A regular column which ran in the 1920s through the 1940s in *The Chicago Defender* titled “Going Backstage with the Scribe” served as a review of current entertainment in Bronzeville and throughout the city. The column provides an excellent social commentary



Fig. 7: Valda Gray and Carol Lee, female impersonators at the Cabin Inn, were frequently covered in reviews of Chicago nightlife (“‘Imps’ at the Cabin Inn,” *Chicago Defender*, May 28, 1938, 19).

written from the perspective of a person of color during the pansy craze. In this same issue, the columnist sings the praises of “[Sepia] Gloria Swanson, [Sepia] Norma Shearer, [Sepia] Peggy Joyce] and [Sepia] Greta Garbo [who] do their stuff nightly in the Windy City” before later listing the tour dates and locations of celebrity performers like Duke Ellington.<sup>58</sup> It is striking that the article mentions the “Sepia” female impersonators in a way

that positions their cultural and community significance alongside the likes of the famed Duke Ellington. Indeed, Hilda See, another reporter for *The Chicago Defender*, writes in 1936 that “Female impersonators supply the main draw in cafes now, according to a survey made by a well known critic.”<sup>59</sup>

Reviews like these convey the popularity and importance of female impersonators of color for the Black community. The demand and appreciation for this type of entertainment is well documented throughout the 1920s and 1930s in the coverage and promotion of Black queer performers in *multiple* regular columns in *The Chicago Defender*, like “Going Backstage with

<sup>58</sup> MacKay, “Going Backstage,” Mar. 14, 1931, 5.

<sup>59</sup> Hilda See, “‘Female Impersonators’ Rule Many Floor Shows,” *Chicago Defender*, September 12, 1936, 21.

the Scribe,”<sup>60</sup> “Cabarets,”<sup>61</sup> “Here and There,”<sup>62</sup> and “Nite Spotting in Bronzeville,”<sup>63</sup> as well as in the advertisements and reviews in *The Chicago Whip*<sup>64</sup>, another prominent Black newspaper. The frequency with which columns like this appeared suggests that female impersonators in fact provided immensely popular entertainment, eagerly enjoyed by a vast and diverse audience.

Bronzeville’s queer cabarets and their performers rose to national prominence in 1934 when Chicago again hosted a World’s Fair. A review which ran in *The Chicago Defender* the same year as the Century of Progress World’s Fair proclaimed, “When you have seen our Floor Show and ‘camped’ in the Cozy Cabin Club, you have seen Chicago at its Best.”<sup>65</sup> The success and popularity of queer performers of color earned them a prominent role in shaping the city’s identity. In fact, the famed female impersonator and multi-talented entertainer Frankie “Half-Pint” Jaxson became the only person of color invited to perform at the 1933 opening celebrations of the Century of Progress.<sup>66</sup> Fortuitously located on the southern border of the Century of

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<sup>60</sup> Clifford W. MacKay, “Going Backstage with the Scribe,” *Chicago Defender*, May 23, 1931, 5; MacKay, “Going Backstage,” *Chicago Defender*, May 30, 1931, 5; Clifford W. MacKay, “Going Backstage with the Scribe: Run Around,” *Chicago Defender*, July 4, 1931, 5; Clifford W. MacKay, “Going Backstage with the Scribe: Run Around,” *Chicago Defender*, July 18, 1931, 5; “Going Backstage with the Scribe,” *Chicago Defender*, July 21, 1934, 8.

<sup>61</sup> “Cabarets,” *Chicago Defender*, September 8, 1934: 9; “Cabarets,” *Chicago Defender*, September 15, 1934, 9; “Cabarets,” *Chicago Defender*, September 22, 1934: 8; “Cabarets,” *Chicago Defender*, October 13, 1934, 9; “Cabarets,” *Chicago Defender*, October 14, 1934, 9; “Cabarets,” *Chicago Defender*, October 27, 1934, 9; Barbara Llorayne, “Cabarets,” *Chicago Defender*, November 10, 1934, 8; “Cabarets,” *Chicago Defender*, November 24, 1934, 9.

<sup>62</sup> Bob Hayes, “Here and There,” *Chicago Defender*, December 31, 1932, 5; Bob Hayes, “Here and There,” *Chicago Defender*, February 29, 1936, 8; Bob Hayes, “Here and There,” *Chicago Defender*, May 9, 1936, 8; Bob Hayes, “Here and There,” *Chicago Defender*, May 30, 1936, 11; Bob Hayes, “Here and There,” *Chicago Defender*, March 13, 1937, 24; Bob Hayes, “Here and There,” *Chicago Defender*, June 11, 1938, 18; Bob Hayes, “Here and There,” *Chicago Defender*, November 12, 1938, 18; Bob Hayes, “Here and There,” *Chicago Defender*, August 5, 1939, 21; Bob Hayes, “Here and There,” *Chicago Defender*, July 27, 1940, 20.

<sup>63</sup> “Nite Spotting in Bronzeville,” *Chicago Defender*, May 1, 1937, 20.

<sup>64</sup> “‘Don’t Tell Everything’ at The Vendome Theatre,” Advertisement, *Chicago Whip*, January 28, 1922, 6, Stage and Screen section; “Sunset Café,” Advertisement, *Chicago Whip*, February 4, 1922, 6, Stage and Screen section; “Sunset Café,” Advertisement, *Chicago Whip*, February 25, 1922, 6, Stage and Screen section; “Sunset Café,” Advertisement, *Chicago Whip*, March 4, 1922, 6, Stage and Screen section.

<sup>65</sup> Hilda See, “‘Around the Town’ Brings Treat in Dance and Song,” *Chicago Defender*, November 3, 1934, 9.

<sup>66</sup> Dewey R. Jones, “Race Represented as World’s Fair Opens in Blaze of Glory,” *Chicago Defender*, June 3, 1933, 1.

Progress fairgrounds, Bronzeville drew crowds into the queer black and tan clubs that multiplied throughout the neighborhood. The vaudeville shows featured at the World's Fair dazzled "normative" American audiences from around the country who then ventured into the black and tan cabarets of Bronzeville to experience its world-class queer performers.

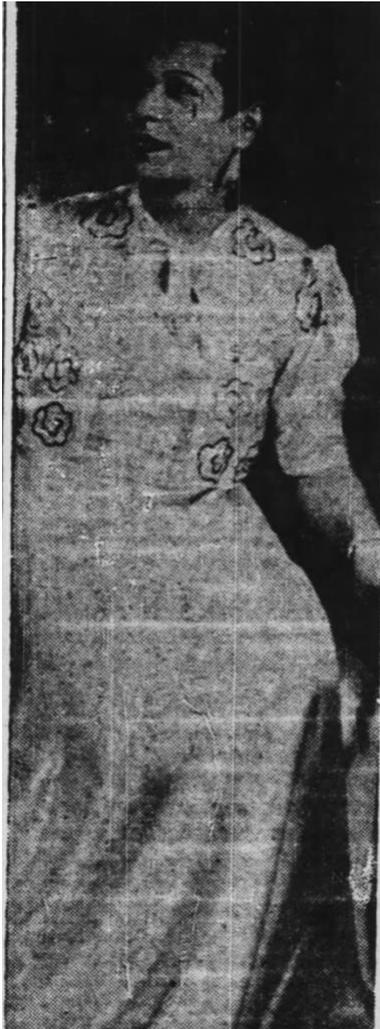


Fig. 8: Valda Gray, female impersonator and producer at Bronzeville's Cozy Cabin Inn ("Impersonator." In *Pittsburgh Courier*, August 27, 1938, 20).

Over the decade, Bronzeville's pansy craze only grew more vibrant and Chicago's black and tans earned a reputation for producing many of the nation's finest performers. *Defender* columnist Hilda See noted in 1936 that "Gloria Swanson, one of the first of the 'impersonators' to hit the stroll in Chicago and now a featured entertainer in New York's Harlem."<sup>67</sup> Swanson's rise to national stardom, See claims, is not unique: "Since then the Mae Wests, Peggy Joyces, and others have come along to make their way but the popularity of such players were first made known here in Chicago. . . travel to New York or any place else where they are used, and you will learn the same thing. They are all seeking the three or more 'stars' Chicago has, and isn't willing to turn loose"<sup>68</sup> This period encapsulates the prominence of Chicago's (and specifically Bronzeville's) queer performers of

<sup>67</sup> Hilda See, "'Female Impersonators,'" 21.

<sup>68</sup> See, "'Female Impersonators,'" 21.

color nationally within the popular arenas of culture such as cabarets, dance halls, speakeasies, and night clubs.

Popularity and an overwhelmingly positive societal reception allowed a sense of self-determination for many queer performers of color entertaining in nightspots in Bronzeville and throughout the city. On some occasions, Black female impersonators were able to leverage their popularity to evade legal trouble. For example, a 1931 *Defender* article headlined

“Impersonator of Woman Who Sang for Judge is Freed,”<sup>69</sup> reported on a Black female impersonator’s ability to circumvent criminal charges for female impersonation off-stage in public. The article describes the dubious circumstances under which 21-year-old Walter Currin, who performed under the stage name

“Greta Garbo,” found himself incarcerated: “[Currin] was badly disheveled when he appeared before Judge Edward B. Casey. He wore a blond wig, sheer chiffon hosiery and a blue georgette dress. His short jacquette was of moleskin.”<sup>70</sup> Remarkably, Currin was able to use pansy performance as a means of

garnering legal favor from a white judge. When asked to account for himself, Currin claimed he



Fig. 9: The celebrity of Black female impersonators made their personal lives a source of fascination and allowed them liberties not widely available to other queer people at the time. Here, a story featuring the “wedding” of another “Sepia” Mae West (Sam Fouche, also of Chicago) to Ray St. Claire (“Funny What Love Will Do.” In the *Indianapolis Recorder*, February 22, 1936, 2).

<sup>69</sup> “Impersonator of Woman Who Sang for Judge is Freed,” *Chicago Defender*, December 5, 1931, 13.

<sup>70</sup> “Impersonator of Woman,” 13.

was a “performer.” The article reports: “[t]he defendant was asked to sing, and he sang ‘Please Don’t Talk About Me When I’m Gone.’ And to the tune of the same number he danced out of the courtroom. Judge Casey dismissed the charge.”<sup>71</sup> Currin capitalized on his talents as a female impersonator, and these talents resulted in a literal get-out-of-jail-free card.

Similarly, George Manus, whose stage persona was “Sepia” Joan Crawford, found himself in a physical confrontation with Sergeant Robert Harness of the Fourth District Police in the early hours of a Saturday morning. The *Chicago Defender* describes Manus as a “tall and languorous feminine impersonator employed at a Thirty-fifth street night club” who was “attired in slacks, high-heeled pumps, and a flowing silk shirt-waist.”<sup>72</sup> Intoxicated, Manus accosted the officer, giving the officer “a good sassing for daring to cramp ‘her’ style. . . Manus even tossed back ‘her’ flowing hair and offered to slap Sergeant Harness on the cheek.”<sup>73</sup> When the policeman finally attempted to grab him, “the haughty ‘damsel’ popped a pair of manicured hands on ‘her’ shaply hips and demanded: ‘Take your hands off my bosom!’”<sup>74</sup> Even after resisting arrest and employing impressively brazen language to a police officer, Manus, like Currin, saw his charges dropped: “After being cautioned on the respect due an officer of the law, Manus was discharged. He switched jauntily from the courtroom.”<sup>75</sup> In this way, entertainment ultimately provided a cultural platform allowing some queer performers of color access to increased social, and even legal, agency.

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<sup>71</sup> “Impersonator of Woman,” 13.

<sup>72</sup> “Cocktails Gets Female Impersonator in ‘Dutch’,” *Chicago Defender*, July 15, 1939, 24.

<sup>73</sup> “Cocktails,” 24.

<sup>74</sup> “Cocktails,” 24.

<sup>75</sup> “Cocktails, 24.

The incredibly permissive attitude of the courts toward these queer performers is all the more surprising when compared with the harsh penalties dealt other Black men wearing women's clothing in public. For example, in 1929, two men were sentenced to six months in a workhouse simply for wearing women's clothing.<sup>76</sup> In 1932, three men wearing female attire were charged with disorderly conduct and held without bail<sup>77</sup> while another man was held for 100 days after unknowingly making advances toward a police officer while dressed as a woman.<sup>78</sup>

It is notable the striking difference in language used by the press to discuss the "crime" of wearing women's clothes in public when applied to these celebrity performers versus average citizens. While the *Defender's* articles detailing the ordeals of Currin and Manus are light-hearted,

playful, and even a little congratulatory, the tone in articles about non-performing queer people of color caught for the same "offense" is much harsher. The paper even went so far as to publish photographs, full names, and addresses of some of the men charged with impersonating a



ALONZO DAVIS HENRY JOHNSON  
 The Misses (?) HENRY JOHNSON, 4728 Calumet Ave., and ALONZO DAVIS, 4726 Calumet Ave., who attempted to explain to a judge in the morals court last week as to why they have masqueraded as women for 15 and 10 years, respectively. They were taken by officers who witnessed their antics with two men in a car parked in front of 3729 Prairie Ave. Asked what they did for a living, they declared that they took in washing and ironing. They were fined \$25 and cost. Both "women" told a physician that they have always wanted to be of the female sex. Even as children, they said, they played with dolls and feminine toys.

Fig. 10: Two individuals, caught wearing women's clothes, have their names and addresses published in the newspaper in addition to legal repercussions ("Masqueraders Exposed." In *Chicago Defender*, February 20, 1926, 1).

<sup>76</sup> "Two Men Get Six Months for Female Masquerade," *Chicago Defender*, March 23, 1929, 11.

<sup>77</sup> "Three Men in Women's Dress Sent to Prison," *Chicago Defender*, December 10, 1932, 12.

<sup>78</sup> "Impersonator Tries Luck on Wrong Patron," *Chicago Defender*, September 24, 1932, 1.

member of the opposite sex.<sup>79</sup> Both Currin and Manus, by contrast, were able to leverage their notoriety and professional success in a way afforded them emancipation from the very real legal and social limitations imposed on both queer people and Black people in this era.

### ***The Cozy Cabin Inn: Reworking the Ideological State Apparatus at Black and Tans***

Among the many night spots in Chicago's South Side neighborhood of Bronzeville that offered pansy performance and female impersonators, one in particular was notorious for its excellent queer entertainers and thrilling floor shows. The Cozy Cabin Inn (or Cabin Inn) opened its doors in 1933 at 3119 Cottage Grove Avenue before it relocated in 1938 to Thirty-Fifth and South State Street.<sup>80</sup> Known throughout Chicago as the "oddest of nightclubs,"<sup>81</sup> the Cabin Inn, under the management of Nat 'Big' Ivy (proprietor) and Eddie Woods (general manager), offered nightly entertainment featuring many of the most famous female impersonators in Chicago and indeed the nation. Reporting on the night club's fourth anniversary celebration, *The Chicago Defender* promised that "Every night is a gay one[;] you'll enjoy an evening of real

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<sup>79</sup> "Masqueraders Exposed," *Chicago Defender*, February 20, 1926, 1; "Two Men," 11; "Tells Police He Stole to Dress Up Sweetheart," *Chicago Defender*, July 27, 1929, 11; "Impersonator Tries Luck," 1; "Three Men," 12; "Stylist Woman Revealed as a Man to Judge," *Chicago Defender*, June 1, 1935, 12.

<sup>80</sup> There is some disagreement about the dates of both the move and the name change: Heap claims the relocation occurred in 1935, and this is when "Cozy" is dropped from its name, while De la Croix never mentions "Cozy" and claims the move to State Street occurred in 1938. In my own research, I have observed "Cozy" dropping from press mentions beginning in 1935; I found one news item placing the Cabin Inn on State Street in 1935 (Franklyn Frant, "Sepia Mae West," *Atlanta Daily World* (Atlanta, GA), Sep. 18 1935), but all other mentions of a re-opening or a location on State Street appear in 1938: "Valda Gray Praised on Spicy Revue," *Chicago Defender*, September 24, 1938, 18; "Crowd Jams Cabin Inn at Its Opening," *Chicago Defender*, October 22, 1938, 19; "Fashionettes Cocktail Party is Ultra Ultra," *Chicago Defender*, December 3, 1938, 15; Flash Evans, "Dots and Dashes," *Chicago Defender*, October 8, 1938, 19.

<sup>81</sup> "Cabin Inn Celebrates 4<sup>th</sup> Anniversary with Red Hot Show and Plenty 'Imps'," *Chicago Defender*, July 10, 1937, 10.

entertainment,” and “every Thursday morning, the Cabin Inn has a big breakfast show for all its patrons.”<sup>82</sup> Beyond “traditional” theatrical entertainment, the Cabin Inn staged a variety of community events. One legendary evening in October of 1935, the Cabin Inn even hosted two homosexual weddings before being raided by the police.<sup>83</sup> Yet, when the night club hosted a benefit for St. Elizabeth’s parish, it “brought out the city’s most smartly attired socialites,” and “a capacity crowd filled the New Cabin Inn.”<sup>84</sup> The Cabin Inn was a place of paradoxes—it was simultaneously a place of scandalous spectacle, a venue for respectable community events, a criminal enterprise, and the staging ground for the formation of a revolutionary queer community. These contradictions ultimately made the Cabin Inn an exemplary location for experiences of disidentification—inhabiting ways of being that were unobtainable within hegemonic discourse, reworking categories of identity, and challenging white supremacist and heteronormative power structures.

What made the Cabin Inn notorious among Bronzeville’s thriving night spots was its commitment to unapologetically queer spectacle and socialization. Across the nation, the “most bizarre of Chicago’s public spots” was particularly known for its incredible female impersonators. A 1935 article in the *Atlanta Daily World* reports that the Cabin Inn was



Fig. 11: Advertisement for the Cabin Inn (In *Southeast Economist*, January 21, 1937).

<sup>82</sup> “Cabin Inn Celebrates 4<sup>th</sup> Anniversary,” 10; “Nite Spotting,” May 1, 1937, 20; Frant, “Sepia Mae West.”

<sup>83</sup> “‘Midget Shorty’ Bunch to Wed Oct. 15 at Cabin Inn,” *Chicago Defender*, October 12, 1935; “‘Bullfrog Shorty’ to be Married at the Cabin Inn,” *Chicago Defender*, October 3, 1935.

<sup>84</sup> “Fashionettes Cocktail Party,” 15.

“featuring entertainment by five gentlemen of the neuter gender.”<sup>85</sup> Over its lifespan, the Inn employed some of the most well-known female impersonators of the era, including Valda Grey,<sup>86</sup> (sepia) Joan Crawford,<sup>87</sup> (sepia) Luzetta Hall, (sepia) Mae West,<sup>88</sup> Jean LaRue, Petite Swanson,<sup>89</sup> Nina McKinney, Dixie Lee,<sup>90</sup> Frances Dee, sepia Mary Pickford, Billie McAllister, Carol Lee, and Doris White. These performers made up the “feature attraction”<sup>91</sup> at the Cabin Inn, and many acquired national and even international fame.<sup>92</sup> The Cabin Inn capitalized on pansy performance and gender illusion to appeal to the widespread fascination with queer sexual performativity and Black culture.



Fig. 12: Valda Gray, famous female impersonator and producer of many of the Cabin Inn's celebrated floor shows during the 1930s (*Ebony*, March 1948).

The Cozy Cabin Inn catered to both members of Chicago's Black community and also white audiences seeking thrills and social taboos, often traveling to the city's South Side neighborhoods from their neighborhoods on the North Side of the city. Capitalizing on its proximity to the Century of Progress fairgrounds, an advertisement for the Cabin Inn featured the Black female impersonator Gilda Gray's fan dance routine,<sup>93</sup> a nod to the popularity of Sally Rand's notorious fan dancing spectacle at the World's Fair, the Cabin Inn lured mixed-race audiences from around the city (as

<sup>85</sup> Frant, “Sepia Mae West.”

<sup>86</sup> Valda Grey also served as the producer of the floor shows and other entertainment

<sup>87</sup> Sometimes called “Joanne” Crawford, aka George Manus

<sup>88</sup> Richard Barrows, not Sam Fouche.

<sup>89</sup> aka Alphonso Horsley

<sup>90</sup> aka Robert Beck

<sup>91</sup> “Nite Spotting,” May 1, 1937, 20.

<sup>92</sup> Rob Roy, “Early Hines is One Up on Jim Lunceford Now,” *Chicago Defender*, August 24, 1935, 7; “Valda Gray Praised,” September 24, 1938, 18; “Cabin Inn Revue is Every Bit Snappy,” *Chicago Defender*, September 3, 1938, 18; Bob Hayes, “Cabin Inn Show has Plenty Songs, Dances,” *Chicago Defender*, March 25, 1939, 19; Billy Jones, “Big New Revue Tops Cabin Inn: Stars that Shine,” *Chicago Defender*, January 7, 1939, 18.

<sup>93</sup> advertisement for the Cozy Cabin Club, 3119 Cottage Grove Ave., “The South Side's ?? Oddest Nite Club ??” featuring “Luzetta Hall, Sensational Blues Singer,” “Joan Crawford, Soubrette,” and “Gilda Grey, Fan Dancer,” in *Chicago Defender*, September 15, 1934, 9.

well as visitors from all over the country). As a Black queer performer, Gray's performance could also offer the subversive pleasure of seeing a Black male in an act that was culturally identified with white female sexuality. Similarly, Luzetta Hall used sexual and racial difference to create compelling spectacles enticing mixed-audiences. In a review of the latest show at the Cozy Cabin Inn, an article in the *Defender* describes how "you will find 'Luzetta Hall' as a female impersonator, a sensation that is really different together with 'Blue and Jean,' the first 'Lady' and Gentleman of the 'Carioca.' A team that more than merits that name doing the 'Carioca in their own inimitable style.'"<sup>94</sup> In this instance, Hall's Brazilian dance number conveys a queer performative mirroring of heteronormativity through spectacle and subversive gender illusion. Hall reappropriated the "Carioca," a Brazilian dance resembling the Samba, as a tangible exemplar of notions regarding exoticism and sexuality as a means of captivating diverse audiences through tantalizing dance numbers demonstrative of the performer's extraordinary talent. With a queered and racialized twist, Hall evoked the social capital attached with the exoticism of Brazilian sexuality during the time, reimagining the event through subversive sexual and racial difference. Both Gray and Hall gave performances reimagining white heteronormative discourse to include queer and racialized subjects, challenging power dynamics surrounding race, sexuality and gender by catering to white heteronormative fascination with Black sexuality. By these means, the Cabin Inn re-envisioned the world through entertainment that celebrated sexual and racial difference and acted as a site of disidentification.

By offering broadly appealing, and often scandalous, entertainment, the Cabin Inn proved popular among a multiplicity of races and heritages and provided a bridge crossing racial and sexual lines, allowing culturally disparate demographics to mingle freely. Some, like *Defender*

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<sup>94</sup> "A Unique Show at Cozy Cabin," *Chicago Defender*, September 1, 1934, 8.

columnist James J. Gentry, saw cabarets as important institutions in the fight for racial equality. In one issue, Gentry observes that the Cabin Inn, with a handful of other Bronzeville nightclubs, “were always crowded with a genial gang of jolly folks of many races” and “we see nightly, Chinese, Japanese, Filipinos, and other men of the other darker races, including the Race man, enjoying the company of the Nordic woman; and vice-versa.”<sup>95</sup> By welcoming mixed audiences, comprised of multiple races, genders, sexualities, and classes, black-and-tans created spaces for disparate demographics to engage with one another despite societal taboos. The performances on stage detracted attention from the racial differences among the patrons, allowing them to engage in a shared experience. Entertainment fostered a shared engagement with queer culture with a multiplicity of races creating a shared experience that (temporarily) bridged racial difference.<sup>96</sup> Reflecting the optimism of the era, Gentry writes: “I believe, that in association with other improvements for race relationship, the night club serves as a definite cure for race hatred or prejudice.”<sup>97</sup> Whether or not the cabaret could provide a “cure” for bigotry, the Cabin Inn played a vital role in challenging laws and norms of segregation by facilitating the intermingling of individuals of varying backgrounds.

Queer performers of color like Luzetta Hall, Valda Gray, “Mae West,” and “Joan Crawford” drew crowds to the Cabin Inn and helped define the space as socially tolerant, acceptanting, and even celebratory of queerness. For a Chicago night-lifer of the 1930s, the Cabin Inn offered thrilling spectacles, a tight-knit community, and the perfect arena for social and sexual experimentation. As a social space, the Inn acted simultaneously as a unifying standard to connect patrons across color lines and an opportunity to disidentify from one’s social

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<sup>95</sup> James J. Gentry, “Bronzeville in Chicago: The Cabaret and Its Usefulness,” *Chicago Defender*, November 28, 1936, 20.

<sup>96</sup> Heap, *Slumming*, Chap 6.

<sup>97</sup> Gentry, “The Cabaret and Its Usefulness,” 20.

and cultural limitations. Queer culture produced at the Cabin Inn served as a bridge connecting white, Black, queer, and heteronormative demographics through the commonality of the shared experience of engaging with the spot's entertainment. It offered a cultural sphere in which "the relationship between the races and sexes is always amiable and at times amorous. . . Thousands of persons are seeking this type of pleasure, but only find it in the night club. . . I have found that the night club is the only place where the public may be seen 'acting natural.'"<sup>98</sup> Heterosexual and homosexual patrons, regardless of racial identity, coalesced into a unified gallery of spectators. The Cabin Inn carefully fostered a social space for communities with diverse racial, sexual, and class backgrounds to gather visibly and perform different kinds of cultural identities while becoming engrossed with the same entertainment content.

In this way, the Cabin Inn provided performative escapism from monotonous reality for every audience member, regardless of sexual and racial identity while offering glamorous mirages of lived realities and fantastical escapes from disciplinary discourses, providing curious minds with salacious fodder. Each revue curated by the queer performers and producers at the Cabin Inn featured a mix of soulful reflections on the pains of heartache and struggle coupled with playful re-envisionings of social codes and exciting dance numbers. One show included female impersonator Luzetta Hall "tell[ing] just what happens when a 'Woman Loves a Man'" followed by song number in which "Pretty Maxine Johnson says its alright to cheat a little as we never know the difference 'One Hundred Years from Today,' now that's the truth."<sup>99</sup> The article suggests that these performers did more than simply offer entertainment to distract audiences from their everyday lives; they also served as proprietors of culture by suggesting taboo rules as replacements for aged normative standards of morality. Night spots such as The Cabin Inn thus

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<sup>98</sup> Gentry, "The Cabaret and Its Usefulness," 20.

<sup>99</sup> "Cabarets," Oct. 13, 1934, 9.

offered entertainment simultaneously affirming of the harsh realities of everyday life while also reimagining a new world of modernity via queer and racialized performativity.



Fig. 13: Female impersonators at the Cabin Inn with musician Jimmie Noone (Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library).

The Cozy Cabin Inn maintained a devoted set of patrons and performers producing exceptional entertainment throughout the 1930s. Reopening at a new location in 1938, the *Defender* reports that “when Big Ivy opened the doors oh [sic] his new Cabin Inn hundreds of night lifers were out to join the celebration.<sup>100</sup> As late as 1939, it was still consistently producing “one of the most outstanding shows on the south side”<sup>101</sup> and its shows had even been picked up for radio broadcast.<sup>102</sup> The Cabin Inn remained popular until its closing in 1940 when Nat Ivy lost his entertainment license and the Cabin Inn was forced to operate only as a tavern, no longer allowed to host Valda Gray’s elaborately produced queer shows.<sup>103</sup> Yet the enthusiasm for pansy

<sup>100</sup> “Crowd Jams Inn,” 19.

<sup>101</sup> Jones, “Big New Revue Tops Cabin Inn,” 18.

<sup>102</sup> “Jimmie Noone’s Band All Set for Cabin Inn: Twelve Piece Band Will Top New Show,” *Chicago Defender*, September 9, 1939, 20.

<sup>103</sup> Bob Hayes, “No Show for Patrons of Cabin Inn,” *Chicago Defender*, January 27, 1940, 12.

performance, female impersonators, and queer nightclubs in Bronzeville had far outlasted much of the country, in part because of the success of the Cabin Inn and the vital role it in the development and maintenance of a queer culture in Bronzeville.

### ***Revising Hollywood: Queering White Leading Ladies***

A particularly striking example of this can be seen in the trend of Black male performers adopting the names and characters of white female movie stars as a crucial part of their act and persona. Often advertised with “sepia” in front of their “names,” female impersonators such as Gloria Swanson (Walter Winston), Joan Crawford (George Manus), Greta Garbo (Walter Currin), Mae West (Richard Barrows), and Peggy Joyce (Sam Fouche, who also at times performed as “Sepia Mae West”) built successful careers by adopting the identities of white cultural icons. Under the safeguard of entertainment and spectacle, these Black queer performers inserted themselves in the realm of popular entertainment where *whiteness* was the default. Because the newly formed movie industry idealized whiteness and heteronormativity, non-normative subjects would, by default, struggle to find positive identification in the popular imaginary. Instead of an outright rejection of dominant discourse, many of the performers who rose to prominence did so through identifying themselves in identities and practices familiar to dominant discourse, but which were not culturally coded to connect with the non-white, non-heterosexual bodies they inhabited. Their acts and personas play on a misrecognition with the categories, values, and practices of white and heteronormative culture in which they cannot be fully interpolated. These figures can best be understood as cultural curators who perform disidentification within hegemonic codes, creating or recovering ways of identifying and claiming them as their own.

Sepia Gloria Swanson, who is often credited with starting the national “vogue” of female impersonators with her rise to national stardom,<sup>104</sup> began her career in Chicago’s Bronzeville before becoming one of the most popular performers in New York City. By adopting the persona of the white female starlet Gloria Swanson, sepia Gloria Swanson produced an imitation of sexual and racial performativity meant to be recognized and appeal to a broad audience. Yet, Swanson’s performances drew attention to the disconnect between the Black male-identified body and the culturally-recognizable codes of white, feminine performance. Swanson dressed her large body with the feminine extravagance associated with white female movie stardom, donning fishnets, furs, and sequins,<sup>105</sup> and performed adaptations of popular songs rephrased with “witty sayings” and “spicy lyrics.”<sup>106</sup> For example, at a celebrated performance at the Harlem Opera House in 1934, she sang: “I’m a big fat mama, got the meat shakin’ on my bones / I’m a big fat mama, got the meat shakin’ on my bones / And every time I shake some skinny gal loses her home” while performing a sensual, flirty dance, raising her skirt to expose her knees.<sup>107</sup> Inhabiting a body identified with Blackness and masculinity, Swanson performed the hyper-femininity and hyper-sexualization associated with the white starlet Gloria Swanson, thereby working within and against the racist and heteronormative systems in which she was entrenched. Swanson’s performances exposed and highlighted a reality of difference, projecting a queer-racialized subjectivity into the national imaginary to be compared with the feminine beauty and

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<sup>104</sup> Hayes, “Here and There,” December 31, 1932, 5; “Around New York,” *Chicago Defender*, March 2, 1935; See, “‘Female Impersonators,’” 21; “‘Gloria’ Swanson Tops at Britwood,” *Chicago Defender*, September 25, 1937; “Impersonator a Wow at 101: ‘Miss Swanson’ Now in ‘Heaven,’ It Seems,” *New York Amsterdam News* (New York, NY), January 22, 1938; Maurice Dancer, “‘Gloria Swanson’ Buried in Harlem: Entertainer Won Fame as a Female Impersonator,” *Chicago Defender*, May 3, 1940.

<sup>105</sup> James F. Wilson, “Introduction: ‘It’s Getting Dark on Old Broadway,’” *Bulldaggers, Pansies, and Chocolate Babies: Performance, Race, and Sexuality in the Harlem Renaissance* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2010), 194, Kindle.

<sup>106</sup> Dancer, “‘Gloria Swanson’ Buried in Harlem.”

<sup>107</sup> Augustus Austin, “Fletcher Henderson’s Band Pleases at Opera House,” *New York Age* (New York, NY), September 1, 1934.

glamour of her white namesake. Performances such as this cultivated a cultural spectacle of disidentification through the discursive lens of white ideals regarding feminine beauty, queering and racializing these ideological categories.

However, the queer racialized performativity that earned the sepia “Gloria Swanson” acclaim was not an entirely disingenuous identification. In private life, Swanson appears to have lived largely as a female and cultivated the extravagant lifestyle and habits associated with white female stardom. A 1931 article from *The Afro-American* claimed that Swanson “is proud of the fact that he has not worn a stitch of male attire in ten years. He wears the daintiest of feminine flimsies, coats of ermine and shoes of the latest style.”<sup>108</sup> Additionally, nearly all press coverage of Swanson written while she was alive uses feminine pronouns when referencing her both as a performer and a private individual, demonstrating a remarkable capacity for accepting Swanson’s self-presentation, given the time. Swanson’s close personal friend Bruce Nugent describes about her glamorous and unconventional lifestyle: “Seldom coming on the street in the daytime, breakfasting when the rest of the world was dining, dining when the rest of the world was taking its final snooze before arising for the day, his public life was lived in evening gowns; his private life in boa-trimmed negligees.”<sup>109</sup> Adopting the wardrobe and habits of a white female celebrity, Swanson reworked and reclaimed discursive categories in a way that allowed a queer man of color an opportunity to access the fantasy and glamor associated with white movie starlets.

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<sup>108</sup> “The Strange Theatre: Female Impersonators Taboo Here, Are All the Rage in China,” *Afro-American* (Baltimore, MD), August 29, 1931.

<sup>109</sup> Bruce Nugent, “Gloria Swanson,” from *Biographical Sketches*, in *Gay Rebel of the Harlem Renaissance: Selections from the Work of Richard Bruce Nugent*, ed. Thomas H. Wirth (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), 220.

Other female impersonators drew a sharp contrast between their stage persona and their identity in daily life. Press coverage of Richard Barrows, a celebrated female impersonator performing at the Cabin Inn and The Annex as Mae West, emphasizes Barrows's masculinity and heterosexuality. One article about Barrows describes him as a "regular tough guy," and warns, "Let no one think he's a softy. He'll laugh and kid with anybody, but if some misguided person gets the impression he's naught but an out-and-out pansy, he can swing a heavy fist."<sup>110</sup> Barrows's heterosexuality, too, is suggested by the article, which writes that "Mae . . . claims a four-year-old son in California, his original home."<sup>111</sup> Barrows is eager to affirm his masculinity and heterosexuality, making it clear that his stage persona is not reflective of his personal identity. Similarly, Sam Fouche, best known as the impersonator Peggy Joyce, assures the readers of the *Afro-American* that "he has gone into the art of female impersonation purely from an artistic standpoint"<sup>112</sup> while another article notes that Fouche is "known for his athletic prowess in all sports."<sup>113</sup> These articles draw attention to the disidentification in Barrows and Fouche's performances on stage, demonstrating the temporary adoption the affect and codes of an identity category which the subject rejects.

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<sup>110</sup> David Martin, "Male Mae West in Chicago has 57 Evening Gowns," *Afro-American* (Baltimore, MD), week of November 3, 1934.

<sup>111</sup> Martin, "Male Mae West in Chicago."

<sup>112</sup> "Around the Town," *Afro-American* (Baltimore, MD), week of May 19, 1934.

<sup>113</sup> "Male Mae West's Impersonations Began at Ball," *Afro-American*, January 18, 1936.

Indeed, the masterful performances of these entertainers highlights the instability of normative categories used to distinguish genders and sexualities. The sharp contrast between Barrows's appearance in daily life versus on stage as Mae West is a subject of fascination for the press, and presumably, Barrows's audience. One article describes



Fig. 14: (left) Barrows as "Sepia" Mae West ("Dick Barrows." In the *Afro-American*, July 6, 1935); (right) Barrows as he appeared in daily life ("Producer: Dickie Barrow." In *Chicago Defender*, April 8, 1939, 21).

how, when "seen on the street, Mae—in

private life, Richard Barrow—resembles a coming heavyweight champion or a football

tackle,"<sup>114</sup> and another article affirms that "on the street he could be mistaken for Joe Louis'

favorite sparring partner."<sup>115</sup> Comparing Barrows with the hyper-masculine appearance of a

boxer underscores the drastic transformation Barrows achieves on stage. Off stage, Barrows's

"favorite strolling costume [was] a turtle-neck sweater and cap,"<sup>116</sup> yet in one of the reported 57

evening gowns he donned as Mae West, "he is transformed into an amazing imitation of a

curvesome, cold weather honey, and sings and dances on par with the gals, and enjoys himself

mightily."<sup>117</sup> Barrows's impressive ability to pass, apparently quite believably, as an attractive

woman suggests that the signifiers used to identify a person's gender are unreliable, especially in

the hands of a skilled entertainer. If a large, very masculine Black man can pass as a glamorous

and attractive woman, the categories used to distinguish a person's identity cannot be relied

upon. Even for those experienced in identifying the curious gender-bending of female

<sup>114</sup> Martin, "Male Mae West in Chicago."

<sup>115</sup> Frant, "Sepia Mae West."

<sup>116</sup> Martin, "Male Mae West in Chicago."

<sup>117</sup> Martin, "Male Mae West in Chicago."

impersonators, “‘Mae’ looks like anything but a member of the puzzle sex.”<sup>118</sup> Barrows’s performance of disidentification is so effective that he becomes nearly illegible within the established ideological system. Barrows’s performances provided a counter-example of idealized heterosexual, masculine behavior and therefore represented a social deviance that piqued onlooker’s curiosity, simultaneously captivating and shocking.<sup>119</sup> Female impersonators and their ability to escape established categories challenges the ideological framework which relies on stable identity categories to maintain power relations between different genders and races. In this way, Black female impersonators practiced an art that defied the oppressive restraints found outside entertainment venues.

The ability for individuals to adopt and exchange identity categories at will highlights the limitations of these categories and their inability to reliably represent what they are meant to. When Fouche, who had been performing as “Peggy Smith” at the Club Ritz in Chicago, moved to New York, he adopted the name “Mae West.”<sup>120</sup> Because there was already a well-known female impersonator using that name, this cause some confusion and outraged Barrows, “Chicago’s ‘Mae West,’” who “threatened to sue Fouche for \$25,000 for lifting his self-styled title.”<sup>121</sup> The ability for multiple Black men to claim ownership over the persona of the same white film actress caused a very real slippage in the ability to distinguish individuals. The two men were physically dissimilar. As described in newspapers, Barrows “stands nearly six feet, weighs around 195, and has the torso of a bull,”<sup>122</sup> while Sam Fouche is described as “5 feet 8

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<sup>118</sup> Frant, “Sepia Mae West.”

<sup>119</sup> Newton, *Mother Camp*, 65.

<sup>120</sup> “Around the Town,” *Afro-American*, week of May 19, 1934; “Former Comedian is Producing,” *Pittsburgh Courier* (Pittsburgh, PA), December 7, 1934; “Male Mae West’s Impersonations.”

<sup>121</sup> “Sepia Mae West,” *Pittsburgh Courier* (Pittsburgh, PA), April 29, 1934.

<sup>122</sup> Martin, “Male Mae West in Chicago.”

inches tall, is of a clear brown complexion and has natural, long, black hair.”<sup>123</sup> However, many news articles confuse one for the other, sometimes even posting one of the performer’s picture

with an article about the other.

More importantly, the exchange of one white female starlet’s identity for another suggests the exchangeability of the idealized white feminine identity. The emptiness of the social signifiers used to identify subjects becomes apparent, allowing individuals who are excluded from these hegemonic categories to reappropriate and adapt them for their own uses.

By appropriating the codes and signifiers of the hegemony,

queer performers of color are able to rework and redefine ideological categories from within and re-envision a world with new and different configurations of race, gender, and sexuality. More importantly, it allows oppressed subjects to access, possess, and reappropriate the ideological categories which exclude them. Through performative disidentification, these Black female



**“SEPIA MAE WEST”**  
**The big floorshow at the Cabin Inn is headed by this Sepia “Sister,” and if you wish to see kicking routines plus plenty songs and personality, see Sepia Mae. In private life this “bunch of personality” is Dick Barrow.**



**“SEPIA MAE WEST”**  
 With the sudden demand in New York’s night life for female impersonators, Sam Fouche, who styles himself as the sepia “Mae West” stands out as a feature at Small’s Paradise Club. Dick Barrows, Chicago’s “Mae West” has threatened to sue Fouche for \$25,000 for lifting his self-styled title.

*Fig. 15: An example of the confusion caused by the two “Sepia Mae Wests.” Although they use the same photograph, one publication (left) mistakenly identifies the depicted individual as Dick Barrow (“Kicking at the Cabin.” In the *Chicago Defender*, November 7, 1936, 25) while the other (right) correctly attributes the image to Sam Fouche (“Sepia Mae West.” In the *Pittsburgh Courier*, April 28, 1934).*

<sup>123</sup> “Male Mae West’s Impersonations.”

impersonators subverted notions of race, gender, and sexuality and negotiated a space within the cultural imaginary for queer Black culture to percolate and foster.

### **Conclusion**

The undeniable social and cultural agency obtained by the Black queer entertainers well-documented during the pansy craze of 1920s-30s evidences a phenomenon of radical defiance refuting nationally upheld societal limitations preserving racist and homophobic discursive constraints to exclude queer people of color from entering the popular cultural imaginary. The achievements made by the Black pansy performers not only reveal the courageous audacity of self-determination exercised by the performers, but their historical legacy provided a solid foundation for a futurity of queer and racialized cultural expression to exist in entertainment and culture despite State apparatuses acting to confine, and even erase visibility of such expression. The inclusion and celebration in the national cultural imaginary of the disidentified entertainment performed by the Black queer entertainers during the pansy craze cultivated a visible queer racialized cultural manifestation hinged on refusing submission to societal erasure and exclusion.

The popularity subsequently leading to cultural agency and social mobility obtained by the Black queer performers entertaining in Chicago's pansy craze stimulated an increased societal tolerance of queer and racialized subjectivities during the period but also, marks a visible emersion of "Black pansy culture" within popular culture serving as a momentous historical site of queer-racialized heritage. This heritage is demonstrative of the fragility of disciplinary and exclusionary racist and homophobic ideologies. Ultimately, the performers noted in the pages above bravely subverted racial and heteronormative boundaries and thus provided foundations for the queer and racialized culture that still flourishes today. The popularity and mainstreamed

status of queer and racialized cultural products such as the contemporarily well-known drag competition reality show created by a Black queer man, RuPaul Charles, known as *RuPaul's Drag Race* is just one example of the lasting effects of the Black pansy craze. Just as the Black pansy performers of Chicago's pansy craze used disidentification to re-envision queer entertainment appealing to the masses, *RuPaul's Drag Race* hinges its appeal on queer and racialized culture and situates Black queer culture as dominant queer culture as represented in the Ebonic slang and performativity reflected in queer popular entertainment.

This project's analysis of the legacy of Chicago's leading Black pansy performers exemplifies the revolutionary integration of queer performers of color within the national imaginary, offering a history honoring Chicago's contemporary queer community, and especially its members of color so often under-represented within academic scholarship. Reflecting on the accomplishments of the Chicago's Black pansy performers despite the hostile societal climate they existed within during the time calls to mind the colloquial Western phrase: "When life gives you lemons... make lemonade." I feel the vehicle of disidentification acted as the mechanism producing the "lemonade" for many Black queer performers during the pansy craze. This specific historical legacy represents creative defiance circumventing disciplinary restrictions during an epoch-making cultural manifestation of queer and racialized self-determination through cultural expression and entertainment.

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