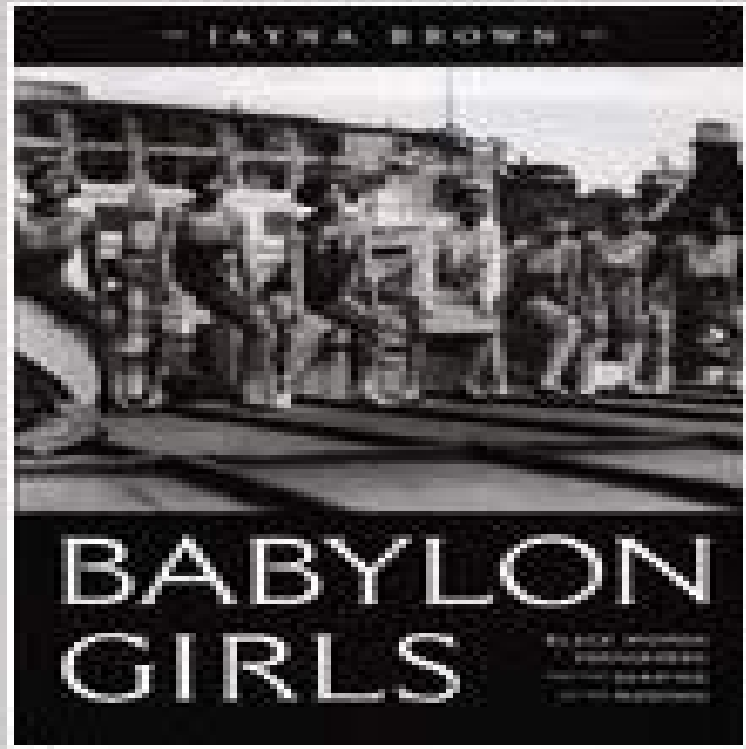


Babylon Girls: Black Women Performers and the Shaping of the Modern



Babylon Girls is a groundbreaking cultural history of the African American women who performed in variety shows, chorus lines, burlesque revues, cabaret acts, and the like between 1890 and 1945. Through a consideration of the gestures, costuming, vocal techniques, and stagecraft developed by African American singers and dancers, Jayna Brown explains how these women shaped the movement and style of an emerging urban popular culture. In an era of U.S. and British imperialism, these women challenged and played with constructions of race, gender, and the body as they moved across stages and geographic space. They pioneered dance movements including the cakewalk, the shimmy, and the Charleston, black dances by which the New Woman defined herself. These early-twentieth-century performers brought these dances with them as they toured across the United States and around the world, becoming cosmopolitan subjects more widely traveled than many of their audiences. Investigating both well-known performers such as Ada Overton Walker and Josephine Baker and lesser-known artists such as Belle Davis and Valaida Snow, Brown weaves the histories of specific singers and dancers together with incisive theoretical insights. She describes the strange phenomenon of blackface performances by women, both black and white, and she considers how black expressive artists navigated racial segregation. Fronting the picaninny choruses of African American child performers who toured Britain and the Continent in the early 1900s, and singing and dancing in *The Creole Show* (1890), *Darktown Follies* (1913), and *Shuffle Along* (1921), black women variety-show performers of the early twentieth century paved the way for later generations of African American performers. Brown shows not only how these artists influenced transnational ideas of the modern woman

but also how their artistry was an essential element in the development of jazz.

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