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Text of article:

The black presence in inter-war Britain was composed of diverse individuals from the Caribbean, Africa, the wider African diaspora and the United States including performers, students, writers, political activists and artists alongside established families and working class labourers who faced the wrath of rioters in 1919. Racist riots had erupted in Glasgow in January and by August the port towns of South Shields, Salford, Hull, London, Liverpool, Newport, Cardiff and Barry were all effected.[1] During the riots their communities of African, South Asian, Chinese, Caribbean and Arab men and women, along with their white family, friends and employees were attacked.[2] In the decade of the 1920s racism, most obviously in the form of the 'colour bar' in everyday experiences such as housing and entertainment were painfully and angrily recorded by black activists.[3] Despite this there were also convivial spaces that cut across ethnic and class boundaries, and for some London particularly 'acted as a mecca for a varied assortment of radical subaltern networks in which the Indian student might exchange ideas informally with the Jamaican sailor or the Somali visitor converse with the politician from Kenya, or the exile from the Gold Coast.'[4] Increasingly such conversations became more formalised through the politically focused organisations which established themselves to speak out against racial prejudice in Britain and across the empire. The second Pan-African congress held sessions in London in the summer of 1921 hosting over 100 delegates and as Hakim Adi has illustrated, by the 1920s West African students whose numbers increased throughout the decade were part of a number of active organisations who were drawing attention to and challenging everyday acts of racism in Britain.[5] They included members of the African Progress Union, founded in December 1918 and chaired by Britain's first black mayor John Archer, and the West African Students Union (WASU), established in 1925.

It was in this context that in 1926 'Blackbirds' mania took hold within popular cultural life in Britain. Following a successful run in Paris, the African American cast of the *Blackbirds* revue, a series of musical and dance numbers interspersed with comedy sketches, enthralled audiences at the London Pavilion on Piccadilly Circus.[6] Sold out performances, the attention of royalty and Blackbirds-themed society parties confirmed the stardom of its lead performer, thirty-year old Florence Mills.[7] She became 'the sensation of the season' commanding adoration among people who 'seriously worshiped her.'[8] Assessed by the *Sunday Post* to be 'the greatest coloured entertainer this country had ever seen', her celebrity touched multiple aspects of British life from domesticity to fashion.[9] Her recipe for a New Orleans Christmas Loaf was included in a compilation of yuletide recipes from 'famous stars' for the *Nottingham Evening Post* in 1926 and in 1927 the *Dundee Courier* carried an article on 'decorated stockings' including 'one of the newest shades' which came in 'a golden brown' called Florence Mills.[10] She took part in special performances for disabled servicemen and Bethnal Green's children's hospital and Golders Green Synagogue. She also engaged with and inspired members of the city's black communities. Remembered with affection and admiration in the memoirs of black artists Mills is well known within histories of performance during the Harlem Renaissance, yet, despite her immense popularity in Britain during the 1920s, she is rarely discussed in histories of the British stage or popular culture.[11] This article focuses on the time Mills spent in Britain. It examines newspaper reports of her performances and four examples of fan mail to consider how Mills' presence in Britain as a performer and an anti-racist activist influenced public debates and personal reflections on racial identity, sexual desire and belonging to Britain.

The examples of fan mail we focus on here reflect how four individuals connected in particular though very different ways to Mills through her performances on and off stage. For some fans their encounters with Mills came through sharing a space with her in the theatre, for others they came closest through photographic representations of the star or reading about her in newspapers and magazines. Their handwritten letters give us an insight into 'ordinary' people's identities and their attempts to understand their lives in the context of performances of race and class in 1920s Britain. Although short, the intimate letters speak to a number of broader social, economic and political themes including the hardening of racism or 'the colour line' in Britain between the wars; the importance of the arts in challenges to racism; the developing formation of ideas around an African Diaspora and intersections of race, sexuality and desire.

Florence Mills and the performance of 'race'

No recordings have survived of Mills' performances, but she was considered to be one of the leading performers of the Harlem Renaissance during the 1920s, and she was one of the few African American vaudeville performers to achieve international success.[12] Jayna Brown observes that the lives of African American performers were inherently itinerant, and that through her performance and mobility Mills embodied 'the New Black Woman' who was 'urban, emancipated' and mobile, 'traveling abroad to represent the black cultural capital' of African Americans.[13] Mills wore her Eton crop brushed back and 'had modern views' on Southern spiritual melodies.[14] Zakiya Adair observes that Mills' travels with vaudeville would become an important space for the transportation and representation of blackness.[15] She was also known for her plain speaking about white oppression off-stage and her cross-

dressing roles on stage, all forms of identity which resonated with her fans.[16] Many of her fans were from the working class who made up the audiences at black revue performances and though some black commentators such as the critics George Bell (of *Variety*) and Tony Langston (*Chicago Defender*) would give positive reviews of her performances, W E B DuBois did not.[17] As Adair has argued, by finding success within the spaces of vaudeville a 'loosely scripted, comedic and musical' form of performance that was routed in and associated with the working classes, Mills 'challenged the notion that racial uplift could only be attained through forms of cultural performance determined legitimate by the black political elite.'[18]

Born in Washington DC, Florence began performing as a young child, following in a tradition of 'picaninny' performers of the nineteenth century.[19] However, Mills' career was halted when a child protection organisation placed her into an institution run by Catholic nuns, against her family's wishes.[20] Mills and her family later moved to New York where Florence formed an act with her sisters Olivia and Maude and also performed in her own right on theatre stages in and around the city.[21] Florence worked hard to become an established stage performer in New York and in 1921 she gained her first major stage role, as a replacement lead in the hit musical *Shuffle Along* which also starred Josephine Baker. *Shuffle Along* 'remains a benchmark of the Harlem Renaissance'; but it also signalled a new era of black women performers, though these women found themselves enacting roles that 'worked within and against familiar versions of racialized femininity' which 're-circulated fantasies of African and colonial female subjecthood.'[22] Building on this success Mills came to London with the revue show *Dover Street to Dixie* which celebrated a popular run at the London Pavilion; but it was her starring role in *Black Birds of 1926* first performed in Harlem but with successful runs in both Paris and London, that made her a massive star in Britain. Opening in September 1926 the revue marked its 150th performance in January 1927 with record advance bookings running into March.[23]

Not only a celebrity performer, Mills was also an outspoken critic of racism. Growing up in the United States she was regularly a victim of racial prejudice and the politics of white supremacy and, as she explained in an essay she wrote for the *Sunday Chronicle* in 1926, it was only through 'sheer determination to rise superior to prejudice' that she was able to 'win through at all'.[24] Though the spaces of performance might have been seen to be 'much more democratic and Christian than the world of high-brows and church goers', what William Pickens described in 1927 as the 'American color-psychosis' permeated all aspects of life.[25] Following the 1919 'race riots' and the subsequent hardening of the 'colour line', these were also problems Mills and the rest of the cast faced in Britain.[26] The news that an all-black cast was going to be performing in London in 1923 outraged the Actors' Association, the Variety Artists' Federation, the musicians union and the National Association of Theatrical Employees who complained to the licencing authority, the London County Council.[27] The extent of their lobbying forced a formal response from the Minister of Labour, Montague Barlow, who explained that there was nobody in Britain who could give 'precisely this form of entertainment'.[28] Under its header 'The Colour Ban', the *Exeter and Plymouth Gazette* agreed wryly that this probably was the case, as the 'white man's attempt to portray the "darkey" is generally a half-hearted-affair'; but for the paper, the real question was whether the Aliens' Order should have been relaxed and thus allow 'coloured gentlemen' to perform - however gifted they might be - when so many British performers were out of work.[29] The compromise the authorities settled on reflects well the hardening and officially endorsed racial prejudice

of the colour bar in inter-war Britain. Mills and her colleagues did perform, but the British unions successfully insisted that an all-white cast performed in the first half of the show with Mills and the rest of the cast allowed only to appear in the second half.[30] When the show returned to the United States it reverted to being an all black cast, reconfiguring its journey from *Dixie to Broadway*.[31]

The political compromise did not have quite the desired effect given that many reviewers (though not all) preferred the performance of Mills and her company, with the energy and talents of the American cast exciting audiences.[32] As well as popular success, the revue was loved by musicians including Constant Lambert, the actor John Gielgud and the Prince of Wales.[33] Although *Dover Street to Dixie* was popular, *The Era* reported that as the Ministry of Labour refused to allow 'the coloured band' to play outside the London Pavilion, the revue was withdrawn at the end of August.[34] When Mills and her colleagues returned to Europe in 1926 to perform *Blackbirds*, the artists' union continued to protest against the right of all black casts to perform in Britain. On the eve of the Blackbirds tour of Britain, the *Daily Express* published an article by Hannen Swaffer, who had previously led a racist press campaign against black performers in Britain, in which he acknowledged he too had initially opposed the coming of all black casts to Britain, but now had seemingly been convinced that Mills and company of performers did not mark 'a wholesale invasion of black people.'[35]

However, the success of the Blackbirds also reportedly convinced the Variety Actors Federation (VAF) to oppose the granting of any future labour permits for black companies.[36] In one critical response, a journalist reflected that Britain had replaced its 'Yellow Peril' with 'a Black Peril'. But where, asked the journalist, was 'the cry against the White Peril', for there were always agents literally combing Europe for variety acts to bring to Britain. No, the writer concluded, the Variety Actors Federation's protests could not be considered an issue of nationality. The VAF made no such protests against German or Austrian artists, nor against performers from the United States - as long as they were white. As the reporter observed 'The objection, therefore, must have its root in the performers' colour. …. What has really happened is that the V A F, has got black fever, and got it badly. The Negro, because he is a Negro, must be banned. This certainly does not come very well from a country that was the first to abolish negro slavery.'[37] Although it is important to be reminded that, despite the writer's conviction, Britain was not the first country to abolish 'negro slavery', the myth served as an important tool against the hardening colour bar operating in Britain, with the journalist concluding by reminding readers that 'Variety is cosmopolitan, and, further, always has been.'[38] That Mills had copies of these reports among the papers of her personal archive reflects that she was well aware of the racial prejudice she and her fellow performers were facing and challenging during their time in Britain.

Florence Mills and the Black Presence in London

Off stage Mills and her colleagues used their celebrity to support local communities and charities. According to one newspaper report, Mills' rendering of the famous Jewish chant, 'Eli, Eli,' was said by a rabbi present at one charity performance to be the most wonderful and expressive he had ever heard.[39] And though only reported after her death in 1927, after some performances Mills and her husband would be driven to the East End, visiting several hospitals with gifts, the car then heading back west to the Embankment to enable the driver to distribute money to those sleeping rough along the river Thames.[40]

Florence Mills spoke out against racial prejudice in the United States and racism more broadly. She 'consistently asserted her race belonging' and as the Liberian Consulate, based at West Africa House in Liverpool noted in August 1927, while in Britain Mills maintained a reputation as someone 'always endeavouring to do her bit in the struggle against racial antipathy.'[41] Mills' stance on racial issues made her a great asset to black communities living in Britain be they poor working people, students or celebrity friends from the arts. In 1923 Florence Mills appeared as a guest of honour, along with James P. Johnson and his Orchestra and members of the West Indian cricket team, at a party for 'The Coterie of Friends'.[42] This collective had originally been founded by a small group of students, their aim to create a social space where 'serious minded people of colour' could frequently meet, debate, discuss and socialise'.[43] The groups' original members founded the Club in the spring of 1919, perhaps as a personal response to the riots.

The founders of London's Coterie of Friends were all students. Along with A. Luke and J. McDougall they included as President, Edmund Thornton Jenkins, a Charleston-born musician who studied composition at the Royal Academy of Music from 1920-1921 and also played jazz. The Secretary Harold Piper, was born in Montserrat and a member of the Pharmaceutical Society; Dr Felix Hiram Leekham, a Trinidadian of Afro-Chinese descent, became Vice-President while he was a medical Student based at St Mary's hospital in Paddington. Their treasurer, Randall H Lockhard from Martinique was in London to study law.[44] In December 1919 the Coterie of Friends hosted an evening of works by the black British composer Samuel Coleridge-Taylor and both Piper and Jenkins took a leading role in the social gathering for South African nationalists held in London in August 1919.[45] Although dormant for twelve months before May 1923, owing to the departure from London of some of its principal members, the club still claimed the credit for having given some of the foremost social functions in 'the Negro world of London'.[46]

Opening in September 1926, Mills' return to Britain with the Blackbirds was important not only for white society *Vogue* readers keen to learn 'what the negro has made of jazz', but also for black people in London.[47] On the evening he attended a performance Hannen Swaffer reported 'there were indeed lots of negroes of all shades in the house, all proud of the triumph of their coloured brethren.'[48] Mills was well aware of the importance of her success to black people and understood her performances on stage to be a direct challenge to racism. As she told a *Daily News* reporter, she liked working on stage because 'it is the quickest way of showing white people that we are really very like them.' But despite the Blackbirds' success in London she was conscious that she 'still seemed to be looked at askance by some people.'[49]

Writing race, class and desire

Florence Mills received a range of letters. Of those that survive from both her trips to Britain some are notes and telegrams of support for her performances from friends and colleagues, others are requests for and letters of thanks for her participation in charity events and performances. There are invitations to parties and a high society wedding. A number of the letters reflect the sense of ownership of or imagined intimacy with celebrities which though usually associated with Hollywood's movie star era, Corin Thronsby (2004) illustrates are present in earlier forms of fan mail received by the poet Byron.[50] The letters in this paper

have been chosen from those known to come from British fans and been selected to illustrate the differing forms of emotional connection Mills inspired among different individuals. The first two letters discussed came from men who positioned themselves as white and working class; both wrote to Mills during her first tour of Britain in 1923. The third and fourth letters were written by women, one expressing queer desire, the other by a black woman who drew a sense of pride from Mills' presence and success in Britain.

AR wrote to Mills in 1923. He had been reading regularly the racist criticism Mills and her 'fellow artistes' had been receiving in the press and 'rather admired' the way she had continued to perform in the face of it, but he wrote not to simply offer his support, but to invite her to view some of Britain's 'pretty and historical places' from the sidecar of his motorcycle.[51] He told her that he would be proud to have her as his guest, and to learn more about America from her. He explained that he had spent a number of happy years living in Africa where he had 'the companionship for some months of an old captain' who had told him lots of 'interesting things' about the American South. He did not elaborate on what these 'things' were, but nor did he condemn the racist practices he had no doubt been told about. Though he had 'no axe to grind', the tone of his letter suggests that he expected to engage Mills in a conversation on the validity of the old captain's account of the South rather than a condemnation of it. Despite her well-known stance on racial prejudice, he seems unabashed in asking her to humour him with this, though, like other fan letters in the collection, his confidence diminishes towards the end of his letter. He asks her not to laugh at his invitation, telling her that he is a working man with only certain times when he could be free to meet with her. But a more confident persona returns as he promises Mills that he will act as a gentleman and, as someone who knew nothing of the stage or press, would prove to be a 'jolly companion'. In closing he assured Mills that even if she tore up his letter, he wished her a prosperous and happy stay while she was in Britain.

The second letter we highlight was written by a self-described 'White Poor Man' who wrote to Mills in May 1923 from somewhere in 'Blighty. Unlike AR, he did not assume to make a request of Mills for her time in person but wrote to express his admiration for her. He believed that all London would be brought to heel with *Dover Street to Dixie* still a new revue when he was writing and found that 'something wills I should write to you'. He foresaw great success for Mills resulting from her performance, but alongside his prediction he offered his own '<u>Advice</u>'. Warning that Mills must try not to let success develop her pride, for pride would hide her natural charm, he implored her to be earnest and true to herself, for then he argued: 'you will reach the hearts of the Real White Men. Through all keeping natural, and good as <u>you</u> can. In fact, be a woman, and you will be master of man.'[52] He did not assume that Mills would ever read his letter, and concluded that if she did, Mills would probably think 'I am strange in the head.' But, he reflected, 'a photograph it has oft been said, has sent many poor chaps clean off their head. And maiden from another clime, Yours caused very strong thoughts which are mine.' 'I don't suppose we shall ever meet' he mused, 'Not even in Good Old Dover Street' but he would 'dream of you my "Photo Dixie."' He wished her luck, good friends and good health and signed off, 'A sincere admirer, A White Poor Man'.[53]

Both these letters are clearly gendered and racialised. Both AR and the second author make their whiteness and masculinity clear, but are also keen to ensure Mills understands that they write to support her as a black woman working, performing and challenging racism in Britain.

The 'White Poor Man' does not explicitly state it in his letter, but his explanation that 'something wills I should write to you' suggests that like R he was aware of the racial prejudice Mills and the wider cast were facing in the British press and sought to provide her with support through the materiality of his letter. Though its' text is mediated through an appeal to 'hearts and minds', this letter from a 'White Poor Man' expresses a sense of solidarity across the 'colour line' that is not present in R's letter. R's focus on his time spent with his Southern friend in Africa and a desire to talk more about the South with Mills, highlights an unreflective imperial privilege coupled with what Susan Pennybacker has described as a European perspective that was fascinated with the ways of the Jim Crow South while also repulsed by them.[54] Neither, however, reflect the idea of the fan letter as 'a testing ground for an independent, reflective self' which Linda Grasso found in the letters of female fans writing to the artist Georgia O'Keeffe, which is present in the two letters from female fans we turn to now.

In her examination of female fans Grasso illustrates how O'Keeffe was 'a magnet of attention, the object of desire, the spur of fantasy' for many of those who wrote to her.[55] A similar observation can be made of Mills, with the two women fans highlighted here reading a multiplicity of desires, hopes and fantasies in and onto her. As mentioned above, James Wilson has noted how Mills' speaking out about white oppression and her cross-dressing roles on stage resonated with her fans, and these are the two main themes highlighted by the following letters.[56] The first of these came from MB. The date of her letter to Mills is not recorded, but she refers to Mills as 'My Dear Bluebird', a reference to a song closely associated with Mills – 'I'm a little blackbird looking for a bluebird.' This suggests MB sent the letter to Mills during her second stint in London with the Blackbird Revue, but Mills did also perform the song as part of *Dixie to Broadway,* and so perhaps also in *Dover Street to Dixie*.[57] The song became her signature piece and was important to her for the political messages she read into its lyrics. In Mills' 1926 essay on *The Soul of the Negro* she highlighted some of the song's lyrics, including the lines '*Never had no happiness. Never felt no one's caress, I'm just a lonesome bit of humanity',* as 'indicating something of the negro's attitude to life'.[58]

However, as Adair observes the song is also about a blackbird's search for acceptance and love.[59] It is the song's melancholy theme of a soul looking for love that is picked up by MB in her letter. MB makes clear in her letter that she adored Mills and maintained that it was not simply because she was famous, sure that 'if I had seen you walking along the street and didn't know who you were I'd have fell for you just the same.' Her decision to share her feelings of passion may have been encouraged through an identification with Mills' cross-dressing performances. On the British stage a tradition of male impersonation had been particularly popular in music halls during the 1890s with Vesta Tilley the 'dominating star of the Edwardian Era'.[60] Critics, and surely fans too, made direct comparisons between Tilley and Mills. Writing in *The Sketch* Beverly Nichols described Mills 'as a sort of coloured Vesta Tilley', while Herbert Farjeon reflected that though he wouldn't 'rave about her' Mills could 'look as smart as Vesta Tilley in dress clothes and a topper.'[61] Kayte Stokoe illustrates that during her life Tilley 'balanced apparent challenges to norms with a politics of respectability.'[62] But, Alison Oram has argued that though 'there was certainly no clear conceptualisation in the early twentieth century popular culture of sex between women. … There is plenty of evidence of women's homoerotic response to male impersonators.'[63] In the case of Vesta Tilley, Oram quotes her recalling that 'Each post brought piles of letters,

varying from an impassioned declaration of undying love to a request for an autograph … or a piece of ribbon I had worn.'[64] MB' letter is similarly a declaration of love.

Examining the mail sent to Georgia O'Keeffe, Linda Grasso identified women employing their fan letters as a space to express and develop ideas about themselves; the women used their letters as 'a testing ground for an independent, reflective self'.[65] It would seem that that MB was similarly using her fan letter to Mills as 'a testing ground' for an expression of queer desire.[66] In an opportunity to discuss emotions she had perhaps not revealed to anyone else, MB confessed in her letter to Mills that: 'I've got it bad, I've actually fallen in love with another woman.' Though further correspondence does not seem to have survived in the archive, it is likely that this was not MB' first contact with Mills for this was a letter of thanks; Mills had 'just about crowned my happiness' by sending MB a photograph. Like the 'white poor man' from 'Blighty', Mills' photograph was now an important personal possession, an object that reinforced an 'illusion of access' between celebrity and fan, stirring new emotions in its owner.[67] MB does not reveal how the photograph she owned depicted Mills. Images which appeared in newspapers included headshots of Mills as a modern young woman with her cropped hair slicked back and framing her face, painted cupid's-bow lips and large dark almond shaped eyes looking out beneath highly arched eyebrows, in which she is simultaneously neat and glamorous. Others depicted Mills as one of her stage characters, cross-dressed in tails with a white bow tie and white waistcoat, her hair tucked beneath a shining black topper.

Whichever print she had been sent, MB had been forced to part with the photograph for a fortnight so it could be copied and coloured. MB reveals that she and Mills had never met, for she hadn't 'been near enough' to Mills to see her clearly, but MB remained confident that she had given accurate instructions to the colourist; 'if I don't get the colouring right' she wrote to Mills, 'I'll let you shoot me.'[68] At the time she sat down to write her letter, MB had to wait until the following Saturday before she saw Mills again – perhaps at a performance or in her returned photograph, reflecting that 'I wish I could be your shadow then you'd never be out of my sight.' At this point MB brought her letter to a close fearing she might go off the 'deep-end'. Wishing Mills 'something better than fame. Happiness.' She signed off and promised to remain, 'Always your Slave, MB.'[69]

Wilson argues that Mills' performances can be seen to represent 'the modernist tension between savagery and civilisation' but that she also collaborated with the white songwriters and producers to challenge stereotypical assumptions of black womanhood.[70] With the specific example of *Blackbird*, Adair argues that because Florence Mills believed the Little Blackbirds song symbolized African Americans' struggles with racism, her interpretation of the song transformed it into 'a complex anthem of Black struggle and perseverance' and so 'manipulated white American and European desires to consume slave culture, and expanded economic and cultural possibilities for African American women entertainers.'[71] It would seem that MB was similarly able to reinterpret the song in the context of her desire for Mills, but MB' reference to slavery in her signature cautions against any assumptions that all of Mills' fans fully appreciated the complexities of racial politics that she sought to bring to her work or any 'manipulation' of their desires to consume slave culture.

The multifaceted understandings of racial and class identities present in a sincere admirer's description of himself as a 'white poor man' asking a black woman to ensure she maintained her 'feminine' qualities, and the reversal of racial history contained in MB' declaration to remain always Mills' slave, are also present in MDs's letter, written to Mills from Holborn in September 1926.[72] MD had not only seen Mills in a photograph, she had seen her on stage, and was moved to write to Mills the day after she had been part of the audience at a Blackbirds performance. Perhaps MD had seen Mills perform in 1923, or perhaps she had been following the casts' success in France, but she was keen to see Mills perform. As she wrote to Mills on 12 September she must have seen the Blackbirds show on its opening night in London, one of the 'negroes of all shades in the house' noted by Swaffer.[73] As MB explained to Mills in her neatly composed hand, while watching the Blackbirds show the night before she felt sure that among the audience 'never was there a heart prouder than mine, being one of yourselves. I think you are wonderful – Yes wonderful indeed.'

Like other fans, MD held Mills in great esteem, but primarily she admired her for her performance as an artist, rather than her financial success, her beauty or glamour. For MD, Mills' singing was 'like a nightingale' and her dancing was 'also divine', but the pride MD MD felt was the 'race pride' of seeing a 'woman of colour' successfully performing on stage – a sense of belonging and understanding reflected in her address to '*My* dear Miss Mills'.[74] In an article for *The Crisis* in 1922, Alain Locke had argued that 'black national drama' could help destroy stereotypical images on the stage replacing them with more positive depictions of black life.[75] MD understood Mill's performance in this context and wrote to her and by extension the entire Company to thank them 'for being able to show the White People, who think we are nobody – because we are "colour" that we can stand side by side & beat them at their own game.'[76]

Through her letter we get a brief sense of how racism on the streets of Britain was felt in the everyday lives of MD and other people of colour in Britain and the inspiration performers such as Mills provided. Despite Mills' consistent assertion of her blackness, Mills' racialized and sexual appearances were debated in the British press. One reviewer argued that Mills looked not like a 'negress' but more like 'a very sunburnt Italian' and a number of reviews reported that the Blackbirds were not 'as black as they are painted.'[77] Others, like MD, saw Mills as 'a coloured woman' whose 'performances not only announce the fact, but insist upon it'.[78] Mills reiterated the importance of black performance in challenging racism in an interview with the *Daily Express,* maintaining 'The stage is the quickest way to get to the people. My own success makes people think better of other coloured folk.'[79] As noted above, Mills stridently confronted racial prejudice and argued in *The Soul of the Negro* that there was 'not a coloured man or coloured woman in existence who does not bitterly resent the sentiment that drives them beyond the pale.'[80] These aspect of Mills' performance - inside and outside the theatre - were picked up by MD, as she explained to Mills that she wrote to her as another black woman, or as MD put it, 'a colour woman like yourself'.[81]

The racial discrimination Mills faced reduced once she had acquired her celebrity, but Mills remained aware that such protection was privileged and limited. She did not forget that for years before she became a success 'and the white people smiled on me' she had struggled against adversity and prejudice. Even with success, she had more than once been confronted by commentators at the stage door in London who lamented 'what a pity she isn't white'.[82]

Still, when Mills wrote *The Soul of the Negro*, she argued that 'In England, where the colour line is practically non-existent Negroes have achieved a virtual equality.'[83] She made her comments in the context of the violent and legally sanctioned racism that African Americans faced daily in the United States where the violence of lynch law, which she mentioned, still operated.[84] Still, Mills' comments give a sense of the geographies of understanding, or misunderstandings, which existed between members of the black elite as they read the everyday experiences of living life along the colour line in different places.

MD clearly felt a need for white people's views of black people in Britain to been challenged and while the Blackbirds' cast were performing in Britain during the summer of 1927, British newspapers were reporting on the work Anti-Colour Bar Sub-committee of the Edinburgh Indian Association established by Indian students in the city to protest at the refusal to admit them to dance halls and restaurants.[85] Following protests, questions in Parliament and negotiations, the Edinburgh ban was lifted during the same summer, with 'coloured men' being given admission to dance halls 'under certain conditions'.[86] Such reports have not survived in Mills' archive and perhaps she was not as aware of these experiences. When the popular performers Paul and Eslanda Robeson were refused a table at the Savoy Grill two years later and informed that 'the management did not permit negroes to enter the rooms any longer' it was an indication that celebrity would not shield the elite against discrimination in Britain.[87] Before signing off her letter, MD evoked the evolving ideas of the African diaspora in praising Mills once more: 'Well done, Daughter of the Mother Land.' This signals that despite her pride and joy at Mills' presence in the city and her sincere appreciation of Mills' embodied efforts to redefine and represent blackness, MD was pinning her hopes for real change and equality on the developing politics of Pan-Africanism, which she could have encountered in many spaces of political activism in London.[88]

Like ARs and 'a white poor man', the letters MB and MD' wrote expressing emotional connections to Mills that are both gendered and racialised. For MB, she understands her desire for Mills having 'actually fallen in love with another woman', though her promise to remain always Mills' 'slave' reveals that this was not a 'colour blind' construction, but one burdened by the histories of slavery and racism that MB would have presumably consciously eschewed. For MD, it is Mills' embodiment of 'the New Black Woman' - working, successful, political and candid - that is the focus of her letter, her admiration and appreciation. The increasing agitations and events organised by groups like the WASU might well have been an avenue through which MD came to frame her thoughts on the African diaspora. Though these organisations were dominated by men, as explored by Marc Matera, Black women in interwar London were involved in anti-racist campaigning, women's rights and black internationalism but have been minimised in public memories and histories of Pan-Africanism.[89] Writing to Mills as a 'a colour woman like yourself', MD' perhaps saw her letter as an opportunity to speak to a politicised black woman and her gendered turns of phrase hint at a dissatisfaction with some Pan-African organisations and individuals that marginalised black women's concerns. The four letters taken together illustrate how a single female black body powerfully evoked affective connections with 'ordinary' people of all ethnicities and are suggestive of their attempts to express their thoughts on challenging racial prejudice in Britain, queer desire, developing political movements, gender and class solidarity. They are also illustrative

of the productive possibilities for intersectional histories that are located by examining the histories of popular culture and the gendered and racialised aspects of 'celebrity'.[90]

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When the Blackbirds went on tour in 1927, playing in many of Britain's major cities, the strenuous schedule took a heavy toll on Mills. By now she had been performing constantly for five years, never missing a performance.[91] After a period of rest in Germany she and her husband returned to the United States. On arrival in New York that September they were greeted by a crowd of hundreds on the pier, but Mills died two months later.[92] Her funeral was one of the most spectacular in Harlem. Reportedly over 5000 people attended while over 150 000 people lined the surrounding streets.[93] The African American press carried detailed reports of the funeral including the eulogy given by Dr Brown in which he reflected that: 'The race has sustained a great loss, the theatrical profession has lost its brightest star.' As reported by the *Negro World*, Brown spoke of her dignity and poise and the helpfulness she showed to others; he suggested a memorial that would 'perpetuate her life and work' in the promotion of better race relations.[94] In Britain initial reports of her death appeared in the *Scotsman*, *Nottingham Evening Post*, *Leeds Mercury* and the Birmingham *Daily Gazette,* among others. Most took cuttings from the American press, reprinting details of various lengths from one line to a couple of paragraphs. More detailed reflections came in later editions including the *Illustrated London News*, where she appeared among 'Personalities of the Week: People in the Public Eye' and *The Era*, who remembered her as 'a very sensitive, serious and charming girl, whose chief ambition it was to raise the social status of the negro.'[95] For the contributor to the Gloucester *Citizen's* Woman's Corner, Mills' was 'an example of what a woman can do'; they praised her commitment to challenging racial equality, but also her generosity to the 'lonely and hopeless' along the Embankment, 'particularly to the women' who clustered there.[96]

Not all the reports reflected an understanding of the politics of race relations Mills had sought to instigate. The *Sunday Post*, carried a lengthy obituary but one filled with caveats: 'But for her colour, of which she was proud, British managers are of opinion she would have been one of the greatest artistes in the world. … Miss Mills was the greatest coloured entertainer this country had ever seen. Though her skin was black she was white all through.'[97] This was an echo of what Mills heard at the stage door from those who expressed their regret that she wasn't white. For black people Mills' instance on challenging such attitudes meant her time in London became an inspiring and politicised cultural memory. In 1935 the cast of the still popular Blackbirds show were out in force at Soho's multi-cultural club the Shim Sham, and the following year when the feminist and Caribbean activist Amy Ashwood Garvey and the playwright Sam Manning opened their own London club they named it the Florence Mills Social Parlour.[98] Specialising in Caribbean food and music the space became a gathering place for African and West Indian activists and students.[99] That same year you could also still buy 'Florence Mills' stockings along with the colours Fawn, Puma and Honeymoon Beige from Draffen's Department Store in Dundee.[100]

For the four fans whose letters we have highlighted here, Mills' was a real and imagined body onto which they could project an array of emotions: pride, admiration, desire, class and solidarity. Their letters depict brief accounts of their lives and their senses of belonging within

a relationship forged by moments of affect within a theatre, through a photograph, the imagined stage of 'Dover Street', and the spaces of their letters, words written in hope, but not expectation, that they would be read. Mills' activism, performance and success – celebrity and financial – meant that though she could be reduced to the colour of a pair of tights by some, she effectively challenged racial, gender and class boundaries for her fans and colleagues. The spaces of vaudeville and variety 'allowed African American women performers to queer or challenge and subvert racial and gender identities.'[101] Mills could represent a sense of class equality or working class success, for others she inspired a sense of 'race pride'. The letters from British fans to Mills also illustrate how we might think of the theatre and photographs, as well as paintings and exhibition spaces as extensions of 'fan mail as a form of perceived interactivity'; spaces that inspired reflection, intimacy, solidarity and desire.[102]

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