Intimate Apparel

A Play By: Lynn Nottage

Directed By: Phyllis E. Griffin

Actor Packet By: Tiffany Wilson
Let Me Tell You a Story:

Inside every human being is a living breathing story. Each day we water and feed it with experiences, relationships, heartbreak, and laughter. All of our stories combined create history. As different as we may be, together we form a time and a place that tells a story.

History also eludes us at times. It contains no visible starting point, and the end moves further away as time progresses. Lynn Nottage slices segments of history to create characters who tell a universal story. For the play, Intimate Apparel, Nottage chooses one of America’s most complex and diverse historical time periods—the turn of the twentieth century. Intimate Apparel centers on six characters residing on the same island living vastly different lives. Although they each wind up in places far from where they started, together they hope that Manhattan will provide that chance at achieving the American Dream. Mrs. Van Buren desires a new life as a city woman married to a distinguished New York man. Mrs. Dickson, Esther, and Mayme flee the Deep South to seek freedom in the North. Mr. Marks evades the anti-Semitic regimes of Eastern Europe, optimistic that within her crowded streets and tall buildings Manhattan holds the promise of religious freedom.

This actor packet uses these characters as templates for American history at the turn of the century. Esther’s journey north depicts the history of the South during the reconstruction. The journey Mr. Marks and his family take from Romania tells the story of the immigrants arriving by the thousands at New York Harbor. This packet contains narratives that center on one the characters in the play. The narratives give both a specific account the characters journey to Manhattan, and broader historical perspective of the time.

As we dive into this rehearsal process, I hope the information I’ve provided encourages you to discover your origins, and share your story. Keep in mind that this packet contains condensed historical overviews. For more information including books, articles, and video links feel free to contact me.

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Esther’s Story:

The sun rises behind the rolling hills of North Carolina, the blossoming orange trees in Florida, and the sweet-smelling orchards of Virginia. The forget-me-not blue sky illuminates the grand plantation homes occupied by genteel southern belles along with the modest two-room shacks held up by cinderblocks housing the working-class laborers. This summer landscape sets the backdrop for an unthinkable tragedy in the summer of 1885. A young Negro girl named Esther loses her mother at the tender age of 15. Her father, a broken man without the ability to speak or work relies on his young daughter for support. Esther, a girl on the verge of womanhood assumes the roles of both matriarch and provider. She wakes up before dawn to prepare breakfast for herself and her father, and by 5am it’s time to head off to the nearby orchard where she toils until sundown harvesting peaches, oranges, and cotton for the plantation owner. At the end of the day she collects her 75 cents and heads where her domestic duties await her.

Since the death of her mother, Esther rules the family home. She takes charge of washing and mending clothing, preparing meals, and feeding what little livestock (chickens, goats, or a dog) the family may own. At 15, Esther takes on adulthood. Despite her maturity, diligence, and independence, Esther is still the property of White landowners. As she works tirelessly in the fields for her meager salary, her labor benefits racism and bigotry.
Esther’s Story cont.

Two years later Esther loses her father. Now an orphan with no future in North Carolina Esther gather her few belongings and makes the dangerous journey north. At 17 years old Esther faces a world of rape, public beatings, and lynchings hoping that a better life awaits her.

Meanwhile, throughout the 1880’s, former confederate states-- like North Carolina-- enforce laws restricting Black men and women from playing any role in the political system. These states use voting restraints, vagrancy statues, and the Black Codes as powerful weapons in controlling the lives of Black men and women. The southern state governments exercise the full extent of their power to silence newly freed slaves. Once the Fifteenth Amendment extended voting rights to African Americans in 1870, southern states included several laws in their constitutions that prevented free Blacks from voting—the most heinous of these required Blacks to own property and take literacy tests. Even when they clearly proved their reading and writing skills, administrators refused to pass them.

In 1889 Florida initiates the poll tax as a part of the Jim Crow Laws. The poll tax along with the grandfather clause means that (1) the state requires citizens to pay a fee in order to register to vote and (2) the State Constitution excuses citizens whose father or grandfather voted before the Civil War from paying it.
Esther’s Story Cont.

In addition to the voting restrictions enforced on Southern Blacks, former confederate states put into action several discriminatory policies known as the Black Codes, which combine former slave laws from the antebellum (pre-Civil War) period with laws the northern states used to regulate free Blacks. State constitutions from Florida, Alabama, Georgia, Virginia, the Carolinas, and Mississippi contained bylaws granting landowners the right to create year-long contracts with their laborers restricting both hours and pay.

No laws subjugate free Blacks more than the vagrancy statutes—first enforced in 1866 and still in the constitutions of southern states well into the 1920s. These laws stipulated that judges and officers arrest any person they deemed unemployed as a vagrant. Esther, as a woman working her way from job to job throughout the southeast, risks the consequences of persecution and re-enslavement for her vagrancy. But, while she escapes the penalties of one-thousand dollar fines and chain gangs, other Black men and Women meet a more unfortunate fate.

With predators hidden around every corner—some of them policemen looking for an excuse to arrest another Negro and some of them regular men who prey off the naivety of young girls—Esther learns the importance of extreme caution and vigilance. In the play Intimate Apparel, Esther desires closeness, but remains wary of who she lets close to her. Memories of her journey north still linger in the back of her mind. After surviving the rape society of the South, Esther demonstrates tremendous courage letting a man (a stranger too) into her life, and building relationships.

Reasons for Leaving the South:

Green Cottonham and Re-enslavement

In 1908 an Alabama sheriff arrested Green Cottonham for vagrancy. The county judge sentenced Cottonham to 30 days of hard labor. Because he lacked the cash to pay the numerous legal fees, Cottonham wound up serving a year—not 30 days. The sheriff then sold Cottonham to Tennessee Coal, Iron and Railroad Company who paid $12 a month to the county for his labor. The coal company housed Cottonham in the worst living conditions possible; he spent nights chained to a wooden barrack, and days shoveling 8 tons coal nearly suffocating in the cramped mines.

Cottonham, like the countless other Black men and women charged with vagrancy in the South during the reconstruction, never committed any true crime—only that of being black. None of the bylaws in the state constitutions specifically named Negroes as their target; their purpose was to maintain White supremacy. Most freed slaves lived in poverty and lacked property. These vagrancy statues, never gave former slaves the opportunity to find work and begin a new life. The result was that, most free Blacks stayed with their former master.
Reasons for Leaving the South:

**Terrorism:**

In 1865 Confederate army veterans founded the first wave of the Ku Klux Klan in Pulaski, Tennessee. Klan members and other white supremacists used terrorism and violence to control the Black community. At least one lynching (public hanging) happened a week somewhere in the Deep South, with sometimes two or three people lynched at the same time. Southern politicians condoned lynchings for decades before the reconstruction. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, this act of violence became more sadistic and exhibitionist. Huge crowds watched with excitement the torturing and mutilation of Blacks, and White supporters of civil rights.

**Graph of Lynchings Over Time in the United States**

There were nearly 1500 lynchings and racially motivated murders in the mid 1860’s.

**Jobs:**

For the majority of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, King Cotton ruled the South’s economy. After the Civil War, plantation owners developed the share-cropping system. The planter gave each tenant a plot of land and a portion of the crop. The tenant usually received half the crop or less if the planter furnished the tools, seed, and mules. Plantation owners offered these share-cropping and tenant farming jobs to newly free slaves. Having no money or land, the free Blacks readily accepted.

In 1898 the tiny insect known as the boll weevil ate its way through the South. Farmers tried to diversify their crops by including different strains of cotton that would mature faster and food products like peanuts. These new food crops required thirty times fewer workers, so share croppers and tenant farmers found themselves out of a job.
Victoria Earle Matthews:

In the late nineteenth century African Americans and European immigrants traveled through harsh conditions to reach New York City—an ever-expanding metropolis. Between 1890 and 1910 the population of New York grew by 126 percent. Along with their hopes of achieving the American Dream, these new settlers brought poverty, unemployment, and homelessness. Young Black girls (some as young as 13) traveling alone from the South were especially vulnerable to these elements. Crooked “employment agents” lurked around the street corners of Savannah, Charleston, and Jackson soliciting young girls with promises of housing and employment. As a young woman alone in a new city, it was difficult to figure out whom you could trust.

This is where women like Victoria Earle Matthews and the White Rose Home for Working Colored Girls come in. Like Mrs. Dickson from *Intimate Apparel*, Mathews, a Black woman from the South, offered shelter and protection to young girls traveling alone to New York. She was well-educated and used her eloquent writing skills to promote social reform on behalf of Black women living in New York. In her semi-autobiographical *Aunt Lindy* (1893) Matthews writes about a Black female slave who forgives her master for years of abuse. She wrote this novel in an effort to help African Americans overcome their inner anguish. In her most famous speech, *The Value of Race Literature*, she discusses the importance of collecting and publishing writings by Black men and women. Mathew’s social values and the White Rose mission developed when she was a young girl born into slavery. She spent the early years of her childhood away from her mother. When the Civil War ended and slavery abolished, Victoria’s mother gained custody of her children. The family moved to New York in 1873. By the 1880’s Mathews began writing and organizing protest groups advocating women’s rights. In 1892 Mathews founded the Woman’s Loyal Union—a social activist club for Black women. The WLU also supported the anti-lynching crusade of Ida B. Wells.

After years of social organizing, Mathews further promoted the advancement of Negro women by creating the White Rose Mission. Young Black women, often naïve and illiterate, were drawn into prostitution by New York employment agencies. In the late 1890’s, Mathews toured the south investigating the red-light districts and the “employment agencies” responsible for the victimization of these young girls. As a result, she created the White Rose Mission to educate young girls and encourage independence and self-sufficiency. By 1897 the White Rose Industrial Association came to life. The association mainly offered traveler’s aid and protection to Negro girls journeying north. In 1900, Mathews, along with other prominent New York Black women, founded the White Rose Home for Working Colored Girls. Unlike the employment agencies, the White Rose Home strived to educated Negro women rather than exploit them. Matthews victimized women trapped in prostitution and poorly paid domestic servitude. She provided them with job training, counseling, and affordable shelter. Young women could board at the White Rose Home for 50 cents a week.
The Nation within a Nation:

Across the Atlantic, through the Balkans, and three-hundred and thirty miles inland resides a community of men, women, and children persecuted and terrorized by outsiders, yet strong in culture and tradition: the Romanian shtetl. Inside this 1880’s village lives the Marks family—a family that, like so many others in their society, value heritage above everything else. The men immerse themselves in the Talmud daily. In a world where historically their people suffered religious discrimination across the globe, the Marks family finds comfort in the ancient texts.

Two decades earlier, the Marks family fell into great fortune. Newly appointed Prince Alexander John Cuza strived to improve the living conditions of impoverished Jews. He even gave a speech in 1864 speaking out against the mistreatment of Jews; he strongly believed that Jews deserved freedom and access to a decent education. Prior to Cuza’s reign, Romanian laws mandated that Jewish children attend school in the shtetls away from the Christian children. Jews were not citizens, so the government denied them the right to own land and the right to participate in politics. With Cuza in power, life in Romania looked promising. Unfortunately, the upper-class citizens of Romania held the real power. The boyar, or aristocratic class, forced Cuza to sign his abdication and leave the country. The Marks's look back at the 1860’s as a brief era of hope ending with a new prince, Carol I, and a new wave of institutionalized anti-Semitism.
Now that it’s 1882 the Marks family faces a difficult decision—endure Prince Carol I’s anti-Semitic regime, or begin a new life in America. They look around and witness the police burning temples and plundering Jewish villages. At the same time, they fear that a departure from their homeland will mean abandoning tradition. Many Orthodox Jews maintain that migration holds no answers to the current problems facing Eastern Europe. Historian Irving Howe records one Orthodox Jew “Where do you travel and wherefore do you travel? You are heading for a corrupt and sinful land where the Sabbath is no Sabbath.”

Despite the worries of assimilation, the family sells their possessions, packs their two young sons onto a crowded ship, and head for New York City. Although they face the unknown, they put their faith in God; hopefully, He will grant them safety and prosperity as they journey into the New World.

The Marks family first makes the exhausting passage through Western Europe where the family endured persecution at the hands of hostile Western Europeans. Finally, they board the ship (possibly the Darmstadt), exhausted to the point of passivity, and set sail across the Atlantic. The voyage on the ship proves just as tiring as the exodus from Romania. Jewish immigrant Morris Cohen recalls his voyage to America: “We huddled together in the steerage literally like cattle—my mother, my sister and I sleeping in the middle tier, people being above us and below us…We could not eat the food of the ship since it was not kosher. We only asked for hot water into which my mother used to pour a little brandy and sugar to give it a taste.”

The Marks family survives relying solely of bread and water. After fourteen days New York Harbor creeps into view beyond the horizon. A rush of excitement and panic washes over the family of four. A fearful voice whispers echoes in their brain: “What if the ship sinks before we make it?” “What if we arrive only to be turned away at the harbor?” One Jewish man describes an immigrant’s arrival to New York as “the nearest earthly likeness to the final day of judgment, when we have to prove our fitness to enter heaven.” For the Marks family, judgment day is today.

Once numbered and lettered by immigration officials, the Marks family, along with the countless other immigrants on board, rush into Castle Garden, the port of immigration before Ellis Island opened in 1892. “Hurry up!” “Los!” “Faster!” “Pospeste Si!” “grabeste-te!,” yell the officials in German, Italian, and Romanian. The hundreds of men, women, and children run into the abandoned concert hall and undress. A doctor checks for venereal diseases, leprosy, and TB Another doctor examines their eyes, and another tests their hearing. After completing the medical exams, the family undergoes the interrogation process by the inspectors. The Marks family confirms that they are not anarchists, communists, polygamists, murderers, thieves, or insane.
At last the new life for the Marks family begins. The family moves into a one-room tenement flat with a few other relatives who made the voyage months earlier. In this new world, with its foreign customs, and language the Marks family clings even tighter to their faith. Yet, the family still aims to start a new life. The father teaches his sons to sew and properly fit garments. During the day father sells his wife’s home-made gogosi, a Romanian pastry, on a pushcart down Orchard Street.

By 1892 the youngest son exhibits extraordinary talent in sewing, while the oldest demonstrates skills in business. After years of saving every cent he earned, the oldest child of the Marks family leaves the family home to start his own business out of a one-room flat on Orchard Street. Out of this flat the young Mr. Marks sells the most luxurious fabrics he can afford. The array of silks, chiffons, satins, wools, and cottons over-shadow the gloom of his dully-lit tenement home. The rabbinical law of Negiah forbids Mr. Marks from touching a woman not related to him. Living on his own distances him from his family—the only people he can touch. He finds the sensation of touch and warmth in his fabrics. He spends his days connecting to his family and homeland through the Torah, and connecting to people through his fabrics.

**Jacob Riis Photo Essay**

**Jacob August Riis (1849 –1914)**

Danish immigrant Jacob Riis was a renowned social reformer, journalist, and photographer. One of his most famous books, *How the Other Half Lives: Studies among the tenements of New York* (1890) explores the slums and poverty experienced by most of New York’s immigrants on the Lower East Side. Riis used his photography to bring awareness to this social issue. Below is some of his most famous work.
“Long ago, ... it was said that 'one half of the world does not know how the other half lives.' ... It did not know because it did not care ... until some flagrant outrage on decency and the health of the community aroused it to noisy but ephemeral indignation.”

-Jacob Riis How the Other Half Lives
Minstrel Shows:

The history of American music mimics the story of American people. Through music, listeners hear tales of anguish, joy, fear, and, love. The mobility of American music begins with the minstrel shows of the early nineteenth century. From minstrel shows ragtime and the earliest forms of American musical theatre evolved. Minstrel shows began on the plantations with small semi-professional slave bands. As early as the seventeenth century, slaves entertained interracial audiences with jokes, dancing, plays and, music. By the 1840s, performances of these small plantation acts developed into longer vignettes featuring white men in blackface. Popular characters featured in minstrel shows included the lazy and dim slave boy, and the northern fop Negro who fails laughably at assimilating to White culture. These white performers never depicted the reality of plantation life or Black culture; they performed what they perceived (or more likely, what they wished it to be in some fantasy) as Black culture.

The scholar Rachel Sussman, in her article: “The Carnivalization of Race,” claims that minstrel shows entertained bored southerners. On a more psychological level, the use of blackface freed White actors from social restraints. While under blackface, White minstrels critiqued classism and politics in the United States. In their performances they depicted Blacks dressed as northern whites exaggerating their uptight demeanor. The shows also featured scenes where the dim-witted “Sambo” character plays tricks on his inattentive master. In the 1800’s race clearly signified a person’s social status, and societal norms dictated that Blacks were less than human. Seeing a White man satirize his own race in blackface is like watching an anthropomorphic Black man. Audiences reveled in these performances because of the social freedom the masks of blackface provide.
Queen of the Blues (1945)
By: Gwendolyn Brooks

Mame was singing
At the Midnight Club.
And the place was red
With blues.
She could shake her body
Across the floor.
For what did she have
To lose?
She put her mama
Under the ground
Two years ago.
(Was it three?)
She covered that grave
With roses and tears.
(A handsome thing
To see.)
She didn't have any
Small brother
To think she was everything
Fine.
She didn't have any
Baby girl
With velvet
Pop-open eyes.
She didn't have any
Sonny boy
To tell sweet
Sonny boy lies.
"Show me a man
What will love me
Till I die.
Now show me a man
What will love me
Till I die.
Can't find no such a man
No matter how hard
You try.
Go'long, baby.
Ain't a true man left
In Chi.
"I loved my daddy.
But what did my daddy
Do?
I loved my daddy.
But what did my daddy
Do?
Found him a brown-skin chicken
What's gonna be
Black and blue.
"I was good to my daddy.
Gave him all my dough.
I say, I was good to my daddy,
I gave him all of my dough.
Scrubbed hard in them white folks'
Kitchens
Till my knees was rusty
And so."
The M.C. hollered,
"Queen of the blues
Folks, this is strictly
The queen of the blues!
Men are low down
Dirty and mean.
Why don't they tip
Their hats to a queen?

But a thought ran through her
Like a fire.
"Men don't tip their
Hats to me.
They pinch my arms
And they slap my thighs.
But when has a man
Tipped his hat to me?"

Queen of the blues!
Queen of the blues!
Strictly, strictly,
The queen of the blues!
Men are low down
Dirty and mean.
Why don't they tip
Their hats to a queen?
**Cake Walks:**
In 1876 some of the earliest rags debuted at cake walks. These musical numbers originated in the 1840’s with slaves dressing up in high fashion and mimicking the formal dances of their white masters. Like minstrel performers, the dancers in the cake walks parodied White culture. Video footage of a cake walk from 1903 depicts Black men dressed as fops twirling canes and nearly tripping with every step they take. The women are equally over the top wearing overly-embellished Victorian dresses (American Mutoscope and Biograph Company, 1903). They parade around the stage satirizing the mannerisms of the White upper-class. With their outrageous costumes and mannerisms, both Black and White audiences found these parodies amusing and entertaining.

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**Coon Songs**
Musical historian Edward Berlin believes that the American public’s first encountered the Ragtime genre at the Chicago World’s Fair in 1893. Although no documentation exists explaining where, when, or who played the first rags, sheets music from Ernest Hogan’s *All Coons Look Alike to Me* [right] is one of the first records of ragged music. The World’s Columbian Exposition, or Chicago World’s Fair, celebrated the 400 anniversary of Christopher Columbus’ arrival to America with a variety of attractions, exhibits and performances. The fair lasted 7 months, and during this about 27 million people passed through. One reason for the lack of documentation about ragtime and coon songs is that Black artists played on the outskirts of the Fair, while the featured artist played inside.

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**Everybody Ragin’**
By the year 1896 ragtime became the official music of the twentieth century. Vaudeville artist Ben Harney brought the first rags to New York when he played at Tony Pastor’s Music Hall. The following year he published *Ben Harney’s Ragtime Instructor* which gives detailed instructions on how to rag any tune, making ragtime music more accessible. By 1900, southerner Scott Joplin published Maple Leaf Rag, an iconic ragtime tune.
The Jezebel Stereotype:

Applied to voluptuous light-skinned Black females in the 1640’s, the Jezebel Stereotype borrows its name from the Old Testament story about the Phoenician Queen Jezebel who marries King Ahab. Because of her foreignness, worship of pagan gods, and influence over the king, the Israelites accused her of idolatry, sexual indiscretion, and gender transgression. As the 17th-century European explorers traveled to distant continents, many of them characterized the dark-skinned semi-nude natives of Africa, Brazil, and the Caribbean as lascivious harlots. The customary tribal dances and the polygamous relationships both intrigued and repulsed Europeans. William Bosman described the Black women on the coast of Guinea as "fiery" and "warm" and "so much hotter than the men." William Smith described African women as "hot constitution'd Ladies" who "are continually contriving stratagems [on] how to gain a lover.

Due to the ignorance caused by racial ethnocentrism, many English colonists and slave owners justified subjugation and enslavement of Blacks through the Jezebel Stereotype. Certain White colonists treated the natives like animals because they embodied an animal-like sexuality. Many slave owners sold men like cattle, and raped women. Abolitionist, James Redpath, rationalized the rape of indigenous women by claiming that they “gratified by the criminal advances of Saxons.”

After Lincoln abolished slavery in the United States in 1863 the Jezebel stigma continued to haunt Black women. The Jezebel Stereotype as a form of racism has been institutionalized over the last five centuries.

Prostitution

With prostitution both common and legal in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the city of New York required that women of the night register with local law enforcement, and submit their health records. Because sex workers varied in age, race, and gender, police officers strained to enforce licensing and registration requirements. Most prostitutes never bothered registering, and police involvement was limited to accepting bribes from women for either protection or “looking the other way.” As a result, the US witnessed a spike in venereal diseases—the most common being syphilis. Young prostitutes like Mayme risked exploitation, disease, and abuse at the hands of strange men. A street-smart prostitute knew she must have some muscle behind her.
The Tenderloin:

Thomas de Witt Talmage called it the “modern-day Sodom and Gomorrah.” The anti-vice reformers referred to it as “Santa’s Circus.” The name that stuck to this vice district between 57th ST and 23rd ST, 5th AVE and 8th AVE was the name christened by Police Captain Andrew S. “Clubber” Williams—The Tenderloin. By 1880, The Tenderloin became New York City’s major vice district. It encompassed the largest number of nightclubs, saloons, and dance halls in all of New York.

Due to the overwhelming number of brothels, New Yorkers nicknamed 6th Ave. “the stomping ground of the well-dressed unfortunates.” In City of Eros, historian Timothy J Gilfoyle describes the Tenderloin overflowing with sex workers; West 32nd Street and West 35th contained nineteen brothels each. At night the streets overflowed with sex, booze, and music. During the day, grocery stores, department stores, and coal sheds occupied the Tenderloin. Some of these establishments shared street corners with the saloons and brothels. Between 1893 and 1895 more theatres and hotels moved uptown towards Broadway. Oscar Hammerstein opened the Olympia on Broadway and 44th. The Knickerbocker and Empire theatres opened 38th and 40th. With this increase of wealthy gentlemen willing to spend big money on a show and a little female company, the number of prostitutes skyrocketed.

Breaking Borders

Although the Tenderloin housed some of New York’s seediest characters, in the 1900’s this neighborhood also housed one of New York’s largest Black communities. Many Black families couldn’t afford to live in any other neighborhood close to midtown, so they settled down in the Tenderloin despite the neighborhoods reputation.

By 1900 the racial tension in Manhattan reached its boiling point. One sweltering August evening a Black woman was accused of soliciting by an undercover police officer. Her husband tried to intervene, but the officer struck him with a billy club. The husband then stabbed the officer with a knife, fatally wounding him. This incident led to one of the city’s largest race riots. Police and white gangs attacked Black residents and their families, destroying their houses and their businesses. Despite their many pleas to Mayor Robert A. Wyck, the Black families never saw justice. The tension between races would only intensify as the century progressed.
Pre-Civil War 5th Ave:
While the rest of the of the country strained to pull itself together following the Civil War, the wealthy inhabitants of 5th Ave in New York City lived in blissful oblivion. Amid race riots, and gang wars that plagued New York City, the aristocratic families sat in their comfortable town homes unaware that they lived in a country quaking with social and economic turmoil. In the fall of 1866, many of these families only concerned themselves with the upcoming horse race at Madison Sq.

The day is September 25th, 1866. The streets (reportedly 5th Ave up to 14th St) overflowed with elegant horse-drawn carriages whose cargo consists of New York’s most fashionable ladies. The sun creates a blinding glare off the harnesses and saddles that, only the night before, were polished to perfection by a Black or Polish servant whose name remains unknown to the people who pay them. Atop every man’s head lays a white hat. There isn’t a naked hand in sight because they are covered by the finest dogskin gloves. By midday, rush hour traffic is at its heaviest; the horse-drawn carriages line 5th Ave from Washington Square to Union Square. Horse races are nothing new, so why is this one so important?

Today is no ordinary horse race. This horse race is exclusively for the bon vivants and the gentlemen with connections to the noble sport in Europe. In fact, these men and women strive to maintain European aristocracy. The horses along with the people on 5th Ave are of the purest breeding. You can pick out one of the finely dressed ladies and date her ancestry back to William the Conqueror.

The 1860’s, also known as the Gilded Age, was a time where the rich could blissfully ignore the poor. Unfortunately, this dream could not last forever. This day at the races is a mere glimpse into the old money of New York. Twenty years later, New York witnessed its biggest increase in immigrants and southern migrant workers. The lemon-lime dream of city life where everyone wore silk and the days consisted of long strolls down Madison Square Garden faded. A few starry-eyed aristocrats tried to hold onto this blissful utopia, many others moved to New Rochelle, and out to the countryside. Those who remained in the city, like the Van Burens, rarely mingled with their neighbors in the Tenderloin, Harlem, or the lower east side. By 1905, the wealthy retreated indoors while the hoi polloi crowded their beloved carriage-lined streets.
Madame Gaches-Sarraute of Paris, a corsetiere who studied medicine, worried that the traditional Victorian corsets pressed too firmly on the women’s vital organs. The Victorian corsets in vogue pushed the abdominal muscles down. She designed the S-bend corset in effort to support the woman’s abdomen. The corsets also freed the thorax allowing the woman to breathe easier. This Parisian trend quickly spread to the states where girls all over the country, like Mrs. Van Buren, pouted their chests and curved their backs in order to achieve the high-fashion look.

By 1905 corsetieres made a new addition to this century-old undergarment; they began to add stocking suspenders. Women often complained about loose garters falling off and tight garters cutting off their circulation. Garter belts held garters in place without any tightening.

Only the most skilled corsetieres faced the challenge of constructing the Edwardian corset. Although some corsetieres still used traditional boning methods, the materials needed (steel, whalebone) became both expensive and rare. As a result corset-makers restored to clever cutting techniques and luxurious fabrics making the garments unique. In the past, middle and working-class women wore corsets made from coutil, a tight-woven cotton blend made to support the boning in corsets. Corset makers also used Sateen, a rayon-based linen. As the century progressed, women wore corsets less as a means of support. Instead, women wore corsets for special evening events, or as lingerie. Both wealthier women and women in brothels wore corsets with silk ribbons and glass beads sewn along the hems and across the bust lines.

Thinner women preferred shorter corsets made out of strips of ribbon and waist-cincher corsets because their small frames only needed light support. The shorter corsets also made it easier for women to perform sporting activities like horseback riding.
In his iconic book *Blacking Up*, the popular American historian Robert Toll claims that the current politics heavily influenced southerners’ perception of Black culture. With the country on the brink of civil war, White slave owners faced a moral dilemma. Democracy dictates that every man should be treated equally. Yet, democratic Americans forced Black slaves to perform manual labor in the harshest conditions. Minstrel shows, which reached their peak in popularity during the ongoing debates over slavery, provided White audiences an escape from reality. The shows allowed Whites to ignore the pressing issues of race and focus on the performances. Minstrels also eased the moral predicament that faced White slave owners; if Blacks really behaved like the stereotypes portrayed on stage, then the Blacks required order from Whites.

In addition to creating a façade of Black culture; minstrel music set the stage for the flourishing of American entertainment—especially Black entertainment. For Black men and women living in postbellum America, art, music, and culture embodied an active meaning. When Scott Joplin sat down to write the Maple Leaf Rag, he heard the folk–minstrel music of Jim Crow. Other scholars see Joplin’s music as a reappropriation of the derogatory minstrel folk music.

Ragtime also has two sides. In her essay *The Characteristic of Negro Expression*, Zora Neale Hurston writes: “the Negro is a very original being. While he lives and moves in the midst of White civilization, everything that he touches is reinterpreted for his own use…” Originality and art grow out of culture. Inside every Black artist there is always a conflict between the cultures imposed on them and their unique self. What makes ragtime uniquely American is that its evolution represents the conflict of American history—the true identity of Black Americans vs. the identity imposed on them.

When Mayme plays those rags on her piano, she absorbs the folk music she grew up with in the South and makes it hers. The same thing happens when Esther creates French–style corsets. The evolution of minstrel shows to ragtime reflects the creative process of every Negro artist.
The Rain on the Tin Roof:

Night finally falls upon damp rain-beaten barracks. Nearly 20,000 men from Barbados, Jamaica, and Trinidad lay on wooden cots reminiscing about the life they left in the Islands and what future laid ahead for them once they fulfilled the contract obligations. Among these Island men sits George Armstrong, a native of St. Lucy Barbados who is more than used to a hard day’s work. As the mosquitoes buzz up ahead, visions of home form in his mind’s eye.

George remembers growing up with a constant feeling of angst and willingness to prove himself. From a young age his school teachers taught him to appreciate hard labor. At the age of 12 he began working in the sugar cane fields. Even now at the age of 35, George still takes pride in working outside and feeling as though he’s contributing to something. When he saw that sharp-looking white recruiter in his crisp white suit, George knew that working in Panama would earn him the cash he needed to live in style in New York City. George remembers reading over that contract—10 cents an hour, housing, and transportation (both to and from Panama) included. To George this contract means steady work, and he rarely came across that in St Lucy.

Several months later George stares up at the leaky tin roof above his cot, and clenches his jaw in anger. The white man in the suit promised him money, but the only pastime he can think of in this bug-infested swamp is to drink himself penniless in effort to forget he is. The contract also promised housing. Not even the poorest of people in Barbados lived in shacks like these. The rain is practically falling through the roof, and bugs the size of his fist walk in and out of the barracks as if they own them.

The White man sent him to a war zone. Everyone in Panama sees him as an enemy; the native Panamanians see him as barbarous gorilla, the White Americans treat him as a work mule, and the Spanish Negroes resent being grouped with the devil worshiping Islanders like him. He fought people outside barracks and the damn bugs inside them. Sometimes during the day the only peace he found was in the clanging sounds of the jackhammers and industrial drills. The hard grueling work distracted him from the hatful remarks made by the other men.

As the night wears on, the rain pounds harder on the roof. Through the persistent drumming of raindrops George feels his heart beat in time with the rain. The rhythm draws him into another memory. A few weeks ago he and his Antillean brothers from Jamaica and Trinidad marched through the Panama railroads. The living conditions, the food, and the diseases infuriated him and his fellow laborers, so they took to the streets and demanded better treatment. “By rioting the Americans would at least punish us by sending us home?,” George thought on the day of the march. The reaction from the police surprised him. The American and Panamanian police forced them back to the barracks using whatever violence they deemed necessary—including whips and iron rods.

As these memories flood George’s mind the walls of the barracks seem to close in on him. All the past events in his life lead him to his current condition. There is still another year left on his contract, and those White men will make sure they work him to the bone. The worst part about being stuck in this foreign land was the loneliness. George, like the other laborers, tries to find company in a bottle of rum or maybe a prostitute. The problem with finding companionship that way is that it never lasts long enough. The prostitute leaves when he pays her, and once the rum is gone he is left with nothing but an empty bottle.
The Canal Zone

1909 Arrival of SS. Ancon with 1500 laborers from Barbados at the Cristobal Port in Colon, Panama

1905 Yellow Fever Quarantine

Men from Barbados and Trinidad digging in the canal zone 1903
Selected Bibliography/ Webliography:


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