

**A Review of *Performing Racial Uplift:
E. Azalia Hackley and African American Activism
in the Postbellum to Pre-Harlem Era.***

By Juanita Karpf. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2022.

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In *Performing Racial Uplift: E. Azalia Hackley and African American Activism in the Postbellum to Pre-Harlem Era*, Juanita Karpf has made an important contribution to our awareness and understanding of this groundbreaking musician, activist, educator and early figure in Black theater, and the era in which she lived. Although Madame Emma Azalia Smith Hackley (1867-1922) has largely faded from memory and public record, it is clear that Karpf has dedicated decades of research to Mme. Hackley, resulting in a surprisingly comprehensive account that has been richly shaped through extensive historical contextualization. Hackley interwove her activism for the uplift of the race with European classical music performance, community-wide music education, New Thought ideology, and mass pageants celebrating African ancestry—all while actively resisting the terror of one of the most overtly racist periods in American history.

In *Performing Racial Uplift*, Karpf credits Madame Hackley with breaking countless barriers, such as being the first African American to pass the civil service exam in Colorado; the first African American graduate of the University of Denver; being the fourth Black public-school teacher in the state of Michigan; the first African American concert artist to write an article series on music performance for a prominent newspaper; arguably the first African American singer to pursue instruction with celebrated white teachers in Europe; being “without peer” as a director of mass choirs; a pioneer of arts marketing; an early arts philanthropist; a groundbreaking vocal pedagogue; being the first Black performer to create a music school offering teacher training to aspiring African American musicians; reviving Negro spirituals; contributing to the creation of the pageant genre; writing the first etiquette book for Black girls and women; being the first African American to write an eye-witness account of Paris on the brink of war; being the most significant African American community activist during the war years; (probably) being the first African American artist to make a recording abroad; the first African American proponent of New Thought; founding countless institutions, and creating a unique pedagogical approach to teaching music to Black students *en masse*.

However, Karpf’s persistent use of African American in these descriptors becomes disquieting, as the term African American was virtually unused until ca. 1980. Especially given the thoughtful consideration Karpf gives to other identities Hackley held, it raises the question of why not use Negro, which would have been *en vogue* in the postbellum to pre-Harlem era? The substitutions seem like a disservice to the pride Hackley so deeply felt and cultivated among her race, at a time when they were proud to be called Negroes.

Regardless of whether she was performing as a soloist, educating tens of thousands, filing lawsuits against railroads, or studying in Europe, Hackley was, first and foremost, dedicated to the progress of her race. Her uplift efforts were varied, strategic, and effective—as evidenced by the successes of her students: Clarence Carroll Clark and Daisy Robinson Tapley became the first Negroes to make commercial recordings; Mary Saunders Patterson was Marian Anderson’s first voice teacher (Anderson, herself, was also a student of Hackley); Clarence Cameron White ascended through HBCUs before teaching at Julliard; and her students established community music schools in Chicago, Philadelphia, Indianapolis, and New York.

Due to a lack of original source material about Mme. Hackley, Karpf has organized the book by topics instead of chronology. Hackley’s many interests and talents lend themselves well to this, making the book accessible and salient for scholars of race, colorism, and eugenics; women’s studies; music and music education; Jim Crow travel; Negro patriotism around World War One; and New Thought spirituality and philosophy in the postbellum to pre-Harlem era. As a cover-to-cover read, the book can at times be redundant, but that allows the sections to stand better on their own—and, hopefully, easier for professors to assign and future scholars to cite. It is my hope (and that of Karpf) that this book will yield additional research, as well as discovery of artifacts—like a copy of Hackley’s book, *Patriotic Pageant*.

In Chapter Five, World War I Activism, Karpf explores how Mme. Hackley began adding elements of pageantry to her musical festival productions as the United States became involved in World War I. Although white communities had been producing pageants since at least the 1910s, and Black leaders such as Rev. Henry Hugh Proctor and W.E.B. Du Bois had produced pageants in 1912 and 1913, Hackley’s 1917 “Queen’s Pageant” at Metropolitan AME Church in Washington, D.C. and 1918 pageants in Atlanta and Detroit surpassed them all in pomp, circumstance, and substance. Mme. Hackley’s “...emphasis on female leadership and Afrocentrism contrasted dramatically with white pageants as these tended to feature white male heroes of history, allegory, and legend, along with female roles largely confined to the portrayal of women in the domestic realm” (p. 124). As with other genres that Hackley pioneered, this was likely influenced by earlier experiences, in this case, her 1890 title role performance in the oratorio, *Esther, the Beautiful Queen*, by William Bradbury.

The scale of Hackley’s pageants would terrify any producer—no matter how seasoned. Her massive pageants drew an audience of 6,000 to the Atlanta Auditorium Armory, incorporating “...hundreds of participants and included 100 African American military personnel” (p. 125). To honor those fighting in the war, the “...program included a “Procession of Countries” led by marching soldiers carrying flags of Belgium, Canada, China, Cuba, England, France, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Japan, Russia, Spain, and several African countries. Following the entrance of military personnel, over 500 children, dressed in international

costumes, filed into the armory...” (p. 125) singing. Other productions included “Queens and rich decorations representing fifteen governments with lords and ladies in waiting, chamberlains and color bearers, with the throng singing “The Star-Spangled Banner,” “God Save the King,” and “The Marseillaise” (p. 124). But “the most thrilling, dramatic scene was the entrance of the Queen of Sheba, who had the largest entourage of lords and ladies, and was crowned “Queen of Queens” (p. 124).

In this example, Karpf highlights how Mme. Hackley merged a sort of cultural diplomacy with a precursor to feminist Afrofuturism, by exploring the possibilities of a context imbued with a gendered and racialized interpretation of global relations and governments. Her portrayal of an idealized and feminized world in which Black queens held positions representative of national sovereignty dominated the visual and ritualistic narrative. To Hackley, the veracity of “international progress” and “unity of peoples” could most effectively be represented by assigning leadership roles exclusively to women of African heritage. The crowning of the Black queen of Sheba as “Queen of Queens” endowed Hackley’s spectacle with an irrefutable biblical reference and time-honored sanctity” (p. 124).

Mere weeks later, Mme. Hackley produced another pageant, which attracted an audience of 3,000 in Detroit. Here, critics noted, “Never in the history of musical life in Detroit was such singing heard, and the fact that all songs, used either in solo or ensemble, were compositions of members of the Race, added novelty as well as producing remarkable enthusiasm,” acknowledging that Hackley’s pageants had “grown to be a part of the national life of the Race throughout America” (p. 126).

Although Karpf does not state this, the Black Theatre Review’s readers will be familiar with the important role that the pageant genre has held, yielding such staples as Langston Hughes’ *Black Nativity*. As such, Karpf indirectly establishes Mme. Hackley as a key contributor to the form, the Race, and more broadly, American culture. Given Karpf’s previous (2011) scholarship for the article, “Get the Pageant Habit: E. Azalea Hackley’s Festivals and Pageants during the First World War Years, 1914-1918” in *Popular Music and Society*, I hoped for a deeper exploration of the ways in which Mme. Hackley influenced Black theater.

Although Karpf obviously has deep respect and affection for Mme. Hackley, the shortage of original material frequently leads to substantive speculation—requiring a critical eye to distinguish between the author’s opinion and scant records of fact. For example, “Ultimately, she did not have any children, and it is not known whether she ever became, or attempted to become, pregnant” is immediately followed by “An explanation for her apparent infertility...” (p. 155). If it is not known whether she attempted to become pregnant, why is *her* infertility apparent? Elsewhere, Karpf deems it “wise” that Hackley’s writing was free from political controversy (p. 142). Indeed, the book contains multiple references to Hackley being “a public figure whose

reputation remained ostensibly *unblemished* by any prolonged participation in radical racial debates or partisan politics” (p. 141). Was W.E.B Du Bois’s reputation blemished by prolonged participation in radical racial debates? Booker T. Washington? No, quite the opposite. But Karpf seems to revel in Hackley’s “neutrality”—between the two sides of the Du Bois/Washington debates, never situating herself solidly in either camp. To me, that seems to be because Hackley had her own, cogent, fully formed philosophies—which would be more fully theorized as “relational activism” nearly 100 years after her ascension, by Sara O’Shanghnessy and Emily Hudart Kennedy, in 2010 (p.164).

Finally, given Madame Hackley’s well-established importance and the known preferences for her own book (artistic, hard gray cover, wide margins, thick paper, compact but classy), I regretted the publisher’s lack of investment in producing a book more befitting its subject. Although there are a few excerpts of music included, throughout the book, I was left wanting more photographs, reproductions of her letters and sections of her books on pedagogy and etiquette, newspaper clippings, and programs. Not reproducing them in this galley-quality book was a missed opportunity for the Press, and more regrettably, Mme. Hackley.

In the end, E. Azalia Hackley made an indelible mark. Even though her name faded from currency, those she influenced include Marian Anderson, Harry Burleigh, Paul Laurence Dunbar, Marcus Garvey, James Weldon Johnson, Henry Ossawa Tanner, Samuel Coleridge Taylor, and Madame C.J. Walker. Hackley “...envisioned music making and music education as interconnected agencies for achieving social equality, building self-esteem, and enhancing racial solidarity” (pp. 166-167) in ways that “groundbreaking” does not do justice, making this book a necessary and important contribution to the record.

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