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CRITICAL FORUM: BLACKNESS IN SLAVIC, EAST EUROPEAN, AND EURASIAN SOCIETIES

Invisible Men: Blackness and Performance in Interwar Romania

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Abstract

This essay explores possibilities for theorizing blackness in relation to modern art and performance in Romania by tracing the trajectories of two African American men who spent significant time in the country. Dancer Bob Hopkins performed with Romanian entertainment troupes for a decade before being deported, while entertainer and cabaret manager Peter Johnson settled in Romania and continued to perform for factory workers under state socialism. Drawing on Paul Gilroy's concept of the Black Atlantic (1993), the essay centers the experiences of Hopkins and Johnson, providing new perspectives on transatlantic cultural exchanges. It further examines the participation of Romania, and eastern Europe more broadly, within global racial hierarchies and formations, drawing on recent scholarship. It concludes by considering the challenges of such research and interrogating the (im)possibility of recovering traces of the Black experience in Romania, while nonetheless advocating for a reckoning with the specters of past histories.

Keywords: performance; race; Black Atlantic; Romania; modernism

In October 1924, an exhibition of the latest European artistic trends opened in Bucharest, marking an important moment for the avant-garde in Romania. Critic Tudor Vianu immortalized the event, describing how "the darkness of the room, in which a large crowd of guests mingled excitedly … was suddenly torn asunder by the roar of a drum. The lights that came on at the same time illuminated the stage, … revealing a jazz band orchestra and its black musician."[1] Although cited in numerous accounts of the avant-garde in Romania, this text has provoked little interest in the mysterious Black performer or his presence in Bucharest.[2] Furthermore, histories of racialized groups have been barely addressed within

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[1] Tudor Vianu, "Prima expoziţie internaţională Contimporanul," *Mişcarea literară* no. 4 (December 6, 1924). All translations from Romanian are by the author, unless otherwise specified.

[2] See for example Ioana Vlasiu, "Bucharest," in Timothy O. Benson, ed., *Central European Avant-Gardes: Exchange and Transformation 1910–1930* (Cambridge, Mass., 2002), 247–54.

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accounts of arts and culture in Romania during the first half of the twentieth century.[3] As indicated by recent scholarship, "race as a category of analysis" has frequently been considered extraneous to central and eastern Europe, a region without a historic Black population and ostensibly without the burden of colonial exploitation.[4] Yet, during my research into avant-garde art and performance of this period, "ghostly things kept cropping up and messing up other tasks I was trying to accomplish" as Avery Gordon described the process of reckoning with the "exclusions and invisibilities" of past histories.[5] I, too, was ready to file away the curious appearance of the Black musician under the rubric of avant-garde provocation, until I realized that the presence of this anonymous performer was not an uncommon occurrence.

In this essay, I explore possibilities for theorizing blackness in relation to modern art and performance in Romania by tracing the trajectories of two African American men who spent significant time in the country. I conclude by considering the challenges of such research, in particular pertaining to the period's press and the available archival sources.

Beyond the Black Atlantic: Modernism and Black Performance in Romania

The period between the two world wars, sometimes known as the "jazz age," brought about a seismic shift in European artistic and social life due to the encounter, on a far greater scale than ever before, with Black performance culture.[6] Like his contemporaries across Europe, Vianu recognized the contribution of African and African American cultural expression to avant-garde artistic trends and explicitly linked innovation in the visual arts with the arrival of modern sounds, concluding that "the jazz band interlude was not a mere theatrical gesture, but a real modernist ritual."[7] According to Paul Gilroy, this "distinctive counterculture of modernity" was the result of longstanding repression and struggles for emancipation that obliged Black communities to create their own artistic forms and to challenge prevailing western political and intellectual structures.[8] Gilroy's influential concept of the Black Atlantic functions as both a geographic and a cultural space, connected by

[3] One of the most glaring absences concerns Romani cultural contributions: see Oana Dorobanțu and Carmen Gheorghe, eds., *Problema românească: O analiză a rasismului românesc* (Bucharest, 2019). Few studies have articulated the racialized dynamic in which Jewish artists lived and worked in interwar Romania, a rare example is Radu Stern, "Jews and the Avant-Garde: The Case of Romania," in Mark H. Gelber and Sami Sjöberg, eds., *Jewish Aspects in Avant-Garde: Between Rebellion and Revelation* (Berlin, 2017), 35–51. Studies on the period of World War II and the Holocaust are more numerous.

[4] Sunnie Rucker-Chang and Chelsi West Ohueri, "A Moment of Reckoning: Transcending Bias, Engaging Race and Racial Formations in Slavic and East European Studies," *Slavic Review* 80, no. 2 (Summer 2021), 216–33, 216; Catherine Baker, Bogdan C. Iacob, Anikó Imre, and James Mark, eds., *Off White: Central and Eastern Europe and the Global History of Race* (Manchester, 2024).

[5] Avery F. Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (Minneapolis, 2008), 8, 17. My previous research concerned Jewish contributions to modern design and performance in Romania, see for example Alexandra Chiriac, *Performing Modernism: A Jewish Avant-Garde in Bucharest* (Berlin, 2022). This is not to suggest that Jewish and Black individuals were racialized in the same way in Romania at this time. However, parallels and collaborations between these two groups do exist in the context of avant-garde cultural creation and will form the subject of further research.

[6] There is much rich scholarship on this topic, including, but not limited to, Petrine Archer-Straw, *Negrophilia: Avant-Garde Paris and Black Culture in the 1920s* (New York, 2000); Jody Blake, *Le Tumulte Noir: Modernist Art and Popular Entertainment in Jazz-Age Paris, 1900–1930* (University Park, PA, 1999); Jonathan O. Wipplinger, *The Jazz Republic: Music, Race, and American Culture in Weimar Germany* (Ann Arbor, 2017).

[7] Vianu, "Prima expoziție."

[8] Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, Mass., 1993), 36.

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the circulation of people and ideas, a "transcultural, international formation."[9] It encompasses both the legacies of slavery and racialization, and the cultural expression of Black communities across Europe and the Americas.

Geographically, eastern Europe may be an implausible addition to the Black Atlantic, yet culturally it is worth exploring its positionality in relation to this space.[10] The performers who arrived here, while less numerous than in western Europe, moved across the Atlantic both as agents of modernity and to escape the legacies of slavery in the United States, "engag[ing] in various struggles towards emancipation, autonomy, and citizenship."[11] As the examples in this essay will demonstrate, they encountered both new opportunities and old prejudices. Anca Pârvulescu and Manuela Boatcă have argued that central and east European histories are inscribed within global colonial and inter-imperial entanglements that reveal in the region the "existence of a heterogeneous ethnic and racial field that yields complex forms of creativity and resistance" and challenges acknowledged timelines of modernity.[12] The trajectories of Bob Hopkins and Peter Johnson, two African American entertainers who arrived in Romania sometime around 1914–15, bear witness to these connectivities.

Having achieved success in Austria-Hungary and the Russian empire, Philadelphia native Bob Hopkins first appeared on stage in Romania in January 1915, as guest star of the annual Press Ball. His reputation preceded him, as the Romanian press emphasized Hopkins's fame and described him as "the extraordinary eccentric dancer."[13] Hopkins often collaborated with another Black dancer, Peter C. Johnson of Charleston, South Carolina, who appeared on stage under the Romanianized name Petrică as early as December 1915.[14] Hopkins and Johnson performed throughout Romania under the same sobriquet of "eccentric dancers," a description that suggests their comedic routines may have reflected the vocabulary of contemporary African American dance. Eccentric dance relied on "articulating bodily difference," so that limbs and body segments moved in unexpected modes and directions, favoring novelty and uniqueness "rather than privileging the repetition, imitation, and mastery of prior choreographic phrases" inherent to classical European dance.[15] Thus, a full decade before Josephine Baker cemented the status of African American dance in Europe and the avant-garde Contimporanul exhibition opened to the rousing sounds of jazz, audiences in Romania were already becoming familiar with Black performance. Furthermore, Hopkins and Johnson became embedded into the Romanian cultural milieu in a remarkable manner. In the late 1910s and early 1920s, they were engaged by impresario Avram Nicolau to tour the country performing in operettas, a very popular form of

[9] Ibid., 4.

[10] Scholars have already assessed the potential application of Gilroy's concept to the region: Catherine Baker inquired to what extent a "black Adriatic" is a more appropriate model, while Maxim Matusevich argued that the experiences of African students in the Soviet Union could expand the framework of the Black Atlantic. See Catherine Baker, *Race and the Yugoslav Region: Postsocialist, Post-Conflict, Postcolonial?* (Manchester, 2018), 10, 16; Maxim Matusevich, "Expanding the Boundaries of the Black Atlantic: African Students as Soviet Moderns," *Ab Imperio* no. 2 (2012): 325–50.

[11] Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, 16. Gilroy's text has been critiqued for its overemphasis of African American cultural figures and its lack of engagement with the African continent, among other things. For an overview of works that critically engage with Gilroy's model see Lucy Evans, "The Black Atlantic: Exploring Gilroy's Legacy," *Atlantic Studies* 6, no. 2 (2009): 255–68.

[12] Anca Pârvulescu and Manuela Boatcă, *Creolizing the Modern: Transylvania across Empires* (Ithaca, 2022), 4.

[13] "Fapte, nu vorbe," *Dimineața*, January 15, 1915, 5.

[14] "Bob Hopkins cu Petrică...," *Dimineața*, December 25, 1915, 4.

[15] Jasmine Johnson, "Sorrow's Swing," in Soyica Diggs Colbert, Douglas A. Jones Jr, and Shane Vogel, eds., *Race and Performance after Repetition* (Durham, 2020), 127–41, also citing Brian Harker, "Louis Armstrong, Eccentric Dance, and the Evolution of Jazz on the Eve of Swing," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 61, no. 1 (Spring 2008): 67–121.

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entertainment in central and eastern Europe at this time.[16] In 1920, Hopkins was involved in choreographing a Romanian production of the operetta *Phi Phi*, a Parisian success that incorporated new musical styles.[17] Shut down by the authorities due to its risqué songs and nudity, it nonetheless showcased Hopkins's choreographic talent, launching his new career: he became dance master not only for Nicolau's company, but also for the revue theater of impresario Constantin Tănase, Romania's best known provider of popular entertainment at this time.[18] In the early 1920s Hopkins's successful career continued, bolstered by the interest in jazz that was spreading across Europe.

Johnson's path diverged from that of Hopkins as he carved out a career in managing popular entertainment venues. From the mid-1920s he was the artistic director of the cabaret Moulin Rouge located in the center of Bucharest, and appeared in the Romanian feature film *Milionar pentru o zi* (Millionaire for a Day, dir. Jean Georgescu, 1924), filmed partly at the venue.[19] After some years managing a cabaret in the smaller city of Ploiești, he returned to Bucharest in the late 1930s as artistic director for a string of entertainment venues, whose advertisements began to feature portrait photographs of Johnson, perhaps pointing to the prominence he had gained at this point in his career.[20] Johnson's experience is particularly interesting because he witnessed Romania's social and political transformations throughout almost the entire twentieth century. Working as a waiter at the bar of the Athénée Palace hotel in the 1950s, he was heavily surveilled by the socialist-era secret police due to his contacts with foreign diplomats.[21] Final mentions of him in the Romanian press of the early 1960s reveal an elderly Johnson performing in a touring variety show throughout provincial workers' clubs.

Hopkins and Johnson constituted the nucleus of the Black presence in Bucharest during the interwar period. Although by no means a *tumulte noir* in the Parisian sense, Black musicians, dancers, and sportsmen came and went, often gravitating around these two established presences.[22] Geo Walker, a Black boxer on tour in Romania, was even contracted to act in a play at the National Theater, and throughout the 1920s Romanian audiences encountered famed performers such as Josephine Baker, Paul Robeson, Sam Wooding, and the touring variety show La Revue Nègre.

Racial Hierarchies in Romania: Between Black and "Off White"

By November 1930 a newspaper article was complaining about the growing number of Black people in Bucharest, a now banal sight, unlike the earlier time when Bob Hopkins was "the only 'flesh and bone' representative of distant Africa."[23] Through a parodic, yet cautionary,

[16] Correspondence dated May 1922 between Nicolau and the Ministry of the Arts names Hopkins and Johnson as active members of the impresario's 90-person Romanian troupe. Romanian National Archives, fond 550, dossier 779/1922 (Ministry of the Arts, Authorisation requests). Press notices further show that Hopkins performed in operettas by German, Czech, and Austrian composers. His links to the musical traditions of central Europe and his tours in this region before and during his time in Romania indicate further avenues for studying blackness in a transnational context in the pre-jazz era.

[17] *Phi Phi* was a 1918 work by French composer Henri Christiné. "Premiera *Phi Phi*," *Dimineața*, January 30, 1920, 4; "Guvernul reintroduce cenzura?," *Dimineața*, March 25, 1920, 4.

[18] "Teatrul Cărăbuș...," *Dimineața*, May 30, 1920, 2; "Turneul oficial al companiei...," *Patria*, July 10, 1920, 2.

[19] Călin Căliman, *Istoria filmului românesc 1897–2000* (Bucharest, 2000), 62–63. There is no indication that the film, or any part of it, has survived.

[20] Advertisements with Johnson's portrait photograph start appearing in September 1938 in the newspaper *Ordinea* and can also be found during the summer of 1946 in *Ultima oră*.

[21] The National Council for the Study of the Securitate Archives holds several secret police files with information about Peter Johnson and his family.

[22] Blake, *Le Tumulte Noir*.

[23] Sell, "Alb și negru," *Rampa*, November 9, 1930,1.

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tale about a Romanian man whose wife gave birth to a Black baby, the article reproduced western fears of a Black threat to white power structures, particularly through miscegenation. Nonetheless, aspirations to racial purity and fears of national degeneration were not merely a western transplant, but a local concern dating back to the Romanian principalities' first attempts at political self-determination in the nineteenth century and usually directed at racialized groups such as Jews and Roma.[24] This reflected a fear of cultural inadequacy and a desire to move closer to the west in the global racial hierarchy, escaping the semi-peripheral position of the east European region, its "off white" status. As recent scholarship argues, referring to east European nation states, this very state of "liminality pushe[d] them to work towards whiteness."[25]

Examining the trajectories of Black performers such as Hopkins and Johnson in Romania reveals the historical progression of attitudes towards racial constructs and proximity to whiteness. During the decades they spent in the country, they witnessed Romania negotiating its relationship with global structures of white supremacy and colonialism, whether through its territorial gains in the aftermath of WWI, its treatment of its own minority groups (including strategies of Romanianization and antisemitic legislation), and its cultural and political allegiances to western powers such as France and Germany, culminating in its close relationship with the Nazi regime.[26] During the years of WWI and its immediate aftermath, racial difference was not imbued with negative connotations in Hopkins's reception. Furthermore, despite ostensibly being a novel apparition in a country with few Black visitors, newspaper articles rarely sensationalized his presence through the medium of race. Mostly, he was described as a famous Black dancer, a master "in the modern choreographic arts" alongside Johnson, offering "artistically superior productions" with original humor and witty parodies.[27] In the aftermath of WWI, central and east European nation states became more invested in proving their proximity to whiteness as they advocated for self-determination. As James Mark has argued, "Eastern Europeans … *had* identified with, and ambiguously participated in, Western Europe's territorial expansion," embracing colonial discourses of racial difference both external, referring to extra-European territories, or internal, directed towards minority groups within the region.[28] Romania's successful outcome post-Trianon heightened fears amongst nationalists that the increased proportion of

[24] Scholarship on the history of race science and eugenics in Romania includes Maria Bucur, *Eugenics and Modernization in Interwar Romania* (Pittsburgh, 2002); Cosmin Koszor-Codrea, "Mismeasuring Diversity: Popularizing Scientific Racism in the Romanian Principalities Around the Mid-Nineteenth Century," *Journal of Romanian Studies* 4, no. 1 (April 2022): 37–56, and the English and Romanian-language works of Marius Turda, particularly his recent monograph *În căutarea românului perfect: Specific național, degenerare rasială și selecție socială în România modernă* (Bucharest, 2024).

[25] James Mark, Anikó Imre, Bogdan C. Iacob, and Catherine Baker, "Introduction: Racial Disavowals—Historicizing Whiteness in Central and Eastern Europe," in Baker, Iacob, Imre, and Mark, eds., *Off White*, 1–30, 6.

[26] That is not to say that Romania's semi-peripheral position in a global and European context should not be considered, especially in light of the later decades of state socialism and post-1989 developments, but that the period of the 1920s and 1930s might benefit from a frame of analysis that considers the specificities of that era. As Baker explains in *Race and the Yugoslav Region*, 6–8, east European cultural studies of the past decades have often explored the region through the lens of its postsocialist condition and in relation to postcolonial theory, thus emphasising its subaltern and/or peripheral state. I would like to imagine a pre-socialist positionality in the case of Romania and how this may be different. For information on Romania's interwar practices of Romanianization, its antisemitic legislation, and the growth of fascist factions see, for example, Irina Livezeanu, *Cultural Politics in Greater Romania: Regionalism, Nation Building and Ethnic Struggle, 1918–1930* (Ithaca, 1995); Roland Clark, *Holy Legionary Youth: Fascist Activism in Interwar Romania* (Ithaca, 2015); Carol Iancu, *Les juifs en Roumanie, 1919–1938: De l'émancipation à la marginalisation* (Paris, 1996).

[27] "Stârnește mare senzație...," *Opinia*, April 5, 1916, 1.

[28] James Mark, "Wilson's White World: The Foundation of Central-Eastern European Nation-states after World War I," in Baker, Iacob, Imre, and Mark, eds., *Off White*, 31–53, 32.

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ethnic minorities (almost a third of the population by the 1930 census) was diluting the "authentic" spirit of the nation, and it was during this period that an interest in eugenics and biopolitics flourished in the country, becoming a chief preoccupation for scientists and intellectuals.[29]

It was no coincidence that Hopkins's blackness took on additional meanings during the interwar period, linked to colonial narratives and race science. He was increasingly hired to highlight racial difference, performing for example during a documentary screening in September 1924 about a Swedish hunting expedition to Africa.[30] The previous month, a newspaper article mockingly asked whether Hopkins should be considered Romanian, having been dancing in Romanian fashion ("dansează românește") for twelve years.[31] The path towards acceptance that was marked out in the 1910s turned out to be merely an illusion, as the following year marked Hopkins's departure from Romania in extreme circumstances. In the fall of 1925, he was deported from the country that had been his home for the past decade due to a violent incident. While one newspaper article recounted Hopkins's timely intervention against drunken patrons at the cabaret Bristol in Constanța, another reporter used racist and racializing language to paint a different picture.[32] Underneath the tailcoat and white gloves, Hopkins's "savagery" lay dormant, an inheritance from his ancestors who inhabited "mysterious forests, feasting on the white flavorsome flesh of Europeans wondering through their territories as messengers of civilization."[33] The once kindly and amusing entertainer could not avoid his baser instincts once they were awakened, concluded the article. Deploying the tropes of colonial conquest couched as a "civilizing" mission, the writer also erased Hopkins's African American identity, which was never mentioned. Paradoxically, this racist discourse laid bare the position of Romania within discourses of global colonialism and its connection to the Black Atlantic, tracing a direct line between Hopkins, a bona-fide Bucharest resident, and the routes of transatlantic slavery travelled by his ancestors.

Shared histories of enslavement, racialization, and structural inequalities connected the experience of African American entertainers to that of local Romani musicians, a comparison made particularly pertinent by the performative aspect: not only was performance an occupation associated with both communities, but it was also construed, through racial prejudice, as instinctive ability rather than professional skill.[34] Franz Liszt's designation of Romani music as "mystic song" mirrored the fascination of avant-garde artists towards the

[29] Turda, *În căutarea românului perfect;* Marius Turda, "The Nation as Object: Race, Blood, and Biopolitics in Interwar Romania," *Slavic Review* 66, no. 3 (Fall 2007), 413–41.

[30] "Cinema Vlaicu...," *Dimineața*, September 5, 1924, 6. This was probably the documentary *Med prins Wilhelm på afrikanska jaktstigar* (With Prince Wilhelm on the African Hunting Trails). Dir. Prince Wilhelm of Sweden (Svensk Filmindustri, 1922). It depicted the 1921 Swedish zoological expedition to central Africa.

[31] I. Țăranu, "Ba da! De Max e al nostru!" *Rampa*, August 24, 1924, 1. This would place his arrival in 1912 instead of 1915, but I have found no other evidence for this. Hopkins may have in fact incorporated local references in his comedic dance routines, imitating folk dances, Romani musicians, and other local entertainers. In his study of jazz in Hungary, Ádám Havas also observed that "Black American musicians learn[ed] to play local (Hungarian and Magyar) popular songs." See Ádám Havas, *The Genesis and Structure of the Hungarian Jazz Diaspora* (London, 2022), 70.

[32] "Expulzarea lui Bob Hopkins," *Dacia*, November 29, 1925, 1; Diodor, "Expulzarea lui Bob Hopkins," *Rampa*, December 2, 1925, 1.

[33] Diodor, "Expulzarea," 1.

[34] Roma slavery was abolished in Moldavia in 1855 and Wallachia in 1856. The relationship between Black and Roma performers and the regimes of racialization they encountered in Romania requires further examination beyond the confines of this short essay. Scholarly studies that draw comparisons between the histories of Roma and African American communities include Mihaela Mudure, "Blackening Gypsy Slavery: The Romanian Case," in Heike Raphael-Hernandez, ed., *Blackening Europe: The African American Presence* (New York, 2004), 263–83; Felix B. Chang and Sunnie Rucker-Chang, *Roma Rights and Civil Rights: A Transatlantic Comparison* (Cambridge, Eng., 2020).

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imagined primitivist impulse of African American performance.[35] The racialization of both groups occurred within global parameters shaped by the circulation of people and ideas, pointing to the previously mentioned "heterogenous ethnic and racial field" that disrupts national frameworks even in the case of ostensibly minor or semi-peripheral cultures.[36] As shown by Pârvulescu and Boatcă, in the 1920 Romanian novel *Ion* the racialization of the Romani musicians "helps to produce [the] whiteness" of the novel's peasant protagonist, pointing to concerns that migrants from rural Transylvania arriving in the US would be treated akin to formerly enslaved Black workers.[37]

Migrating in the opposite direction, Johnson was described as "an unproductive member of society" and "a dancer … not in demand in the United States" by the American vice consul who processed his passport application, coincidentally also in 1920.[38] Johnson's commitment to becoming Romanian is thus understandable and, having formed a family and worked in the country for two decades, he became naturalized in the fall of 1943.[39] Still performing in the 1960s in workers' clubs, after the regime change that followed World War II, he was part of a touring show harshly criticized in the socialist press for the poor quality of its entertainment, considered inappropriate for its target audience. L. Moldoveanu, an electrician, opined that Johnson's performance was disappointing as he did not include songs from the rich repertoire of "Black folklore."[40] In the era of global socialism, Johnson was perhaps not "Black enough" for the Romanian electrician, having been living in his adoptive country for almost fifty years. The incident harked back to the appearance of Johnson's teenage son in the theatre production *Coloniale* (Colonials) at Teatrul Liber in Bucharest in 1937, playing the biracial child of a French colonial engineer in a stage décor replete with purportedly "African" masks, spears, and animal skins.[41] A second-generation Black Romanian, Johnson Jr. still represented "distant Africa" on stage, rather like Hopkins. The play by André Birabeau was titled *Pamplemousse* in the original French and had premiered only a few months earlier in Paris. Its rapid translation and staging demonstrate once again Romania's proximity to, and interest in, European narratives of whiteness, racial purity, and colonial power characteristic of this period, that was to be shortly confirmed by its alliance with Nazi Germany. Such examples reinforce the status of the Black Atlantic "as a circuit of transnational exchange haunted by the slave trade," whose spectral reverberations spread beyond its physical boundaries.[42]

In and Around the Archive: Un-Visible Presences and Ghostly Absences

Beyond being an exploration of Black cultural expression in eastern Europe, the present essay is also an exercise in finding pathways for researching and examining such transcultural encounters. In the Romanian National Archives, Hopkins and Johnson are fleeting presences, visible only when one is already aware of their existence. When documentation

[35] Liszt's pronouncements on Romani music are discussed in Pârvulescu and Boatcă, *Creolizing the Modern*, 80. On the reception of African American performers by European avant-garde artists see Blake, *Le Tumulte Noir.*

[36] Pârvulescu and Boatcă, *Creolizing the Modern*, 4.

[37] Ibid., 84–85.

[38] Passport application processed at the American consulate in Constantinople. National Archives and Records Administration (NARA); Washington, DC; NARA Series: Passport Applications, January 2, 1906–March 31, 1925; Roll #: 1410; Volume #: Roll 1410–Certificates: 110000-110375, 10 Nov 1920–12 Nov 1920. Accessed in digital format on January 16, 2025, through www.ancestry.com.

[39] This was printed in *Monitorul oficial* on October 14 and 22, 1943, 9 and 27.

[40] L. Moldoveanu, "Șușanea 'artistică' în turneu la 'țară,'" *Romînia liberă*, April 1, 1962, 4.

[41] "Săptămâna teatrală," *Realitatea ilustrată*, January 5, 1938, 22.

[42] Jeremy Braddock and Jonathan P. Eburne, "Introduction," in Jeremy Braddock and Jonathan P. Eburne, eds., *Paris, Capital of the Black Atlantic: Literature, Modernity, and Diaspora* (Baltimore, 2013), 1–14, 5.

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exists, it is usually the result of bureaucratic control or even police surveillance, as is the case of Johnson's presence in the archives of the Securitate, the socialist-era secret police.

The printed press provides somewhat more plentiful information about Hopkins and Johnson's lives in Romania, with cultural dailies giving details about their professional activities and the government periodical *Monitorul oficial* providing evidence of Johnson's naturalization. Looking for such traces is now immeasurably easier thanks to recent digitization initiatives, whereas when I first encountered these performers in the periodicals room of the Bucharest University Library, it seemed a mammoth task to track their movements with any sort of accuracy. Nonetheless, despite exciting new search capabilities, there are still difficulties. Information about Hopkins and Johnson's careers is scarce compared to other popular performers of this era and images of them are quite rare. It seems counterintuitive that two people with what must have been a distinctive presence in 1910s and 20s Bucharest awakened so little interest in their contemporaries. Like the Black musician at the Contimporanul exhibition opening, theirs is a ghostly presence, a kind of "visible invisibility," in the sense established by Avery Gordon: "*I see you are not there.*"[43] Gordon quoted Ralph Ellison's introduction to *Invisible Man*, stating that the "'high visibility' [of the African American man] actually rendered one *un*-visible."[44] While Ellison is referring to the structural inequalities of the US, in the case of eastern Europe this *un*-visibility is best reflected in the denial of the historical precedents of racial hierarchies within the region.

Yet as the impact of Gordon's influential study in fields like gender or queer studies has showed, absences can also teach us things. Research into Black performers in Romania may turn out to be challenging due to lack of information in certain areas, but it will also be rewarding to read between the lines. Josephine Baker's 1928 visit to Romania was a highly mediatized event with countless newspaper and magazine articles dedicated to it. Writing on the front page of his newspaper *Neamul românesc*, one of the country's most influential thinkers, the historian and politician Nicolae Iorga, cautioned against Baker's remarkable influence, a danger more severe than even the Soviet threat, liable to bring moral ruin to the Romanian nation.[45] This article, possibly the most crucial dedicated to Baker's presence in the country, does not mention the performer by name (making her invisible to word-search software), instead describing her body through racialized misogynistic imagery that renders her recognizable.[46] Pointing to the pitfalls of digital research, this example also demonstrates how absence as much as presence can reveal the structures of white supremacy. Paraphrasing Rebekka Habermas, Irene Hilden cautions against "thinking exclusively in terms of omissions or gaps," instead "considering absence and silence as active production, an active production of ignorance."[47]

The production of ignorance is here two-fold. On the one hand, errors, omissions, and misidentifications related to Black performers abound in the Romanian printed press during this period. An image of three Black men performing in blackface used as both a stock image for an anti-jazz newspaper article and an advertisement for a department store confounded this author until a chance encounter with a description of "The Three Eddies," a vaudeville act that toured Europe as part of *The Chocolate Kiddies* revue. Like Baker, the Three Eddies were not identified, but their image was appropriated for various uses, from conservative ire to commercial marketing. Moreover, to return to Hopkins and

[43] Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, 16.

[44] Ibid., 17.

[45] Nicolae Iorga, "Ofensiva corupției," *Neamul românesc*, June 1, 1928, 1.

[46] Josephine Baker's reception and impact in Romania are also part of this research and will form the subject of a separate article.

[47] Irene Hilden, *Absent Presences in the Colonial Archive: Dealing with the Berlin Sound Archive's Acoustic Legacies* (Leuven, Belgium, 2022), 21.

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Johnson, they became interchangeable in the eyes of one reporter, in what is now a recognizable phenomenon encountered by people of color in white-majority places of work or education.[48] When Johnson's son appeared on stage in Bucharest in 1937, he was misidentified by one theater reviewer as Bob Hopkins's son.[49] This points to another, interrelated, type of ignorance, namely the phenomenon termed "white ignorance" by Charles W. Mills, which underscores how those perceived as white fail to recognize the effects of racism. Together with its offshoot "white innocence," theorized by Gloria Wekker, they are part of a narrative of "disavowal" in eastern Europe, whereby the relevance of race for the region is denied, both by past histories and by nationalist political agendas in the present.[50]

To study blackness in Romania is thus an exercise in observing such absences and gaps and willful omissions. Gordon observed that "ghosts often show up not as professional success, but as failure" and, as a researcher, one is always apprehensive about the possibility that sufficient sources will not materialize, and that the voices of Hopkins and Johnson will never be heard, but only those of the art critics and government officials that wielded power over their lives and careers.[51] Despite the risks, such a study is necessary so that we may see "what happens when we admit the ghost … into the making of worldly relations and into the making of our accounts of the world."[52] The presence of these performers in Romania can reveal new perspectives on transatlantic cultural exchanges and eastern Europe's participation within global racial hierarchies and formations. To access such perspectives, we must, in the words of Toni Morrison, acknowledge that "invisible things are not necessarily not-there."[53]

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[48] For more information on this phenomenon and links to scientific research on the topic, see Zulekha Nathoo, "Why People of Colour are Misidentified So Often," *BBC*, May 25, 2021, at www.bbc.com/worklife/article/20210519-why-people-of-colour-are-misidentified-so-often (accessed August 4, 2025); and Rachel Hatzipanagos, "It 'Makes You Feel Invisible': When People Can't Tell Their Co-workers of Color Apart, It's a Constant Reminder That You're an Outsider," *Washington Post*, May 2, 2019, at www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2019/05/02/co-workers-keep-mixing-up-people-color-office-its-more-than-mistake/ (accessed August 4, 2025).

[49] "Inaugurarea Teatrului Liber," *Rampa*, December 13, 1937, 8.

[50] The work of Wekker, developed in the context of the Netherlands, and Mills, whose scope is more global, is discussed in relation to eastern Europe in Mark, Imre, Iacob and Baker, *Off White*, "Introduction," 4.

[51] Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, 22.

[52] Ibid., 24.

[53] Quoted in Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, 17.

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