

Unruly Reproductions: The Embodied Art of Mimicry in Vaudeville

by Jennifer Schmidt
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The Belle of Mayfair, a musical comedy composed by Leslie Stuart with book by Basil Hood, Charles Brookfield, and Cosmo Hamilton, premiered in London in 1906. The comedy was loosely based on *Romeo and Juliet*, which did not prevent it from including a number called “Why Do They Call Me A Gibson Girl?” commenting on the American fashion craze sparked by Charles Dana Gibson’s illustrations. The lyrics for the song instructed the listener on how to “affect” the Gibson style:

Wear a blank expression,
And a monumental curl,
And walk with a bend in your back,
Then they will call you a Gibson Girl.

...

The girls affect a style
As they pass by
With down-cast eye,
And a bored and languid smile,

...

They do their best, for they’ve seen the pictures.
[Chorus: They’ve missed the point of the Dana picture,]
Which are intended, don’t you see,
For all in perfect type should be.^[1]

For the New York production, which ran from December 1906 through March 1907, Valeska Suratt, a milliner from Indiana, used the role and her dressmaking skills to launch her acting career. Commenting on the hit song for the production’s Baltimore transfer, a review in *The Sun* exclaims that “Miss Surratt...looks like she had just stepped out from one of Charles Dana’s \$1,000 sketches.” The reviewer also notes that the chorus featured a different look than the typical “chubby chorus girls,” stating, “Their places were well filled by tall, willowy creatures, called Gibson girls, who wore the most stunning gowns imaginable and who lifted up their chins in preference to their toes.”^[2]

This new, aloof physicality and the uniformity sent up by the lyrics of the song—“for all in perfect type should be”—correspond to a general trend in depictions of women in the United States. In *Imaging American Women*, Martha Banta argues that “the woman as image was one of the [Progressive] era’s dominant cultural tics.”^[3] The allegorical figure of Columbia, for instance, the young attractive woman representing America, appeared with great frequency during this period in political cartoons or as a brand symbol, such as in Columbia Records and Columbia Pictures. Other female allegorical figures towered

over the United States in the form of the Statue of Liberty and the 65-foot Statue of the Republic at the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition or graced the facades of buildings like the Four Continents statues at the United States Customs House.^[4] Matching these stately figures were Gibson's pervasive drawings of narrow-waisted, large-busted women with upswept hair, button noses, and distant gazes. As Adams, Keene, and Koella discuss in *Seeing the American Woman*, the Girl was "unindividualized": "she generally looked down or away...or she danced and promenaded in lines of similar beings."^[5]

Thus, as the United States entered the twentieth century, the types of women presented to the public in mass media and entertainment were often idealized, generalized, and detached. With the cultural turn to the visual, "woman as image" became increasingly separated from the living, breathing, individual bodies of women. As images of the American Girl proliferated, however, solo female performers in vaudeville offered alternatives to the disembodied anonymity of these aloof female types. In particular, the practice of mimicry allowed performers like Gertrude Hoffmann, Cissie Loftus, and Elsie Janis to break the "girl" mold with their vividly individualized impersonations of celebrities. Hoffmann, Loftus, and Janis brought attention to the manufactured nature of womanhood in the public sphere through an embodied form of imitation, which allowed them critical, creative space to comment on the celebrity culture of their time. The malleability of their form, in which they embodied several figures at once, gave them an unusual freedom from the strict types and categories for female performers, and their abilities as shape-shifters emphasized a bodily rather than an artificial or mechanical means of reproduction. In response to the commercialization and replication of the female image in the Progressive Era female mimics in vaudeville countered the mass-produced, male-created depictions of women, seen in magazines and chorus lines, with their own unruly reproductions.^[6]

At the beginning of the twentieth century, mimicry became a highly popular act on variety stages, and while both male and female mimics thrived in vaudeville, women especially dominated the field. A retrospective *Variety* article from 1948, titled "Vaudeville: Mimics," reveals the prevalence of female mimics. The author, Joe Laurie, Jr., recalls the "heyday" of mimicry on the vaudeville stage, claiming that "There was an epidemic of imitations in vaudeville from 1905 to 1930."^[7] In a list of the "great artists" of mimicry, the majority are women, and of the artists he mentions who created original material for their acts, all five are women: Cissie Loftus, Juliet Delf, Elsie Janis, Gertrude Hoffmann, and Venita Gould. These mimics "used their own special material," and Laurie, Jr. considered this to be a superior practice than simply copying material from the acts they were imitating.

The majority of imitations in vaudeville, however, like the Gibson acts, consisted of more direct copying. The success of Suratt's Gibson act, for instance, lay primarily with the gown—in her ability (as a dressmaker) to copy, make, and wear the "\$1,000" look. Thus, while the Gibson Girl moved from two-dimensions to three, the emphasis remained on the visual, a priority that was in keeping with the period's image obsession. In her book, *Women and the American Theatre*, Faye Dudden discusses theater's turn to the visual, arguing that the commercialized theater at the end of the nineteenth century was part of an entertainment industry that created a "new kind of public realm."^[8] This new public realm "was not concerned with politics or community interests, but rather aimed at private profit and derived its publicness from the breadth of its marketing ambitions."^[9] While female audience members made an enormous impact on the growth of the mass entertainment market, the period also saw the mainstream success of the "leg business." This type of entertainment, designed for the male gaze and formerly prevalent only in entertainments for working-class men, became standard fare in vaudeville and on Broadway.

Perhaps the best theatrical example of the new public realm and its exploitation of feminized bodies and images was Florenz Ziegfeld's "Follies," the annual musical revue that ran from 1907 through 1931 and centered on its spectacular displays of chorus girls. In *Seeing the American Woman*, Adams et al. discuss the chorus girl as an incarnation of the Gibson Girl, explaining that Ziegfeld "sought primarily the Gibson look for his chorus girl."^[10] Sharing the Girl's elegant but undifferentiated appeal, these choruses likewise represented youthful beauty and vigor, were vehicles for displaying the latest fashions, and were meant for replication, requiring hordes of women to fill the ranks. Often the extravagant costumes worn by Ziegfeld's choruses functioned more like scenery, explicitly framing the women as objects and set pieces. Further emphasizing their conformity, the choreography comprised precision line dancing and "geometric formations" that, Susan Glenn argues, "mirrored the early twentieth-century industrial culture" and turned the chorus into a "disciplined female mass."^[11]

The "new public realm" also corresponded to the explosion of print media, which, like commercialized theater, increasingly relied on exploitation of the female image. Matthew Schneirov dates the beginning of the "new era" in magazine publishing from 1893, "the year S. S. McClure established *McClure's*" as well as "the year that Frank Munsey cut the price of his magazine to ten cents—well below the cost of unit production—and made his profit through advertising."^[12] Other magazines quickly followed Munsey's example, and advertising became the chief means of profit, driving down prices for periodical publications and making weekly and monthly illustrated magazines affordable for a broad swath of consumers in the United States. Like the magazines they funded, advertisements became increasingly visual, cutting down on text and relying on imagery, especially that of young, attractive women, to sell their products.

The replicable nature of the Gibson Girl led her to be the perfect tool for selling the latest fashions. The Girl, according to Martha Patterson, "created the first national modeling of the *one right look*," and walking down the streets of an American city in the early 1900s meant encountering a sea of Gibson Girls, wearing the uniform of the New Woman.^[13] Some of the Girl's attributes disseminated progressive ideas about womanhood; she was often shown as independent, athletic, and assertive. The popular magazines, in which the Girl appeared, sold women the possibility of refashioning themselves into these sophisticated beings. Of course, by exploiting this attractive image to sell products, the advertiser's promise of greater freedom led to greater conformity through consumption. Moreover, it was clear that her independence lasted only as long as the period of single life before marriage, and as the model for white beauty and sophistication, she also perpetuated ideas of racial superiority.

In the summer of 1907, after Suratt made a hit as a Gibson Girl in *The Belle of Mayfair*, several vaudeville bills featured imitations of her and the Gibson aesthetic. The Broadway Theatre featured "a new Gibson girl travesty," and Eddie Foy's show, "The Orchid," at the Herald Square Theatre added "a new... imitation of Miss Valeska Suratt, the 'Gibson Girl,' by Miss Laura Guerin."^[14] Most notably, the well-known impersonator, Gertrude Hoffmann, added a Suratt imitation into her program. The common vaudeville practice of copying coupled with the viral commercial popularity of Gibson's drawings—spreading from postcards, to calendars, to cigarette cases, and wallpaper—made the Girl's appearance on stage rather inevitable.

Responding to these trends, imitations in vaudeville and musical comedy both exploited and satirized the superficiality and conformity in the Girl's appeal. For her Gibson imitation, Gertrude Hoffmann, who used elaborate costumes and make-up to create the effect of her impersonations, copied the gown made

famous by Suratt. A review of her performance dwells on the look of her costume:

Miss Hoffman [sic], whose eccentric dancing and imitations nightly win much applause, also costumes her part smartly....for the first, of The Gibson Girl, she wore a black velvet Princess of the design worn by Valeska Surratt [sic] in The Belle of Mayfair, with it's [sic] tight fit and deep V cutout back and front, the fluffiest of fluffy Titian hair. As an exaggeration and burlesque of the type of girl with a kangaroo walk and outlandish poses it was great.[15]

Although the review pays close attention to her dress and hair, it also describes her act in decidedly embodied terms. In addition to celebrity impersonations, Hoffmann was known for her elaborate imitations of dance, such as her famous version of Salome.[16] Whereas reviews of Suratt's performance describe her, in passive, visual terms, as a "living Gibson picture" or "living replica,"[17] the Hoffmann reviewer notes the dancer's exaggerated movements, which provide a burlesque of the Girl's unnatural posture. Gibson drew his female figures with an "S"-shaped spine—the result of combining a narrow waist with a large bust and hips. The corsets of the period also emphasized these features, forcing a posture that humorists likened to the curved back of a kangaroo.[18] Hoffmann's "kangaroo walk" and "outlandish poses" thus satirized the consequences of an actual woman's body attempting to imitate an impossible ideal.

Hoffmann brought further physicality to her imitations by making her costume changes a conspicuous part of the act. An October, 22 1907 review in *The Sun* describes her practice of changing in full view of the audience:

She cavorts back of the scene and is revealed behind a web-like screen changing costumes for dear life with the help of several maids. In a moment she flashes out as George Cohan and gives a rattling good imitation. Behind the screen she goes anon, emerging in the glare of the spotlight as Valeska Suratt singing her 'Gibson Girl' melody. In a minute she is Anna Held singing her nonsensational 'eye' lyric, and then with another flip of skirt and change of wig she is funny Eddie Foy.[19]

Making the frenzied mechanics of her quick changes visible to the audience, Hoffmann exposed the labor behind her visual transformations. This choice, Susan Glenn argues, allowed Hoffmann to "deliberately establish her own presence within each imitation." [20] It also made a spectacle out of the process of becoming an Anna Held or Eddie Foy, belying any sense of ease behind the elaborate costumes, make-up, and personalities seen in vaudeville through a display of the physical effort behind the curtain.

Much of this effort was expended in donning the various trappings of gender presentation. In the space of a few costume changes, Hoffmann represented the masculine figure of George Cohan, two feminine beauty idols, Suratt and Anna Held, and an imitation of the male comedian, Eddie Foy, in ballerina drag. Ending with Foy, as another reviewer comments, made for an effective finale: "to the surprise of the house in the last character, Eddie Foy, in pink tights, ballet skirts, the funny little hat and ostrich walk, with the Eddie Foy smile; she had it all down fine." [21] After praising Hoffmann's imitation of Foy's comedic physicality, the reviewer cannot help but note that she also wore the costume better: "Foy...would find it difficult to imitate Miss Hoffman's splendid figure." By highlighting Hoffmann's feminine

physique, the reviewer rushes to reinforce the gender expectations which Hoffmann's act disrupts. Despite the prevalence of drag in vaudeville, especially female drag, this indicates a discomfort with Hoffmann's quick assumption of several, differing presentations of gender.

Male impersonation by women on stage, such as in breeches roles, has primarily been acceptable as a way for actresses to show off their bodies. Hoffmann follows this rule by choosing Foy's ballerina act to copy. Like the on-stage costume changes, however, her choice also problematizes artificial markers of gender, taking a typically feminine garment like pink tights and using them to signify a male performer. Moreover, Hoffmann's athletic physical presence in these acts, which reviewers describe in zoological terms, makes her dangerously masculine. Like other fearfully athletic New Women, Hoffmann displayed an unnerving ability to take on male as well as female attributes.

Femininity, of course, has often been equated with reproduction, and the prevalence of female mimics in vaudeville opened questions about the cultural assumptions surrounding women's "natural" capacity for imitation. With the ingrained associations between mass culture and femininity, Susan Glenn argues, female mimics exacerbated the period's anxiety surrounding authenticity: "The mimics on the vaudeville stage...could be seen as personifications of a feminized urban consumer culture where being and imitating were one and the same."^[22] Like with the Gibson Girl, advertising used the reproducibility of the female image as a promise to women that they could buy their way to "the one right look."^[23] By impersonating various stars, the mimics encouraged the imitative behavior fostered in celebrity product endorsements, for instance, which were growing in popularity at the time. Want to look like Lillian Russell? Buy Recamier cosmetics. Want to be like Sarah Bernhardt? Buy Pear's Soaps.^[24] Providing a model for successful imitation, the mimics reinforced these attitudes.

They did not, however, imitate only the beauty idols of the day. Instead, they often went in the opposite direction, transforming from lovely young women into the absurd, excessive, or racially-coded personalities of the vaudeville stage. In their acts, mimics could play a range of roles, male and female, and surprise audiences with their transformation from a demure young girl into the brassiest of vaudeville personalities. A look at the careers of Hoffman, Loftus, and Janis indicates how the mimic, as solo performer, had artistic control over her performance, and though she based her act on the personalities of other performers, she was free to interpret them according to her own design. This, as Glenn contends, gave female mimics a powerful role: "that of the artist-intellectual who both participated in and critically evaluated the cultural practices of the day."^[25] Mimicry afforded these women the chance to work in a manner similar to the caricaturists of popular magazines, and like caricature they used exaggeration, distortion, and their own unique style to offer a critical and parodic perspective on popular culture. Unlike caricature, however, the mimics' embodied form of parody went beyond surface-level depictions of women and in return, gave them an unlikely freedom from the restrictive image of the "Girl" in American culture.

Hoffmann's practices as a mimic demonstrate how, as opposed to the photographs of star performers in mass circulation, the portraits offered by mimics were living and breathing imitations—a manual form of reproduction in a mechanical age. Two of the most famous mimics of the time, Cissie Loftus and Elsie Janis similarly emphasized physicality in their acts. Unlike Hoffmann, they eschewed the use of make-up or costume, but highlighted their natural, bodily abilities as mimics. In an interview, Loftus explained that "the born mimic is very independent of such aids to art as costumes, wigs, and makeup," and Janis, in a separate interview, agreed: "Make-ups do not trouble me. I rely entirely on the inflection of the voice and

the copying of action and gesture. That to my mind is the true art of mimicry.”^[26] The desire to defend mimicry as an “art” and to stress the inherent skills of the “born mimic” relate to the broader cultural unease associated with imitation. The readiness with which the personalities of other performers could be replicated, challenged the integrity of both live performances, star and mimic, and placed mimicry in an ambiguous relationship to authenticity.

Indeed, the vogue for mimicry coincided with modernist cultural anxieties over the impacts of mechanical reproduction in the age of the machine. Inventions from the phonograph to the photograph to the ready-to-wear shirtwaist blurred the lines between imitation and authenticity in an urban, industrialized society. As Walter Benjamin would later theorize in his essay, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” the “criterion of authenticity,” central to the function of “art objects,” began to break down, as, with the advent of photography “to an ever greater degree the work of art reproduced becomes the work of art designed for reproducibility.”^[27] Unlike mechanical forms of reproduction like film or photography, however, mimicry was a form of imitation that preserved some of the “auratic” quality Benjamin ascribes to the traditional art object.

In interviews, Janis would “compare herself to a newspaper cartoonist,” Glenn notes, who “exaggerates certain characteristics in order to give a more striking air of reality to the finished picture.”^[28] The caricaturist and critic Max Beerbohm also makes this comparison in his review of the mimic J. Arthur Bleackley. Beerbohm scoffs at the mimics who give “exact faithful reproduction[s]” of their subjects, because “an exact reproduction of the real thing can never be a satisfactory substitute.” Rather, he writes, the mimic should have a critical perspective: “The proper function of the mimic is, of course, like that of the parodist in words, or of the caricaturist in line, to exaggerate the salient points of his subject so that we can, whilst we laugh at a grotesque superficial effect, gain sharper insight into the subject’s soul, or, more strictly, behold that soul as it appears to the performer himself.”^[29] Beerbohm’s insistence that mimicry can reveal the “soul” of both the mimic and the subject articulates the desire of his age to find art and humanity within reproduction and to validate mimicry as an art with “aura.” Moreover, mimicry constituted an embodied form of parody, and unlike most newspaper cartoons, the creators were likely to be women.

While both Loftus and Janis had long and varied careers in entertainment, their practices and stage personas as mimics had many similarities. Cecilia “Cissie” Loftus was the daughter of famous performers on the British music hall stage, and in 1891, at the age of 15, Loftus began performing her imitations at music halls to instant acclaim. She made her New York debut in 1895 at Koster and Bial’s Music Hall, and although she continued to perform on both sides of the Atlantic, she centered her career in the United States. When Elsie Janis began performing, also at a very young age, she was hailed as “the American Cissie Loftus.”^[30] With the encouragement and guidance of her mother Jennie, the quintessential stage-mother, Janis was touring the vaudeville circuits by ten and starring in musical comedies by sixteen. Both rising to fame as girls, Loftus and Janis’s effectiveness as mimics stemmed in part from their youthful, feminine personas, which served to heighten the transformation into their various subjects.

Known for her astonishingly wide vocal range and deft physical caricature, Loftus would string together impressions of such myriad acts as the following from a 1908 program:

Marie Dressler singing ‘A Great Big Girl Like Me,’ Hattie Williams and her ‘Experience’ song, Caruso as he sings in a phonograph, George Walker singing ‘Bon Bon Buddie,’ Ethel Barrymore

reading the letter from the boys in ‘Sunday,’ Bert Williams singing ‘Nobody,’ and dancing the ludicrous figure that is appended, and finally Nazimova in a scene from ‘A Doll’s House’ follow in order.^[31]

With a range of impersonations from vaudeville, opera, and the legitimate theater, Loftus exhibited the flexibility of her voice, which could capture, for example, the specific quality of the opera tenor, Enrico Caruso, as recorded on a phonograph. That her voice stretched to low vocal ranges added novelty and transgression to her act. Reviews of her performances, however, stressed the simplicity of her acts. A notice in the *Chicago Daily Tribune* describes Loftus’s charm as stemming from her ingenue-like demeanor: “A dainty winsomeness, supplemented by a sense of genuine humor, the deft touch of the artist, and a mimicry that never in any analysis could be construed into coarseness, was the secret of her popularity.”^[32] Despite the sometimes provocative subject matter of her impersonations—like minstrel songs or Nazimova’s Nora—Loftus, as the *Tribune* is eager to confirm, maintained an image of maidenly propriety.

Her decision to perform without make-up played into her girlish appeal. Max Beerbohm notes this effect in his comments on Loftus: “It seemed so strange, that neglect of convention. To be behind footlights and not rouged! Yes, hers was a success of contrast. She was like a daisy in the window of Solomon’s.”^[33] Beerbohm’s language evokes a striking comparison between Loftus’s simple, natural artistry—like that of a daisy—and the commercial spectacle of vaudeville likened to a flashy department store window. The critical response to Loftus reveals a difference between the superficial representations of the typical vaudeville act and the embodied nature of Loftus’s mimetic skill. Her style of mimicry surpassed artificial or technical means of imitation to get beneath the skin of her subjects, and thus, beyond the innocent appeal of Loftus’s unrouged face, her decision to forego makeup contradicted advertisements that sold the idea of transformation through consumption (i.e. buying the right beauty products). Moreover, her cultivation of a simple, “dainty” persona, gave her, conversely, significant career versatility, allowing her to experiment with more rebellious personalities as a mimic, or as an actress, to play androgynous roles, such as Peter Pan.

Elsie Janis, one of the first American women to get her start in vaudeville through mimicry, similarly maintained a girlish persona to accompany her mimetic talent. From childhood, Janis displayed a natural capacity for capturing the voices and gestures of others. She was rumored to give excellent impromptu impersonations, a skill which she reportedly demonstrated before President William McKinley in 1898, when she was invited to perform at the White House. After performing a few songs, recitations, and imitations of Anna Held and May Irwin, Janis surprised the guests with an impersonation of President McKinley, followed by imitations of “members of the United States Senate, the Justices of the Supreme Court (tripping over their robes), and the stereotypical national mannerisms of some of the assembled ambassadors.”^[34] As with Loftus, audiences responded to the contrast, both charming and subversive, of a young girl imitating the mannerisms of mature men and women. One reviewer of her early performances commented, “It might seem incongruous for a child to evoke mental portraits of buxom, beautiful women for an audience. But Elsie’s inflections, gestures, and postures, her duplication of the star’s mannerisms, created a perfect illusion every time.”^[35] Despite his reassurance about Janis’s talent, the author’s tone reveals a certain unease with the effect of her impressions, and if the incongruity between a girl portraying buxom women was unsettling, then the difference between the young Elsie and the powerful men she caricatured could only be more so.

Janis's supposed innocence, however, also made her transgressions of power and gender easier to digest. A review of Janis's September 10, 1923 appearance at the Palace indicates this effect. The author, Mark Henry, is filled with admiration, explaining that he "has reviewed Miss Janis many times, but the pleasure is all his, and if anyone should get a laurel wreath, a gold medal or any other recognition hereafter, it certainly is 'Little Elsie.'"^[36] Even though Janis was 34 at the time of this review, Henry still uses the nickname, "Little Elsie." Because of the close relationship, both personal and business, between Janis and her mother, Elsie did not marry until after her mother's death in 1931. Thus "Little Elsie" maintained the image of maidenhood well into maturity, and her act continued to rely on the pleasing transformation from "winsome" girl into crude and brash performer. Henry describes her as "the only woman in the world who can swear, do it with refinement, and make you like her,"^[37] excusing her mannish behavior through her feminine charm.

With her capacity for creative interpretation, Janis famously added "idiosyncratic combinations" of impersonations to her act.^[38] These combinations included "[George M.] Cohan singing one of his songs out of the corner of his mouth; Eddie Foy doing a clog dance; Ethel Barrymore doing Fanny Brice; and Sarah Bernhardt singing 'Swanee.'"^[39] As this description from Armond Fields indicates, Janis's comedic talent lay in jumbling the famous performers of the day into ludicrous juxtapositions. To do so, it is worth noting, she flexed her virtuosity as an embodied performer, mixing the already intertwined fields of song, dance, comedy, and theater on the vaudeville stage into further entanglement. The effusive Mark Henry of the 1923 Palace review provides another example of this kind of celebrity jumble. He considered her "rendition of 'Yes, We Have No Bananas,' as different artistes would sing it" to be "a masterpiece."^[40] Although this review may be hyperbolic, Janis clearly had a propensity for parodying the vaudeville stage, which thrived on the big personalities of its stars. Such pronounced types were ripe for mockery, and by easily mixing and matching the mannerisms of stars, Janis's act highlighted the way in which the celebrity culture surrounding her rewarded strong personalities. For herself, however, she cultivated an image of the all-American girl;^[41] she was a New Woman freed from the pages of a magazine to send up the star-crazed culture.

Especially for attractive young women like Loftus and Janis, simply the act of presenting solo, comic material on the vaudeville stage was a risky move.^[42] There was a stark divide in the cultural ethos between beauty and comedy, and most female comedians in vaudeville compromised their femininity in some way in order to succeed as comics. For instance, Florenz Ziegfeld stated that his audiences expected "girls and laughter,"^[43] but the subtext of that statement was, of course, that an act consisted of *either* "girls" *or* "laughter." An act was either one of his spectacles composed for the male gaze or a comedy act in which the performer, if female, sacrificed any pretensions to beauty. Often this was achieved with a racial mask, such as Fanny Brice's Yiddishisms and May Irwin's "coon songs," or by making reference to their failure to conform to beauty standards, such as the comedian Trixie Friganza's jokes about her large build and failed diets.

With mimicry, Loftus and Janis found a way to be both feminine and funny. Not only did they maintain reputations of demure womanhood while living public lives, they were also able to inhabit a range of more transgressive personalities in their acts while keeping a stable identity as "legitimate" actresses. They were not immune from the racism and xenophobia of the vaudeville stage: like May Irwin, whom she was imitating, Janis sang "coon songs," taking advantage of the same racially-based humor. But the chameleon nature of her act gave her the privilege to separate herself from the performance. Indeed, Loftus and Janis exploited the difference between their identities as pretty white women and the ethnic

stereotypes or outsized personalities they imitated to prove their skill as mimics. That they chose to capture their subjects without the artificial means of make-up constituted an unusual move to eschew superficial means of representation on the vaudeville stage. That they did it so successfully only further demonstrated the inherently artificial nature of cultural representation in vaudeville.

Occasionally, battles broke out between vaudeville performers and their imitators, which exacerbated questions of authenticity. Hoffmann and Eva Tanguay, for instance, engaged in a well-publicized feud in 1908 over who could give the best performance of Eva Tanguay, the original or the imitator.^[44] The interpretive flare that the mimics brought to each imitation also made it possible for the imitator to be imitated. At the beginning of her career, for instance, Janis always included a few of Loftus's impressions in her act. Indeed, Loftus's imitations were so well-known that several performers imitated Loftus's imitations of themselves. This practice turned competitive when Loftus and Letty Lind became embroiled in a "dancing war" in London, which ended with Loftus adding an "impression of Lind imitating Loftus imitating Lind to her own act at the Palace" in 1894.^[45] A similar battle of Loftus imitations occurred in Louisville in 1902 without the presence of Loftus herself. Since managers often liked to arrange programs so that a star would be performing in the same program as a mimic who impersonated her, it was not unusual that Elsie Janis was performing on the same bill as one of her frequent subjects, Josephine Sabel. Sabel, however, was also performing an impression of Loftus's imitation of herself at the time. Janis took advantage of this by announcing that she would be giving an "imitation of Josephine Sabel in her imitation of Cissie Loftus giving an imitation of her."^[46] After receiving loud applause for this act, Janis brought Sabel back out on stage, and together they performed an encore of the "Loftus imitation" for the audience.

With dueling imitations like these, the acts were no longer about best representing another star's performance but about valorizing mimicry as a feat in itself. Their battle, therefore, became a virtuosic display of imitative embodiment, the movements back and forth demonstrating each star's ability to maintain control over representations of herself. By copying themselves to a ridiculous extent, however, they also lampooned the reproducibility of popular performance, and, as each iteration of "Sabel" or "Janis as Sabel" or "Janis as Sabel as Loftus as Sabel" became further abstracted from the original performance, they pointed to the inauthenticity within forms of representation that replicated women's bodies or images. Unlike the passive, uniform representations of women in magazines or chorus lines, they maintained agency over the act of replication, presenting themselves as accomplished parodists and critical participants in popular culture.

Throughout their careers, mimics like Hoffmann, Loftus, and Janis displayed a canny understanding of women's place in the culture of popular entertainment, and they used their imitations to undermine the expectations surrounding beauty, comedy, and women's bodies. Perhaps the reliance on spectacle in Hoffmann's case or the preservation of conventional femininity by Loftus and Janis limited their ability to make radical or political statements—their acts were light satires rather than biting critiques—but their careers demonstrated the opportunities that mimicry presented for experimenting with and embodying different types, personalities, and gender roles. Beyond the range of their performances, their creative interpretations also fought back against the superficialities of feminized consumer culture. Unlike the images of celebrities and the "American Girl" in magazines and advertisements, their mimicry pierced beneath the skin, destabilizing the artificial representations of women in mass media and entertainment by drawing three-dimensional portraits and caricatures with the body as image-maker. Their acts thus exemplified the cultural and political potentials of embodied performance, taking advantage of the live,

moving body as a tool for creating original, critical, and “auratic” parodies of popular culture.

Jennifer Schmidt is a teacher, scholar, dramaturg, and performer. In 2018, she received a Doctor of Fine Arts degree in Dramaturgy and Dramatic Criticism from Yale School of Drama. Her research traces the history of the one-woman show in America, focusing on women who write and perform monologue-based solo shows. Schmidt received the American Theater and Drama Society’s Emerging Scholar Award in 2015 and has presented papers at ATHE, ASTR, Theatre Symposium, and the Mid-America Theatre Conference. Her writing has appeared in *Etudes* and *HowlRound Theatre Commons*. In the fall of 2019, she will be joining the faculty of Hanover College as Assistant Professor of Theatre.

[1] “Why Do They Call Me A Gibson Girl?” *The Bystander*, October 10, 1906, Vol. 12 no. 149, 83, <https://books.google.com/books?id=yvERAAAAYAAJ&pg=PT32#v=onepage&q&f=false> (accessed 29 January 2019).

[2] “ ‘The Belle’ At Academy,” *The Sun. (1837-1993)*, Nov 13, 1906, <https://search.proquest.com/docview/537283401?accountid=15172> (accessed 24 January 2019).

[3] Martha Banta, *Imaging American Women: idea and ideals in cultural history*, (New York: Columbia UP, 1987), xxviii. Emphasis original.

[4] In *Strange Duets* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2009), Kim Marra discusses the Montana Silver Statue, another allegorical statue at the World’s Columbian Exhibition, which presented “Justice” modeled after the actress Ada Rehan. That these statues were sometimes modeled on famous actresses suggests a cycle of influence between theater and visual media, with the “American Girl” type moving from two-dimensional magazine prints, to living portrayals on stage, and back to three-dimensional images cast in metal and stone.

[5] Katherine H. Adams, Michael L. Keene, and Jennifer C. Koella, *Seeing the American Woman: 1880-1920*, (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 2012), 84.

[6] While in other contexts, the term “female mimic” might refer to a drag performer, such as Julian Eltinge, who mimicked females in his act, I use the term to refer to female performers. Throughout the essay then, “female mimics” refers to women who performed imitations of celebrities of all genders.

[7] Joe Laurie Jr., “Vaudeville: Mimics,” *Variety*, Vol. 170, no. 11 (May 19, 1948): 52, <https://search.proquest.com/docview/1285922332?pq-origsite=summon&accountid=15172>

[8] Faye E. Dudden, *Women in the American theatre: actresses and audiences, 1790-1870*, (New Haven: Yale UP, 1994), 182.

[9] Dudden, *Women in the American Theatre*, 182.

[10] Adams, Keene, Koella, *Seeing the American Woman*, 77.

[11] Susan A. Glenn, *Female Spectacle: The Theatrical Roots of Modern Feminism*, (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2000), caption to image 21.

[12] Matthew Schneirov, *The Dream of a New Social Order: Popular Magazines in America 1893-1914*, (New York: Columbia, UP, 1994), 4-5.

[13] Martha H. Patterson, *Beyond the Gibson Girl: reimagining the American new woman, 1895-1915*, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2005), 33.

[14] "Beginning of Summer Season," *New York Times (1857-1922)*, May 26, 1907, <https://search.proquest.com/docview/96730772?accountid=15172> (accessed 24 January 2019); "Roof Gardens Open," *New York Tribune (1900-1910)*, Jun 2, 1907, <https://search.proquest.com/docview/571882732?accountid=15172> (accessed 24 January 2019).

[15] Cady Whaley, "The Cohans," *The Billboard (Archive: 1894-1960)*, Jun 29, 1907, 10-11, <https://search.proquest.com/docview/1031381111?accountid=15172>.

[16] For further discussion of Hoffmann's dance impersonations see Glenn, *Female Spectacle*, and Sunny Stalter-Pace, "Gertrude Hoffmann's Lawful Piracy: 'A Vision of Salome' and the Russian Season and Transatlantic Production Impersonations," *Theatre Symposium*, Vol. 25 (2017): 37-48, 110.

[17] "Modernized Romeo; Up-To-Date Juliet," *New York Times (1857-1922)*, Dec 04, 1906, <https://search.proquest.com/docview/96609309?accountid=15172>; "She Won't Copy That Gown Again," *Detroit Free Press (1858-1922)*, Jun 06, 1907, <https://search.proquest.com/docview/564061242?accountid=15172> (accessed 24 January 2019).

[18] Ruth Turner Wilcox, *Five Centuries of American Costume*, (Mineola, NY: Dover Publishers, 2004), 146.

[19] "Vaudeville At Maryland," *The Sun (1837-1993)*, Oct 22, 1907, <https://search.proquest.com/docview/537464261?accountid=15172> (accessed 24 January 2019).

[20] Glenn, *Female Spectacle*, 76.

[21] Whaley, "The Cohans."

[22] Glenn, *Female Spectacle*, 81.

[23] Patterson, *Beyond the Gibson Girl*, 33.

[24] Daniel Delis Hill, *Advertising to the American Woman, 1900-1999*, (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2002), 29.

[25] Glenn, *Female Spectacle*, 95.

[26] Loftus quoted in “The Art of Cecilia Loftus,” *The Billboard*, May 16, 1925; Elsie Janis, “Elsie Janis Tells the True Art of Mimicry,” *The Sun (1837-1993)*, Aug 08, 1915, <https://search.proquest.com/docview/534100838?accountid=15172> (accessed 29 January 2019).

[27] Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” trans. Harry Zohn, (Shocken/Random House ed. Hannah Arendt), <https://www.marxists.org/reference/subject/philosophy/works/ge/benjamin.htm> (accessed 1 February 2019).

[28] Janis quoted in Glenn, *Female Spectacle*, 77.

[29] Max Beerbohm, “A Play and a Mimic,” *The Saturday Review*, June 11, 1904: 749, <https://search.proquest.com/docview/9532068?pq-origsite=summon&accountid=15172>.

[30] Lee Alan Morrow, *Elsie Janis: a compensatory biography*, Dissertation, 1988, 57.

[31] “News of the Theaters,” *Chicago Daily Tribune (1872-1922)*, Apr 09, 1908, <https://search.proquest.com/docview/173390463?accountid=15172>.

[32] “‘Cissie’ Loftus is More than ‘Cecilia,’” *Chicago Daily Tribune (1872-1922)*, Jun 22, 1902, <https://search.proquest.com/docview/173068991?accountid=15172>.

[33] Max Beerbohm quoted in John Anderson, “Miss Cecilia Loftus,” *Harper's Bazaar* 71, no. 2710 (June 1938): 52-53, 114-115, 120, 126. [https://search.proquest.com/docview/](https://search.proquest.com/docview/1832505976?accountid=15172)

[1832505976?accountid=15172](https://search.proquest.com/docview/1832505976?accountid=15172).

[34] Morrow, *Elsie Janis*, 24.

[35] Irene Corbally Kuhn, “Elsie Janis, the one-woman U.S.O. of World War I, is gone,” in Slide, *Selected Vaudeville Criticism*, (Metchuen, NJ: The Scarecrow Press, 1988), 111.

[36] Mark Henry, “This Week’s Reviews of Vaudeville Theaters From Coast to Coast by Special Wire: B.F. Keith’s Palace, N.Y.” *The Billboard*, 35, no. 37 (Sep 15, 1923): 16-17, <https://search.proquest.com/docview/1031707084?accountid=15172>.

[37] Henry, “This Week’s Reivews.”

[38] Armond Fields, *Women Vaudeville Stars*, (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2006), 159.

[39] Fields, *Women Vaudeville Stars*, 159.

[40] Henry, “This Week’s Reviews.”

[41] See Deanna Toten Beard, "A Doughgirl with the Doughboys: Elsie Janis, "The Regular Girl," and the Performance of Gender in World War I Entertainment," *Theatre History Studies* 33 (2014): 56-70, for a discussion of Janis's cultivation of her image as an all-American Girl who could be "one of the guys" with soldiers in WWI.

[42] Glenn, *Female Spectacle*, 43.

[43] Glenn, *Female Spectacle*, 48.

[44] Glenn, *Female Spectacle*, 79.

[45] Catherine Hindson, *Female Performance Practice on the Fin-de-Siecle Popular Stages of London and Paris: Experiment and Advertisement, Women, Theatre and Performance* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), 150.

[46] Morrow, *Elsie Janis*, 61.



"Unruly Productions: The Embodied Art of Mimicry in Vaudeville" by Jennifer Schmidt

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