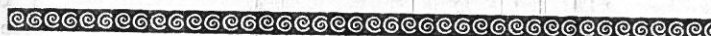


Black Minstrelsy and Double Inversion, Circa 1890



ANNEMARIE BEAN

MISS JOHNSING: Is that you, Dinah Dewdrop?

DINAH: It am.

MISS J: And how do you find yourself, this evening?

DINAH: I ain't been lost, as I knows on, Miss Johnsing.

MISS J: I mean, Dinah, how is your health? How do you *feel*?

DINAH (*shaking her head*): I's sorry to say, Miss Johnsing, dat I's a leetle
off color dis night.

MISS J: That is a melancholic fact, Dinah.

TOPSY: 'Pears like we's all on us a bit shady, dis ebenin'!¹

The above exchange comes from *Jolly Joe's Lady Minstrels*, a minstrel guide "written, compiled, and edited in the sole interest of cheerfulness from the most jovial sources, and arranged with a particular eye to the needs of FEMALE NEGRO MINSTRELS."² *Jolly Joe's Lady Minstrels* was published in 1893, a significant moment in the history of nineteenth-century American blackface minstrelsy,³ as there was an increasing number of professional and amateur white minstrel guides published, including Frank Dumont's *The Witmark Amateur Minstrel Guide and Burnt Cork Encyclopedia* (1899) and *The Boys of New York End Men's Joke Book* (1902).⁴ Minstrel guides were virtual compendiums on how-to-make-a-minstrel-show, with short introductory essays on the history of minstrelsy, front- and back-of-the-book advertisements for fright wigs and burnt cork makeup, and instructions on the form and material of minstrelsy. *Jolly Joe's Lady Minstrels* is a typical example, offering directions on costumes and makeup and a section on "Specimen Jokes, Stories, and Conundrums."

Not only were the amateur minstrel guides detailed lessons on how to be a minstrel, they also served the additional purpose of telling the reader how

to be an Other, in the classical Homi Bhabhan sense of Othering as an ambivalent act of love and subjection.⁵ The opening exchange between Dinah Dewdrop, one of the end women (the others are Sukey, Rosy, and Topsy), and Miss Johnsing, the interlocutor, is significant as a representative example of these lessons in Otherness as outlined in the 1890s minstrel guides. Miss Johnsing speaks in mannered words and diction; Dinah answers her questions in an interpretation of black dialect. The conversation concerns Dinah's health. "How is your health?" Miss Johnsing inquires. Dinah replies, "I's a leetle *off color* dis night." The emphasized observation "off color" is meant to set up the first laugh for the audience, which the comic character Topsy delivers: "'Pears like we's all on us a bit shady, dis ebenin'!" Topsy, a character borrowed from Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), uses color as a mark of social inclusion, for the minstrels and the audience know that everyone onstage is blackened by burnt cork, not by race. The wink to the audience is based in the mutual understanding that we (the performers) are different from you (the audience) but only because we (the performers) are putting on a show, an act, a minstrel show in blackface. This knowledge—that everyone is "shady," but no one is truly "black"—is an important distinction in deriving pleasure for the white audience and white performers. The joke material on the minstrel stage can be said to display, as Sigmund Freud identifies, "the most social of all the mental functions that aim to yield pleasure."⁶

The first characteristic that is standard to minstrelsy jokes is comic material about color. With the increase in amateur minstrel publications, such as *Jolly Joe's Lady Minstrels*, in the 1890s, color or, more specifically, changing one's color for the amusement of yourself and others had become more and more popular and accessible to the larger public. Amateur performers exercised their abilities to change their color because they could, and because the allowability for and humor of "blacking up" had been amusing since minstrelsy's beginnings in the late 1820s.

I would like here to clarify what I will call the *performance of color* in minstrelsy. My employment of *color* rather than *race* or *ethnic group* is derived from the usage of the minstrels themselves: they were presenting a body literally colored, blackened, and sociologically defined by white culture. In the oft-quoted 1903 words of W. E. B. Du Bois: "The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color-line,—the relation of the darker to the lighter races of men."⁷ Du Bois makes the distinction that what has been problematized in the nineteenth century, as it continued to be in the twentieth, is the space where colors confront each other. Du Bois marked a line as this space of encounter; minstrelsy designated the popular stage as the locus of color contention.

Minstrelsy was not an ethnography-based performance, nor was it based in any way in the authentic presentation of African American cultural life. There is significant discussion that some of early minstrelsy was based in direct contact between white minstrel performers and African Americans, which can be traced most notably in the adaptation of the West African

instrument of the banjo by white minstrels. Ultimately, it was not a concern of the minstrels to present a race with a culture, but rather, to present a color, as in "This is how people of this color act." As is well documented, the "color" of blackness would designate a race inferior in mid-nineteenth century anthropological papers, which were supported by highly questionable scientific conclusions based on measurements of head size, for example.⁸ Showing a knowledge of the tenor of the times, blackness (most often), Chineseness, Native Americanness, Japaneseness, Irishness, and Dutch/Germanness were used by white minstrels to entertain audiences through well-established types of humor and nostalgia.⁹ At best, these stereotypes limited the range of images of those ethnicities in minstrel performance; at worst, they contained and constricted them.

In addition to performing color, beginning in the 1840s, white male minstrels used gender as a transgressive space of performing Otherness. The mutability of color coupled with the changeability of gender furthered the white minstrels' promotion of color and gender as being primarily theatrical and of entertainment as a type of mimicry or mimesis, an "almost, not-quite" relationship with the subject, the African American woman. When, around the 1840s, white minstrels performed African American women to illustrate satisfaction or disappointment in an African American male-female relationship (often the material of blackface minstrelsy songs), they wrote songs similar to "Miss Lucy Long":

I've come again to see you,
I'll sing another song,
Jist listen to my story,
It isn't very long.
Oh take your time Miss Lucy,
Take your time Miss Lucy Long.
Oh! Miss Lucy's teeth is grinning,
Just like an ear ob corn,
And her eyes dey look so winning
Oh! would I'd ne'er been born.
If she makes a scolding wife,
As sure as she was born,
I'll tote her down to Georgia,
And trade her off for corn.¹⁰

Blackface minstrelsy songs about the relationships between African American men and women were called wench songs; the female impersonators who would perform the songs were the "wenches." Ultimately, the lyrics established the types of African American women portrayed. In the example of the several versions over thirty years of the comic love song "Miss Lucy Long," probably the first wench song, we can observe a genealogy of the portrayal of African American women by female impersonators in white minstrelsy. At every stage, the title character of the song is always warned by her lover to behave as a good wife, or she will be sold or abandoned.¹¹ She responds to his

words by grinning, her teeth as white as snow, speechless. In *Love and Theft*, Eric Lott notes that no one has been able to prove that the early wench actually sang in the sketches that included her as a character; rather, she became the “lyric and theatrical object of the song” and of the entire theater arena.¹² The female impersonator, therefore, was established as a thoroughly contained and constrained African American woman.

Given the history of female impersonation in minstrelsy, it is intriguing to consider how the performances of color and gender continued once white women were allowed to participate in minstrelsy. White women negotiated their colorized and genderized space in several ways. First, they used white womanhood as a contrast to black womanhood. Second, they presented the woman’s body in an inverse of female impersonation by performing as white men. By the time of the amateur minstrel movement in the 1890s, full-scale participation and acceptance of women onstage in professional minstrel shows was established. Women had been appearing as performers and audience members since the post-Civil War era in concert saloons and variety halls, where “leg shows,” extravaganzas such as *The Black Crook*, and Lydia Thompson’s burlesquing British Blondes were featured.¹³ On the minstrelsy circuit, Gertie Granville performed with Tony Hart, her husband, beginning in 1882, often with both spouses playing female roles (see figure 9.1). There is a photograph of Hart in blackface drag gently reprimanding Granville, who is dressed as a Little Eva character, the popular young heroine of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*.¹⁴ The circa 1882 photograph captures a moment in the continuum of gender impersonation in blackface minstrelsy. Hart, a white man costumed as an African American woman, poses with his wife, a white woman dressed as a white child with an oversized doll. Hart is very much in the low-comedy Funny Old Gal role of white minstrelsy, recalling the comic Dame character in burlesque.¹⁵ He wears dark Victorian-era women’s clothing over his big frame; a wig is piled high on his head; and his face and arms are blackened. Granville is dressed as girlishly as possible; she wears a knee-length, light-colored dress that exposes her legs; and her blonde hair is loose and flowing. Both performances of color and gender exhibit the limits of transgression imposed on women of the popular stage at this time. Hart, the epitome of white minstrelsy’s comic female impersonator, shares the stage with minstrelsy’s—and the American popular stage’s—future female presence: the childlike, ultrafeminized girl-woman with nice legs.

Returning to the excerpt that opened this chapter, the character of Dinah Dewdrop could be costumed similarly to Tony Hart, with one exception. *Jolly Joe’s Lady Minstrels* was written for white women to portray African American women. In fact, white women on stage transgressing racial boundaries was encouraged in *Jolly Joe’s Lady Minstrels* by the implied endorsement of an African American man, Jolly Joe, whose face is grinning on the cover. In the 1890s, the female body on the popular stage had expanded possibilities compared to her counterpart earlier in the century. One of those areas of expansion was to represent the female body in the form of a male body:



Figure 9.1 Tony Hart and Gertie Granville (n.d.). Courtesy Harvard Theatre Collection, Houghton Library.

It was in the early [18]90s that the male imps [impersonators] started to give an honest impersonation. The gals with fine shapes naturally showed off men’s clothes in a way that no man ever could.¹⁶

In a chapter entitled “She-He’s and He-She’s,” former vaudevillian Joe Laurie, Jr., expresses great admiration for the work of male impersonators in turn-of-the-century vaudeville. Laurie implies that male impersonation did not develop out of a need for male partners on the vaudeville stage but rather from a desire for the audience to see women’s “fine shapes” in closely tailored men’s clothes. During her performance as a male impersonator, as she sang

and played instruments, flirted, and danced with female partners, the woman's body could always be reassuringly seen through a shapely veil, albeit of masculinity.

In my considerations of minstrelsy's use of the performances of color and gender as a means of entertaining and sentimentally transporting its audiences, I have been intrigued by the recent work of Susan Gubar on what she terms "racechange." White minstrels, Gubar notes, performed a racechange in blackface, which began the American use of the black Other in a commodity fetish relationship.¹⁷ Gubar notes that, unlike the commonly used term *passing*, which has been used to describe the act of "passing for white" by light-skinned African Americans in a quest for less discriminatory lives, a racechange is a much more expansive notion of "the traversing of racial boundaries, racial imitation or impersonation, cross-racial mimicry or mutability, white posing as black or black passing as white, pan-racial mutuality."¹⁸ In the case of minstrelsy, however, there has been little discussion so far about the transgression of gender paralleling the performance of color on the stage. In effect, one could both further complicate and support Gubar's argument marking white minstrelsy as an example of racechange with substantiation of how white minstrels portrayed African American women on the minstrelsy stage: a "race and gender change." The commodity fetishism that occurs in white minstrelsy when we also consider gender impersonation therefore becomes doubled in its meaning and scope.

There were also minstrelsy performers who chose to change their color, although it would seem not to be necessary to do so: African American minstrels. Active primarily during late minstrelsy,¹⁹ they tapped into a desire by American audiences to laugh at performances of color and gender. When African American minstrels accessed the popular entertainment stage, they eventually changed the words, jokes, and look of minstrelsy,²⁰ but they also maintained its premises of performing color and performing gender for the amusement and nostalgia of their audiences.

A report in the *New York Clipper* in 1858 states that a "colored opera troupe" performed vocal and instrumental songs in the Queen's Concert Rooms in London. "The personal appearance of the parties was extremely ludicrous, but they sang well, and many of their melodies and songs are 'taking,' and likely to become favorites," the writer concludes.²¹ The first black minstrels probably existed as early as the 1850s, although it was not until after the Civil War that black performers, including minstrels, were prevalent on the American popular stage.²² Initially, black minstrelsy tapped into the successful elements of white minstrelsy: "ludicrous" appearance, well-executed music, and catchy tunes. As was the case in white minstrelsy, the skills demanded in black minstrelsy were multiple: black minstrel and vaudeville star Tom Fletcher recalled, in his book *100 Years of the Negro in Show Business*, "In those days you were not hired or even considered in show business unless you could sing, dance, talk, tumble or play some instrument in a brass band."²³ Despite the demanding artistic requirements, African Americans clamored for the few spots available in black minstrelsy groups; in 1894,

2,000 African Americans applied for forty minstrelsy slots in a new troupe.²⁴ The appeal of the minstrelsy stage to African American performers and audiences needs to be examined more closely. Thomas Riis suggests that the oral culture elements of "exaggeration and [the] grotesque" integral to minstrelsy appealed to the African-based culture of African Americans.²⁵ What can be said is that minstrelsy offered opportunities for both trained and untrained musicians and performers on a grand scale. As James Weldon Johnson, a former black minstrel, reflected on minstrelsy's mixed legacy, he wrote on its dualistic nature in African American cultural production:

Minstrelsy was, on the whole, a caricature of Negro life, and it fixed a stage tradition which has not yet been entirely broken. . . . Nevertheless, these companies did provide stage training and theatrical experience for a large number of coloured men. They provided an essential training and theatrical experience, which, at the time, could not have been acquired from any other source. Many of these men, as the vogue of minstrelsy waned, passed on into the second phase, or middle period, of the Negro on the theatrical stage in America; and it was mainly upon the training they had gained that this second phase rested.²⁶

A glance at the names of the early black musical performers and composers, those of Johnson's "second phase"—Bert Williams, George Walker, Will Marion Cook, J. Leubrie Hill, Paul Laurence Dunbar, Jesse Shipp, Bob Cole, J. Rosamond Johnson, and James Weldon Johnson himself²⁷—offers a sense of the creative potential fed by black minstrelsy. I am not suggesting that minstrelsy provided the only means to the end of performance, as it has been noted by many, including Johnson, that African American performers were successful far from the minstrelsy stage. Instead, with the participation of black minstrels, minstrelsy can be said to have given American culture two legacies: one of creativity and one of resilient stereotypes. Ultimately, there was a certain pride in the African American population at the popularity of the college-affiliated singing troupes, such as the Fisk Jubilee Singers and the Hampton Singers, and "our own colored minstrels earn[ing] honorable reputation and some money."²⁸

With the advent of their popularity came the return, at least performatively, of the "Negro" back to the plantation. Offering "trueness" and "realness" by the very nature of the fact that they were not just "acting black" but *were* black, the black minstrels advertised themselves as authentic. To prove this assertion, they restaged old minstrelsy classics out of vogue before the Civil War. The two rival black minstrelsy troupes, Haverly's Colored Minstrels and Callender's Consolidated Colored Minstrels, featured plantation scenes par excellence; at one point, Haverly's even exchanged minstrelsy's opening formation of a semicircle for a full-scale staging of a plantation scene in the South.²⁹ Ironically, the black minstrels became overdetermined in their "niggerness" precisely at the moment that they were achieving greater visibility as performing artists. They, in all likelihood, were building upon the popularity of the slave dramas of the earlier part of the century, such as

Darling Nelly Gray (1856), William Wells Brown's *Escape; or, A Leap to Freedom* (1858), and the many versions of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* being performed simultaneously throughout the country in the 1850s,³⁰ as well as upon the touring company combinations of the Hyers Sisters, Anna Madah and Emma Louise, who toured in the 1870s and 1880s and featured songs such as the following, written by white minstrel songster Charles A. White expressly for Emma Hyers:

Oh golly, aint I happy!
De Yankee's day hab come;
I hear de shout of freedom,
I hear dar fife and drum;
Dar's gwine to be a smash-up
Dis chile is gettin' shy,
She'll leab de old plantation,
Old cabin home, good-by.³¹

As Thomas Riis notes, emancipation is seen in this song to be a mixed blessing.³² Similar in its nostalgia to many white minstrelsy songs, "Good-by, Old Cabin Home" permits the urban audiences of minstrelsy to locate the South as a place of structured contentment, where people knew their place and were relatively happy with their designation. The revitalized use of the plantation scenario by African American minstrelsy troupes differed from the early white minstrelsy use of the plantation in its ambivalence. As in the case of the song "Good-by, Old Cabin Home," African Americans lamented leaving their southern homes but leave them they did.

In these theatrical southern worlds of African American minstrelsy, does gender receive the same type of ambivalent performance as color? In a word, yes. Female impersonation was present in black minstrelsy, according to Robert C. Toll, as were all aspects of white minstrelsy: "black 'sweet' singers, graceful prima donnas, refined dancers, pompous interlocutors, and wise-cracking endmen."³³ Yet I have found little documentation that suggests that the female impersonator in black minstrelsy was central to the entertainment of the primarily black audiences. As Toll, Henry Sampson, Mel Watkins, Thomas Riis, James Weldon Johnson, and Eileen Southern have pointed out, African Americans who attended black minstrel shows were of the working class and familiar with laughing at stereotypes because they were based in comedy, not in realistic portrayal.³⁴ The white female impersonator, especially as the prima donna in late minstrelsy, based her performance in believability, similar to contemporary female impersonators.³⁵ It is possible that black minstrelsy audiences chose to see actual light-skinned African American women as the "leg show" elements of the black minstrelsy show, rather than those who were mimicking femaleness (see figure 9.2).

Black minstrelsy blended into black musical revues and vaudeville, so it is somewhat difficult to discern a continuum in terms of gender impersonation from white to black minstrelsy. However, it seems that female impersonation of the prima donna type was not performed by any of the major black



Figure 9.2 The Smart Set (1901). Courtesy Hatch-Billops Collection.

minstrels, including Sam Lucas, Billy Kersands, Ernest Hogan, Tom McIntosh, or Tom Fletcher. This contrasts with white minstrelsy, where such notables as George Christy and William Henry Rice regularly portrayed highly dressed and stylized mulatta women. I have found evidence of one comic female impersonator in black minstrelsy, Andrew Tribble.³⁶ Tribble, who may or may not be the cross-dressed male in figure 9.2, seems to have excelled in playing female comic roles. He was born in 1879 in Kentucky, and his first role on stage was as a "pickaninny." When he reached adulthood, he left the stage and married, but he returned to performing in Chicago in 1904. Tribble worked in a music hall and was subsequently hired to work at the famous Pekin Theatre, where Robert Motts had established a highly regarded resident company of African American actors, which included, at various times, Charles Gilpin, Flournoy Miller, and Aubrey Lyles.³⁷ It was at the Pekin that "Tribble slipped on a dress and the audience screamed at his performance."³⁸ Bob Cole, J. Rosamond Johnson, and James Weldon Johnson saw him there and cast him in their second work, *The Shoo-Fly Regiment* (1906). Tribble, about five feet, four inches tall, constructed the role of Ophelia Snow: "a single-minded woman, careless, kindly, tough, and above all desirous for an affair of the heart just the same as her sisters blessed with more beauty."³⁹ "Ophelia, the Village Pride," wrote another reviewer, "was exceedingly well done. All must give it to Tribble, he is the goods. His characterization was great."⁴⁰ Tribble would repeat variations on this role throughout his career. Another character Tribble cross-dressed for the show was Sis Hopkins, cited by one reviewer as "the most interesting feature of the cast."⁴¹ Another hit of the show was a comic romantic duet that Tribble sang

with Matt Marshall, entitled "Who Do You Have?" It was, in the words of one reviewer, "screamingly funny, and as well rendered as anything which has been seen here in many moons."⁴²

Tribble was also in the next Cole and Johnson production *Red Moon* (1908). His reviews for this production were not as favorable as the ones for *The Shoo-Fly Regiment*, possibly because Tribble was performing a low-comedy character, who was ill-suited for a "show [that] seem[ed] to be above such parts."⁴³ Tribble appears to have been caught on the cusp of the movement from vaudeville to black musical show/revue, although he does perform similar cross-dressed characters in *Shuffle Along* (1921) and *Put and Take* (1921).⁴⁴ Tribble also worked with The Smart Set, the Eddie Hunter Company, the J. Leubrie Hill Company, and the Miller (Quintard) and Slater Company before his death in 1935.⁴⁵

In his female impersonations, Tribble seems to have relied on the comedic elements solely. He was not presenting the prima donna character of white minstrelsy, whose allure was in the convincing portrayal of her realness. Tribble, and probably other female impersonators in black minstrelsy yet to be rediscovered, brought the performance of color and gender of minstrelsy into a realm of being "screamingly funny" for the audiences, which included both African American women and men; his performances were about "us"—African American men and women and their relationships—not about "them." His legacy is almost certainly alive in twentieth-century comedians such as Flip Wilson, whose smart-talking Geraldine character was immensely popular on his television variety show (1970–1977).⁴⁶ The comedy of Wilson's gender impersonation was similar to Tribble's in that it based itself in the social and political satire of gender. This type of humor was similar to that used by white minstrels in comic female impersonation and achieved like results: a determined break from the constraints imposed by gender roles in society and a political comment on the increasing ambivalence of men about the changing social roles of women.

In addition, black minstrelsy commented on white minstrelsy's performances of color and gender by narrowing the scope of female impersonation. Gender impersonators such as Tribble were primarily comic in purpose and did not in any way thrive on the ambivalence of whether or not Tribble was truly a man or a woman. Tribble, in his "screamingly funny" female portrayals, both expanded the importance of humor in his performances and neatly contained the oft-present dual purpose in white minstrelsy of denigrating the subject of the performances—African American women—and the vehicle of the performance: his own African American male body.

Further extending the ways in which African American gender impersonation inverted the performance of color and gender of African Americans as constructed by white minstrelsy are performances of African American male impersonation. After the Hyers Sisters broke the gender barrier, all-black musical shows, such as *The Creole Show*, put on by Sam T. Jack's Creole Company in 1890–1897, and *Darkest America* (1896), departed from and depended on the minstrelsy format, featuring plantation scenes as well as

original songs and dances.⁴⁷ *The Creole Show* is also significant as it was the first show that employed a large number of African American women performers. Extravaganzas with burlesque elements, complete with songs called "minstrel spirituals" (combining elements of the most popular forms of African American entertainment, minstrelsy and concert singing), and musical revues toured the country. African American female minstrels performed male impersonation during this active period of the 1880s and 1890s.

As noted previously with the African American male minstrels, gender impersonation can be seen as an inversion of the performances of color and gender that were developed by white minstrels. First, the male African American minstrels did only comic female impersonation; they did not continue the tradition of high-style drag developed by the male prima donnas of the white minstrelsy stage. Second, the women of African American minstrelsy featured a small faction of performers who donned male costume and played male roles. These performances by the African American minstrels inverted (and, in the case of the women, double inverted) the notions set up by white minstrelsy: that the African American male body was deformed, overdetermined, and emasculated and that the African American female body was highly sexualized and whorish. When performed by African American female minstrels, gender impersonation doubly inverted the representations of blackness rendered by white minstrelsy. White minstrelsy stereotyped African American women as comic and/or whorish; African American male impersonators chose to perform their female selves through maleness, thereby eradicating any connection with the stereotypes previously generated. African American male impersonators' double inversion of color and gender directly tapped into the anxieties that the dominant culture had about African American women and men. By changing the nature of those characterizations, black minstrelsy, in effect, negated their "coloring" and asserted themselves as a race with first, a proud history, and second, an exciting present. African American performing artists could impressively participate, in numbers higher than the percentage of blacks in the general population, and electrify their audiences with new notions of what a black man or woman performer was capable of on stage.

I have become intrigued by a small, vibrant group of African American female minstrels and vaudevillians who worked from the 1890s to the 1910s, some of whom performed male impersonation. Black female minstrels inverted the blackened-up female impersonators' characterizations of black women in two ways. First, although they were women, they did not play only women; they showed that their bodies were suited to playing both genders and to subverting the dominance of minstrelsy's containment of the black female body as fixed, unmoving, and confined to the two categories of mulatta or mama. Second, they reclaimed minstrelsy's black dandy characterization (overly dressed, urban black male) by reinscribing him into a sophisticated "race man" worthy of the upcoming Jazz Age. Strutting in top hats, twirling canes, and dancing in elegantly choreographed numbers, black female minstrels playing black men and women performed a counternarrative

to white minstrelsy's violent portrayals of African American relationships. It is impossible to know if the black female minstrels, especially the male impersonators, actively pursued performing this race and gender inversion of white minstrelsy; however, I would like to approach their work by distinguishing, theoretically at least, their performances as social commentaries on the racist and sexist images of black men and women, which were the staple material of white minstrelsy. By contrasting the gender impersonation of white minstrelsy with these inverted portrayals, African American minstrels manipulated the rules of performance established by white minstrelsy. Their performances of color and gender were doubly transgressing, and they changed the scope of what transgression on the minstrelsy stage had been thus far.

African American male impersonators commented on their times and turned inside out the performance history of stereotypical characterizations of African American men and women on the popular stage. During this late stage of minstrelsy (which was evolving into vaudeville), there were several African American women minstrels who specialized in male impersonation. They included Florence Hines (active in the teens and twenties); Ida Forsythe (Howard) (b. 1883–d. early 1980s); Alberta Whitman of the Whitman Sisters (b. 1888–d. 1964); and Aida Overton Walker (1880–1914). It will come as no surprise to anyone who has studied nineteenth-century African American popular entertainment that there is little extant material available, especially on women performers. Through the use of primary and secondary sources, I have attempted to construct the beginnings of a performance history of these African American minstrel/vaudeville performers. However, my primary goal is to present their performance of male impersonation as a counterbalance to several portrayals in white minstrelsy. The male impersonations performed by these women seem to have reflected upon the dandy character popular in white minstrelsy. Emasculated, overly dressed, urban, and ineffectual, the black dandy in white minstrelsy was a “Dandy Jim from Carolina” (1843), more concerned with his ridiculous appearance than anything else. The African American women gave a different spin to the dandy character when they made him into a Jazz Age sophisticate, resplendent in black topcoat, tails, twirling a cane and donning a top hat.

One of the best examples of the sophisticated image of black maleness as performed by black female minstrels is the male impersonation of Alberta (or “Bert”) Whitman (see figures 9.3 and 9.4). Describing the Whitman Sisters troupe on 12 February 1910, the *New York Clipper* stated:

The Whitman Sisters and Billy Kersands' vaudeville company play Lagman's Theatre, Mobile, Alabama. The Whitmans include Mabel, manager; Essie, contralto soloist; Alberta, prima donna; Mattie (adopted sister); and Baby Alice. They are assisted by the boy comedian Thomas Hawkins, who replaces Willie Robinson; William Loften, comedian; and Walter Smith, trap drummer. Billy Kersands is assisted by his wife, Louise, and B. E. Edwards, tenor soloist.⁴⁸

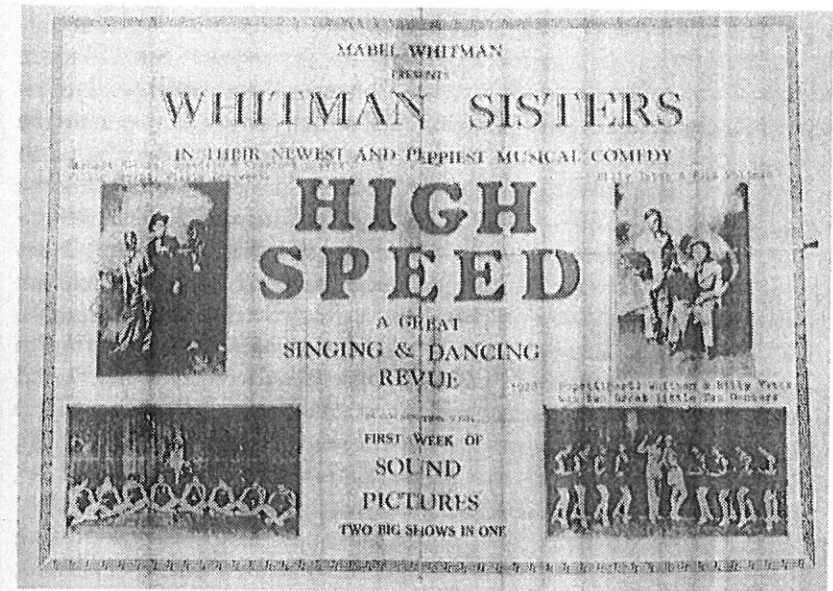


Figure 9.3 “The Whitman Sisters in Their Newest and Peppiest Musical Comedy, *High Speed*” (1928). Courtesy Hatch-Billops Collection.



Figure 9.4 “The World Famous Whitman Sisters” (1928). Courtesy Hatch-Billops Collection.

Alberta Whitman was a male impersonator throughout her successful career on the vaudeville circuit. The Whitmans hailed from Lawrence, Kansas (birthplace of George Walker, 1872?–1911, husband of Aida Overton Walker and Bert Williams's partner) and were the daughters of a well-known minister. Despite Walker's efforts, the Whitmans were not allowed to become professional until after their schooling, which included five years at the New England Conservatory of Music. They first worked with their father on an evangelical tour, and then Essie and Mabel formed an act called the Danzette Sisters in 1899–1900. In 1900, the Whitman Sisters Novelty Company began its career as a group in the Augusta (Georgia) Grand Opera House. Their mother managed the group at that time; by 1904, Mabel took over the management, and they changed the group's name to the Whitman Sisters New Orleans Troubadours. Their debut in New York in 1906 was with the encouragement of Will Marion Cook. They worked the Keith and Proctor, Poli and Fox, and Theatre Owners Booking Association (TOBA) circuits, as well as most theatrical houses. They were truly successful by 1910, occasionally reconfiguring themselves so that several sisters could work independently. Known for their talent and beauty, "These bright, pretty mulatto girls . . . have wonderful voices. . . . The sisters play banjo and sing coon songs with a smack of the original flavor. Their costuming is elegant; their manner is graceful and their appearance striking in a degree as they are unusually handsome," wrote one Alabama reviewer early in their careers.⁴⁹ Often billed as a "coon" act, the Whitmans added boy dancers Willie Robinson and "Pops" Whitman (Alice's son) in the '20s; the latter was billed as a child prodigy. A "Befoh De Wah" act was reviewed in 1907; in it, the Whitmans seem to have parodied the plantation scenes so necessary to early black minstrelsy.⁵⁰ At this point in vaudeville, the Whitmans were credited with giving the audience a performance "quite different from what we have learned to expect when a Negro turn is announced."⁵¹

The information about Alberta Whitman is sketchy beyond the facts of the company as a whole. According to photos, she seems to have performed duets with her sister Alice in the clothes of a well-dressed black man of the period, complete with hat and cane. Unlike the rest of the Whitmans, I have found no documentation regarding what Alberta did after the company broke up in the 1930s. Mabel died in 1942, Essie in 1963, Alberta in 1964, and Alice in the 1970s.⁵²

Alberta Whitman is one of the most intriguing examples of male impersonators. In figure 9.4, she presses herself against her flapper-costumed sister Alice on the right side of the flyer; on the left side, also with Alice, she sits in a tuxedo with her legs open and her arms spread confidently, while Alice crosses her legs and clasps her hands on top of them. This flyer, from 1928, was augmented by someone who typed, "Bert Whitman, dresses in Man's Suit. Bert Whitman is a woman." Bert Whitman presented her audiences an African American woman who broke out of the stereotypes of both African American men, as caricatured by the dandy, and women, as demonstrated by the white female impersonators; she developed a performance of color and

gender that directly inverted her white male predecessors' performances of color and gender.

Primary or even secondary material on other male impersonators is even more elusive than that on Alberta Whitman, but what exists is equally interesting. Florence Hines was called the American Vesta Tilley, after the popular British male impersonator.⁵³ A review of Richards and Pringle-Rusco and Holland's *Big Minstrel Festival* in 1899 remarked: "As a male impersonator, Miss Hines is fine."⁵⁴ Hines also performed in *The Creole Show* (1890–1897). The format was similar to a minstrel show, and Hines, as a male impersonator, was the interlocutor, surrounded by women in a semicircle (pre-dating a similar performance by Aida Overton Walker and the Porto Rico Girls discussed later in this essay).⁵⁵ At one time, Hines also played one of three Conversationalists, who were dressed in male attire.⁵⁶ In *The Ghost Walks: A Chronological History of Blacks in Show Business, 1865–1910*, Henry T. Sampson lists Hines in many shows through the teens and twenties, but I have been unable to find any additional biographical data on her.

Another African American woman who performed male impersonation was Ida Forsythe. Forsythe (b.1883–d.early 1980s) was known for two roles during her career: Topsy (she was billed as Topsy throughout her tour of Europe in 1906–1914) and as a Russian dancer.⁵⁷ Her big break had happened in 1899, when she was billed with the Black Patti troupe, with which she appeared in *Dreamland* as "Kaffir queen, dressed in a shade of green" and was reviewed as having "danced 'Maiden of Timbuctoo,' quite as fascinating as ever."⁵⁸ She also worked with The Smart Set in 1903 and had a solo in Will Marion Cook's *The Southerners* (1904). Apparently, she began to find difficulty working in the teens and twenties, possibly because stage work was often reserved for light-skinned women. Therefore, she took a job as Sophie Tucker's maid in 1920–1922 and was paid \$5 a week. In 1927, Forsythe again worked on the TOBA circuit with Bessie Smith. One of her last known jobs in show business was a role in Oscar Micheaux's *The Underworld* (1935).⁵⁹ As a member of the Negro Actors Guild's executive board, Forsythe remained active beyond her years as a performer.⁶⁰ The most common photo of Ida Forsythe, included in Milton Meltzer and Langston Hughes's black entertainment book, sports a caption stating that she taught Jerome Robbins how to choreograph the cakewalk.⁶¹ The photo features her in male costume similar to that worn by Alberta Whitman. And, like Bert Whitman, Forsythe exudes male-associated confidence in her photo, with a cane on her arm and her legs spread wide.

Aida Overton Walker (also known as Ada Overton) was one of the greatest performers to bridge the performance gap between black minstrelsy and vaudeville. Unlike the previously mentioned African American male impersonators, there have been several excellent articles written exclusively on Walker and her signature dance, the cakewalk.⁶² Walker began her career with the concert singer Sissieretta Jones, known as the Black Patti, and her Troubadours. She met George Walker, her future husband, and his comedy

partner, Bert Williams, when they all posed for photographs for a trade card sponsored by the American Tobacco Company in 1898. Williams and Walker were pioneers in introducing ragtime to their vaudeville work, and Aida Overton helped them introduce the cakewalk, a dance reminiscent of slave mockery of white society, which was then used by the white minstrels in their frenetic walkarounds.⁶³ During her short lifetime, Aida Overton Walker became the principal delineator of the cakewalk, but she also was responsible for all of the choreography of the Williams and Walker revues. As a result, she contributed to the changeover from the "coon" show to black musical revues, as dance was as integral to the work of Williams and Walker as was the music and comedy.⁶⁴

An exceptional example of male impersonation was the pinch-hitting role performed by Aida Overton Walker upon the advanced illness of her husband George Walker, during the extended run of *Bandanna Land* (1907–1909). Centered around the character of a minstrel show player named Skunkton Bowser (played by Williams) and his partner, Bud Jenkins (played by Walker), *Bandanna Land* featured routines similar to minstrelsy interlocutor and endmen setups and a cakewalk as well. This old minstrelsy material was reconfigured by Williams, Walker, Aida Overton Walker, Jesse Shipp, Alex Rogers, and Will Marion Cook.⁶⁵ In February 1909, Walker began stuttering and forgetting his lines, symptoms of his illness of syphilis. Aida Overton Walker had prepared for this moment by practicing George's role in costume, spawning several cartoons. Walker never saw his wife perform "Bon Bon Buddy," his signature song.⁶⁶

After Walker's death in 1911, Aida Overton Walker mostly worked as a choreographer, but sometimes she continued to impersonate males. At a 1913 benefit, she appeared with the Porto Rico Girls and the Happy Girls:

As a fitting finale, Miss Walker, in male attire, rendered several old favorite selections, reinforced by the female members of the Porto Rico Girls and the Happy Girls act. When the curtain descended, Miss Walker stood out in bold relief, with the girls forming an effective background. The picture was a pretty one.⁶⁷

As with the male impersonation of Florence Hines in *The Creole Show*, Aida Overton Walker is surrounded in this performance by African American women. The African American woman on stage, therefore, was marked as *either* male (Walker) or female (the Happy Girls). Black femaleness was malleable, not fixed or contained.

It is certainly possible, given the proliferation of black male impersonators in vaudeville, that these women were deftly performing one of many stock roles. Of course, that could also be said for the female impersonators in white minstrelsy. African American male impersonators inverted a theatrical playing out of dominance, turning over and around the assertion of power by the white male. They challenged the gendered metaphor that they inherited from white minstrelsy on a small but significant scale. The importance of their challenge is related to the performances of white male impersonators in

British vaudeville such as Vesta Tilley, Annie Hindle, Ella Wesner, Blanche Selwyn, and Bessie Bonehill,⁶⁸ who reconstituted women's bodies and marked them as almost male, as opposed to hyperfeminine. Also, when discussing male impersonation in black minstrelsy and vaudeville, it is important to consider the practical matter of the staging and material. African American female minstrels may have portrayed African American males for practical reasons based in available personnel. The Whitman Sisters often staged plantation scenes, as were popular in the late days of minstrelsy, and Alberta may have chosen to portray a male to round out the domestic drama. However, once the company enlarged, Alberta continued to play male characters, even though the company included grown men and boys. Florence Hines seems to have chosen to perform her male impersonation throughout her long career, and Ida Forsythe must have done male impersonation at least once, according to pictorial documentation. And, as has been stated, Aida Overton Walker donned male attire in performance even when she was no longer substituting for her husband.

Unfortunately, any legacy left by the male impersonator in African American minstrelsy and vaudeville is not as prevalent as white minstrelsy's tragic mulatta or the infantile black man. The theatrical legacy that minstrelsy has left continues to require that the woman on stage—especially the black woman—carry the fantasies of the social order. However, there have been African American women performers who have taken on the act of double inversion—restaging the bodies of the African American woman and man through male impersonation. Consider Josephine Baker, who, in one famous photograph, is tuxedoed, with top hat firmly and attractively placed to complement her smile. In Phyllis Rose's biography of Baker, the caption attached to this picture is "No more bananas." Rose refers to Baker's famous dance, in which the costume consisted solely of a skirt made of bananas,⁶⁹ and she acknowledges in this caption a legacy of the African American male impersonators. Baker, like her forebears, chose to approach her sexuality on her own terms, reforming and expanding the potential of her image through her body beyond what the audience expected of her as an African American woman on the popular stage.

If we return now to the historical moment of *Jolly Joe's Lady Minstrels*, we can see that, at the same time that this and many other amateur minstrel guides were defining for readers how to "be black" by speaking in a nonsensical dialect and by wearing fright wigs and burnt cork make-up, African American minstrels were showing audiences that minstrelsy was just a show, a pretense, a *performance* of color and gender rather than a presence of African American culture, even when performed by African Americans. White minstrelsy came close to defining how the minstrelized black body should sound and appear, but it did not succeed in its latent desire to contain and constrict. This attempt to define the African American staged black Other was thwarted by the nuanced, rebellious, skilled, and, in the case of the African American male and female impersonators, doubly inverted performances of restaging. Ultimately, what African American minstrels created was a new form of

theater based in the skills of the performers, not in their ability to conform to stereotypes.

NOTES

1. Mrs. H. M. Silsbee and Mrs. J. B. Horne, *Jolly Joe's Lady Minstrels: Selections for the "Sisters"* (Boston: Walter H. Baker, 1893), 7.

2. Ibid., cover.

3. For the purposes of this chapter, *blackface minstrelsy* or *minstrelsy* is minstrelsy performed by either whites or African Americans. *White minstrelsy* is minstrelsy performed by whites, and *black minstrelsy* is minstrelsy performed by African Americans.

4. Frank Dumont, ed., *The Witmark Amateur Minstrel Guide and Burnt Cork Encyclopedia* (Chicago: M. Witmark, 1899), and Anon., *The Boys of New York End Men's Joke Book* (New York: Frank Tousey, 1902). For an in-depth discussion of the social values contained in minstrel guides and other nineteenth- and twentieth-century publications, see Brooks McNamara, "For Laughing Purposes Only": The Literature of American Popular Entertainment," in *The American Stage: Social and Economic Issues from the Colonial Period to the Present*, ed. Ron Engle and Tice L. Miller (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 141–158.

5. Homi Bhabha, "The Other Question: Stereotype, Discrimination and the Discourse of Colonialism," in Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 66–84.

6. Sigmund Freud, "Jokes, Dreams and the Unconscious," in *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, trans. James Strachey (New York: Norton, 1960), 179.

7. W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, in *Three Negro Classics*, ed. John Hope Franklin (New York: Avon, 1965), 221.

8. In the early twentieth century, Franz Boas put an end to the notion that there exists racial hierarchy, noting that every race has its own variance of body types, languages, and cultural production. See Roger Sanjek, "The Enduring Inequalities of Race," in *Race*, ed. Steven Gregory and Roger Sanjek, (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1994), 1–17.

9. See Robert C. Toll, "Social Commentary in Late Nineteenth-Century White Minstrelsy," in Toll, *Blackening Up: The Minstrel Show in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), reprinted in *Inside the Minstrel Mask: Readings in Nineteenth-Century Blackface Minstrelsy*, ed. Annemarie Bean, James V. Hatch, and Brooks McNamara (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1996), 86–110.

10. Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 160.

11. The lyrics printed are from 1842, according to Lott 160. Lott also excerpts an 1848 version (160). An 1843 version of "Miss Lucy Long" appears in Hans Nathan, "The Performance of the Virginia Minstrels," in *Dan Emmett and the Rise of Negro Minstrelsy* (Oklahoma City: University of Oklahoma Press, 1962), reprinted in Bean et al. 38–39. Robert B. Winans notes the full lyrics of the 1842 version excerpted by Lott in his article "Early Minstrel Show Music, 1843–1852," in *Musical Theatre in America: Papers and Proceedings of the Conference on Musical Theatre in America*, ed. Glen Loney (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1984), reprinted in Bean et al. 151.

12. Lott 160.

13. Laurence Senelick, "Boys and Girls Together: Subcultural Origins of Glamour Drag and Male Impersonation on the Nineteenth-Century Stage," in *Crossing the Stage: Controversies on Cross-Dressing*, ed. Lesley Ferris (London: Routledge, 1993), 90.

14. The novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was adapted for the stage in hundreds of productions across the United States and around the world from the mid-1850s to the turn of the century. See Thomas Riis, "The Music and Musicians in Nineteenth-Century Productions of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*," in *American Music* 4, no. 3 (Fall 1986): 268–286.

15. Laurence Hutton, *Curiosities of the American Stage* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1891), 157. For a further description of female impersonation in American white minstrelsy, see Annemarie Bean, "Transgressing the Gender Divide: The Female Impersonator in Nineteenth-Century Blackface Minstrelsy," in Bean et al. 245–256.

16. Joe Laurie, Jr., *Vaudeville: From the Honky-Tonks to the Palace* (New York: Henry Holt, 1953), 93.

17. Susan Gubar, *Racechanges: White Skin, Black Face in American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 45.

18. Ibid., 5.

19. "Early minstrelsy" is defined from the purported (as opposed to documented) first minstrelsy performance of "Jumpin' Jim Crow" by T. D. Rice c. 1828 to the beginning of the Civil War in 1860. "Late minstrelsy" is defined as post-Civil War minstrelsy. Both definitions are mine, culled from various sources, such as Lott, and Toll.

20. See Marian Hannah Winter, "Juba and American Minstrelsy," *Dance Index* 6 (1947), reprinted in Bean et al. 223–244; Eileen Southern, *The Music of Black Americans* (New York: Norton, 1971), 4–24, 100–104, 259–270; Southern, "The Georgia Minstrels: The Early Years," *Inter-American Music Review* 10, no. 2 (1989), reprinted in Bean et al. 163–175; Winans, 141–162; Mel Watkins, "Slavery," in *Watkins, On the Real Side: Laughing, Lying, and Signifying—: The Underground Tradition of African-American Humor* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994), 45–79; and Richard Kislán, *Hoofing on Broadway* (New York: Prentice Hall, 1987), 12–23.

21. *New York Clipper* (31 July 1858): n.p.

22. Toll 195; Southern, *Music of Black Americans*, 259.

23. Tom Fletcher, *100 Years of the Negro in Show Business* (New York: Burdige, 1954), 53.

24. Toll 219.

25. Thomas Riis, *Just before Jazz: Black Musical Theatre in New York, 1890–1915* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1989), 6.

26. James Weldon Johnson, *Black Manhattan* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1991), 93.

27. John Graziano, "Sentimental Songs, Rags, and Transformations: The Emergence of the Black Musical, 1895–1910," unpublished manuscript, 211, possession of the author.

28. *New York Globe* (3 May 1884): n.p.

29. Toll 205.

30. Riis 7–8.

31. Ibid., 9–10.

32. Ibid., 10.

33. Toll 251.

34. Toll 195–233; Henry T. Sampson, *Blacks in Blackface: A Sourcebook on Early Musical Shows* (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow, 1980), 1–20; Watkins 104–133; Riis 3–28; Johnson 94–125; and Southern, *Music of Black Americans*, 259–270.

35. Esther Newton, *Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 5.

36. Most of the evidence I have found on Tribble is cited by Henry T. Sampson, *The Ghost Walks: A Chronological History of Blacks in Show Business, 1865-1910* (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press), 1988, and Sampson, *Black in Blackface*. However, serious questions have been raised as to the accuracy of Sampson's newspaper and broadside citations in terms of dates and issues. Wherever possible, I have double-checked Sampson's data; however, given the scope of his research, this has not always been feasible. The questioning of Sampson's work is not about the quotes, which are probably accurate, but rather about exact dates and locations.

37. Sampson, *Blacks in Blackface*, 280.

38. Sampson, *The Ghost Walks*, 434.

39. Ibid.

40. Ibid., 394.

41. Riis 134.

42. Sampson, *The Ghost Walks*, 363.

43. Ibid., 394.

44. Bernard Peterson, Jr., *A Century of Musicals in Black and White* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1993), 282.

45. Sampson, *Blacks in Blackface*, 436.

46. Watkins 20-21; 523-525.

47. Sampson, *Blacks in Blackface*, 4.

48. *New York Clipper* (12 Feb. 1910).

49. Sampson, *The Ghost Walks*, 245.

50. Ibid., 386.

51. Ibid., 445.

52. Eileen Southern, *Biographical Dictionary of Afro-American and African Musicians* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1982), 401.

53. Laurence Senelick, "The Evolution of the Male Impersonator on the Nineteenth-Century Popular Stage," *Essays in Theatre* 1, no. 1 (1982): 39-40.

54. Sampson, *The Ghost Walks*, 183.

55. Riis 12.

56. Peterson 136.

57. Fletcher 177; Sampson, *Blacks in Blackface*, 364.

58. Sampson, *The Ghost Walks*, 288.

59. Sampson, *Blacks in Blackface*, 366.

60. Mary Mace Spradling, *In Black and White: Supplement* (Detroit: Gale Research, 1985), 162.

61. Langston Hughes and Milton Meltzer, *Black Magic: A Pictorial History of the Negro in American Entertainment* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1967), 73.

62. See Richard Newman, "The Brightest Star: Aida Overton Walker in the Age of Ragtime and Cakewalk," *Prospects: An Annual of American Cultural Studies* 18 (1993): 465-481; and David Krasner, "Rewriting the Body: Aida Overton Walker and the Social Formation of Cakewalking," *Theatre Survey* 37, no. 2 (Nov. 1996): 67-92.

63. Newman 466-467.

64. Riis 113-124.

65. Ibid., 117.

66. Ann Charters, *Nobody: The Story of Bert Williams* (New York: Macmillan, 1970), 123. Aida Walker began performing her husband's role in *Bandanna Land* in

early 1909, during the Williams and Walker Company's second New England tour. George Walker grew ill during the tour and never recovered. He died in 1911. Aida performed "Bon-Bon Buddy" for approximately three months, from February to April.

67. Eric Ledell Smith, *Bert Williams: A Biography of the Pioneer Black Comedian* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 1992), 165-166.

68. Senelick, "Evolution of the Male Impersonator," 30-44.

69. Phyllis Rose, *Jazz Cleopatra: Josephine Baker in Her Time* (New York: Doubleday, 1989), 97.