

Restructuring Respectability, Gender, and Power: Aida Overton Walker Performs a Black Feminist Resistance

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From the beginning of her onstage career in 1897—just thirty-two years after the end of slavery—to her premature death in 1914, Aida Overton Walker was a vaudeville performer engaged in a campaign to restructure and re-present how African Americans, particularly black women in popular theater, were perceived by both black and white society.¹ A *de facto* third principal of the famous minstrel and vaudeville team known as Williams and Walker (the partnership of Bert Williams and George Walker), Overton Walker was vital to the theatrical performance company's success. Not only was she married to George; she was the company's leading lady, principal choreographer, and creative director. Moreover and most importantly, Overton Walker fervently articulated her brand of racial uplift while simultaneously executing the right to choose the theater as a profession at a time when black women were expected to embody “respectable” positions inside the home as housewives and mothers or, if outside the home, only as dressmakers, stenographers, or domestics (see *Figure 1*).² Overton Walker answered a call from within to pursue a more lucrative and “broadminded” avocation—one completely outside the realms of servitude or domesticity. She urged other black women to follow their “artistic yearnings” and choose the stage as a profession.³ Her actions as quests for gender equality and racial respectability—or as they are referred to in this article, feminism and racial uplift—are understudied, and are presented here as forms of transnational black resistance to the status quo.

Figure 1. Hall Studios, New York. George Walker, Bert Williams, and Aida Overton Walker onstage in *Bandanna Land*, 1905. Courtesy of New York Public Library, Billy Rose Theatre Collection.



The foundation of Overton Walker's transnational black resistance resided in her complete embodiment of racial uplift, concretized through a tripartite strategy that encompassed entertaining and attracting the white upper classes on both sides of the Atlantic; re-presenting the milieu of the African continent beyond the negative tropes of minstrelsy while embracing and authentically visualizing her cultural ancestry onstage; and demonstratively rendering—both at home and abroad—the theater as a respectable profession for African American women despite the black elite's thoughts to the contrary.

Thus this essay's overarching aim is to examine Overton Walker's onstage and offstage performances of transnational resistance as manifested through her fearless enunciation of the concepts of racial uplift, mediated through a feminist position—or a belief in the equality between men and women. During the early twentieth century, African American women were typically limited in their methods of participation for creating positive black images. Overton Walker clearly made decisions that opposed the prevailing ideas of the time held by respected women of the black elite. For example one of these venerable women, Margaret James Murray Washington (writing

under the name Mrs. Booker T. Washington) penned the following in 1895: “We are a race of servants, not in the lowest sense but in the highest and purest sense Thus it is with the struggle to uplift the negro woman there is a starting-point, and this I believe to be the home.”⁴ Patriarchal domination confined black women’s respectable professions to those of schoolteacher, housewife, or domestic.

Yet Overton Walker’s goal to restructure and re-present these perceptions of black women—beyond the limited options available—reflected her embodied pursuit of a strategy similar to the one embraced by the educated, middle-class, African American elite to deliver “respectable” images of black people while also promoting “exemplary behavior by blacks.”⁵ Extending well beyond the vocations prescribed for black women, Overton Walker’s contribution materialized through her dramatic and comedic performances, as well as her choreography and dance skills. A reexamination of her oeuvre therefore allows us to consider Overton Walker explicitly as a woman countering the black male elite’s domination of the ideology of racial respectability through her performances on the vaudeville stage. At this early twentieth-century moment Overton Walker’s various forms of transnational resistance were made evident via her achievements as a black female performer in the midst of Jim Crow America. She demonstrated entrepreneurship by marketing herself as the authority on instruction in the cakewalk; she was a role model who proselytized the theater as a worthy and respectable profession for intelligent and talented black women;⁶ and as the choreographer and creative director for all of the Williams and Walker productions, she broke racial barriers in the field of modern dance.

In early twentieth-century America, the conceptual framework to “uplift the race” stemmed from the racist social climate that denied the black population access to the legal and economic equality enjoyed by white people. This oppressive regime—a continuation of Jim Crow white supremacy—also culturally misrepresented blacks in the visual landscape through minstrelsy and its negative stereotypes. As a result, educated blacks took it upon themselves to dictate how to represent their race. Scholar, historian, and professor Kevin K. Gaines eloquently expresses the black intelligentsia’s directives on cultural representation: “black opinion leaders deemed the promotion of bourgeois morality, patriarchal authority, and a culture of self-improvement, both among blacks and outward, to the white world, as necessary to their recognition, enfranchisement and survival as a class.”⁷ This unilateral decision—imposing pre-determined methods that African Americans could employ to engage in racial uplift work—was itself elitist and an act of supremacy by a specific group of black people within the black race. And as the majority of these self-appointed leaders were male, it was also a sexist move steeped in black patriarchy.⁸

Overton Walker responded directly to the black elite’s sentiments on respectability—particularly regarding her choice of a profession—in a 1905 article for *Colored Men and Women On the Stage*: “I am aware of the fact that many well meaning people dislike Stage life, especially our women. On this point I would say, a woman does not lose her dignity today—as used to be the case—when she enters upon Stage

life. In claiming Stage life as a profession, the emphasis should not be put upon the avocation, but rather upon the purpose for which you make the choice.”⁹ Overton Walker’s use of the word “purpose” speaks to her right and consciousness as a free black woman to choose stage life. Even though she refers to it as an “avocation” or calling, the act of choosing it indicates independent thought, one of the signs of the “new woman” at a time when American society aimed to limit women’s social, political, and economic freedom via defining them as second-class citizens, obstructing their right to vote, and restricting their employment prospects outside the home.

This was a complex time in the American cultural structure. Racism in the early 1900s worked in tandem with blackface minstrelsy, which presented derogatory and demeaning depictions of African Americans and reinforced white supremacy. Jim Crow laws restricted black people’s economic advancement, while the white hegemonic system made it difficult for blacks to grow businesses, despite an economic boom flourishing all around them. The marketing of a “real” or authentic blackness emerged in response to this climate, which largely circumscribed entrepreneurship for black people, limiting them mainly to manual labor or menial positions. In the midst of these restrictions, popular theater aimed at white and black audiences became available to black artists as a market. For the purposes of economic empowerment, black entertainers in the early 1900s established themselves as real or authentic purveyors of African American cultural expression, distinguishing their acts from the imitative techniques of white minstrels.



Figure 2. “The Real ‘Coon’ on the American Stage,” Theatre Magazine 6, no. 59, January 1906.

Marketing themselves as performers who possessed the ability to disseminate and define a true black culture was an astute fiscal strategy as well as a political one, and as cunning, clever, creative businesspeople Aida’s and George’s intent from the start was to create the types of shows that they wanted to produce (Bert Williams did not enjoy the business side of entertainment and left those decisions to George). The

Williams and Walker Company was one of the first all-black minstrel and vaudeville revues to grace New York's Broadway stages. Whereas the prevalent modes of minstrelsy visually announced that black people were lesser, or subaltern to white people, the Williams and Walker performances countered that pronouncement and evoked a subversive tone, telegraphing respect for the African American race.¹⁰ Through her artistic direction of the company's routines and her focus on the chaste comportment and respectability of the female cast members, Overton Walker was vital to the company's artistic and socially responsible reputation. In his book *The Last Darky: Bert Williams, Black-on-Black Minstrelsy, and the African Diaspora*, the cultural theorist, scholar, and professor Louis Chude-Sokei comments on Overton Walker's immeasurable value to the company's operation, and how she consequently became as famous as her male partners.¹¹

The equal notoriety that she achieved through her performances was also evident in the imagery she and the company used to promote themselves. For example, in 1906, George Walker authored an article for *Theatre Magazine* in which he effusively extolled the talents of African American performers, and in particular Williams and Walker's ability to be witnessed by American audiences. He lists the names of many black men of the theater: Will Marion Cook, Paul Laurence Dunbar, Bob Cole, Billy Johnson, Jesse A. Shipp, and Alex Rogers. Not once does he mention his talented wife, but her image is included in the article along with George's and Bert's, and it is significantly larger than theirs (see *Figure 2*). The image is captioned "Ada Overton Walker. One of the most graceful and agile colored dancers on the stage," while the male principals' photos are stamped underneath with their names only.¹² In another instance, Overton Walker is given equal billing in name as well as image in this 1905 triptych of the trio depicted in an advertisement for *Vanity Fair* (see *Figure 3*). Bert and George are the "Two Real Coons," and Aida is strategically situated between them. Although the word "coon" was derogatory, used by both white and black society (including the theater community) to describe southern African Americans recently liberated from the plantation, Williams and Walker proudly adopted the moniker to differentiate themselves from white minstrel performers. In George Walker's own words: "We thought that as there seemed to be a great demand for black faces onstage, we would do all we could to get what we felt belonged to us by the laws of nature. We finally decided that as white men with black faces were billing themselves 'coons,' Williams and Walker would do well to bill themselves the 'Two Real Coons,' and so we did. Our bills attracted the attention of managers, and gradually we made our way in."¹³

Even though Walker's statement suggests that his aim was solely marketability, as an astute and ambitious player he was well aware of the benefits of his visibility as a dark-skinned African American onstage. Like Aida, George was also concerned with racial uplift as exemplified in his quote from the December 1908 issue of the *New York Age*, one of the leading African American repositories for news and opinion: "Because we feel that, in a degree, we represent the race ... every hair's breadth of achievement

we make is to its credit. For first, last, and all the time, we are Negroes.”¹⁴ Williams and Walker’s minstrelsy was performed with the aim to bring humanity to the darky coon character. Instead of the insidious lampooning enacted by white actors in burnt cork, Williams’s biographer Camille F. Forbes clarifies that Williams, while working within the strict parameters of blackface minstrelsy, “rearticulate[ed] and refin[ed] the Jim Crow stereotype, resolutely imbuing it with humanity, dignity, and individuality.”¹⁵



Figure 3. Bert Williams, Aida Overton Walker, and George Walker, advertisement in *Vanity Fair*, 1905. Courtesy of New York Public Library, Billy Rose Theatre Division, Theater Collection Clipping File.

The triptych printed in *Vanity Fair* also illustrates Overton Walker’s tendency toward high drama rather than the comedic tropes of minstrelsy (see Figure 3). Williams wears his signature blackface, exaggerated painted-on white lips, and a goofy expression, while a little hat clings to the side of his head. Walker’s big toothy grin beams so brightly that it almost eclipses his heavily applied makeup. He wears a floppy oversize hat and loose-fitting clothes, tropes of the southern coon. In contrast, Overton Walker is pictured in three-quarter profile striking a dancer’s pose, her shoulders relaxed and her head held high. Her eyes cut a side glance, focused on the camera. Unlike her partners, she offers no smile, whether painted-on or real. Her costume is elegant with sequins and ribbons.

With Overton Walker as their creative director Williams and Walker redefined blackface minstrelsy. They subverted the derogatory genre and presented an alternate version by leaving the plantation and returning to their ancestral motherland. They employed transnational resistance and evinced cultural agency by inserting African themes in their musicals, as George Walker had promised he would, given the opportunity: “We were not long in deciding that if we ever reached the point of having a show of our own, we would delineate and feature native African characters as far as

we could, and still remain American, and make our acting interesting and entertaining to American audiences.”¹⁶ The ridiculing tactics made popular by traditional minstrelsy were replaced with a new type of revue on the public stage in productions such as *Senegambian Carnival* (1898), *In Dahomey* (1902–05) and *Abyssinia* (1905–07), musicals whose titles, characters, and dance routines directly referenced the African continent.



SCENE FROM ACT II, OF "IN DAHOMEY," AT THE NEW YORK. ONE OF THE SEASON'S NOVELTIES, IN WHICH WILLIAMS AND WALKER HAVE MADE A HIT.

Figure 4. Photographer unknown. Cast of *In Dahomey*, 1902. Courtesy of New York Public Library, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Helen Armstead-Johnson Theater Photograph Collection.

In this way, the Williams and Walker team acknowledged the complexities of their social environment and actively created solutions to the problem of white performers misrepresenting and minstrelizing black culture. Instead of continuing to perpetuate the indolent darky coon roles, the Williams and Walker Company provided their characters and productions with dignity by situating them on the African continent while simultaneously acknowledging and referencing the cast's cultural ancestry. It is interesting to note that while George and Aida clearly identified with their African heritage, they never actually traveled to the continent; theirs was an imagined, Americanized version of African culture. Overton Walker biographer Richard Newman notes that these "African motifs, however comic, were deliberate attempts on George Walker's part to replace American darky elements with what he called 'native African characteristics.'"¹⁷ In *Senegambian Carnival*, *In Dahomey*, and *Abyssinia*, Overton Walker choreographed routines with African design elements. Not conforming in any way to the expected coon-type vocabulary or an American southern vernacular, her dance arrangements evoked an empowered position; she abandoned minstrelsy and embraced modernity. In her own words, "unless we learn the lessons of self appreciation and practice it, we shall spend our lives imitating other people and depreciating ourselves."¹⁸ In this essay, "modernity" marks a departure from the past and its limits as dictated by tradition. Modern artists and performers created new movements that were connected to notions of the authentic, where authenticity, or realness, was seen as the opposite of imitation or minstrelsy.

In *Senegambian Carnival*, created by Will Marion Cook and Paul Laurence Dunbar, Overton Walker's group of dancers made up the chorus. It is speculated that

this was the “first occasion that an African America woman was the dance director of a Broadway show.”¹⁹ Performance scholar and cultural historian David Krasner observes that Overton Walker’s choreography “represented an act of empowerment; despite the exploitatively sexual overtones of dancing at the time, many black women fought against stereotyping, attempting to maintain their creativity and self-expression. Black women dancers were forced to maneuver through narrowly prescribed paths, yet despite restrictions, some still managed to carve out innovative careers.”²⁰ Her choreography in *Senegambian Carnival* provides yet another example of Overton Walker’s transnational resistance performed through her insistence in presenting a respectable chorus of dancers on the vaudeville stage instead of the stereotyped troupe of oversexualized black female bodies. Overton Walker did not just carve out a career for herself; she laid the solid foundations for a genre upon which future African American female modern dance choreographers such as Katherine Dunham and Pearl Primus would build and innovate.²¹

Further evidence of Williams and Walker’s attempts to move away from coon-type minstrelsy is exemplified by the words of the prominent theater critic from the *New York American*, Alan Dale. In a 1906 article Dale commented that *Abyssinia* “is a coon show in name only; in reality, it was a most serious near-grand opera for which we were totally unprepared.”²² Once again in *Abyssinia*, Overton Walker’s presence was asserted through her creation, choreography, and artistic direction of the show’s dances, including her appearance with the Nine Abyssinian Maids.²³ The Williams and Walker Company—with Overton Walker’s significant contribution—positioned themselves as part of this new wave of performers who brought a modern take on African American showmanship to the vaudeville stage. Theirs was a departure from traditional minstrelsy as illustrated by the image of the cast of *In Dahomey* (see Figure 4). It shows a splendid array of elegantly costumed African American performers, who could not look more different from white artists in blackface (see Figure 5).

The Williams and Walker Company deployed the tropes of cultural authenticity embodied in song, dance, and humor in order to define their version of performing “real blackness” on the vaudeville stage. Because white actors were mimicking other white performers satirizing the darky coon, their rendition of blackface minstrelsy was an act of imitation thrice over, a re-creation of an inherited stereotype. In contrast, Krasner notes, “Williams and Walker [and a few of their peers in the entertainment business] displayed throughout their writings and actions an acute awareness of the ‘real’ as a cultural signifier and marketing tool.”²⁴ Overton Walker “contributed to the creation of a revised American realism ... [that] countered hegemonic and racist depictions [of blacks] by exploiting the desire for the real among whites.”²⁵ The Williams and Walker Company’s version of onstage blackness was, moreover, subversive. Its coded messages contradicted minstrelsy and were aimed at and interpreted by black audiences while remaining illegible to white ones. For example: Williams and Walker often downplayed the stereotyped southern coon dialect and accentuated the clever and witty repartee between the main characters—Jim Crow (Williams) and Zip Coon (Walker). Traditional roles called for Jim Crow to be the

indolent southern ducky and Zip Coon the citified northern Negro speaking in malapropisms, but Williams and Walker dispensed with the common lampooning, presenting their double-conscious interpretations instead.



Figure 5. Minstrel troupe in blackface with musical instruments, 1910. <http://scaa.usask.ca/gallery/drama/images/LH3782.jpg>.

This is a paradoxical situation. Real or authentic blackness was offered as an immersive experience that involved the haptic as well as the visual senses. Krasner explains that “[t]he ‘realness’ had to be transferable; in other words, whites not only had to observe ‘real’ blackness, they had to experience it as well. ‘Blackness’ had to be made marketable, a species not only in the showcase window ... but something a buyer might sensuously ‘adorn.’”²⁶ Overton Walker and her cohort took advantage of the demand for black realness and made black cultural expression available to their white society patrons at the same time that they were entertaining and delivering the message to their black audiences that minstrelsy could not define them. A central vehicle for this complex exchange was the cakewalk, a dance craze that took hold in the United States and Europe at the turn of the twentieth century (see Figure 6).

Both black and white Americans were swept up in the cakewalk frenzy; the dance was, as Krasner writes, a way in which the white elite went about “othering, without disrupting white notions of cultural behavior.... Cultural identification with blacks ... supplied motivation for whites eager to explore black cultural experiences as an excavation into the exotic world of what they thought was ... the inferior, but often fascinating, Other.”²⁷ These white participants explored exoticism by sampling a signifier of black culture, the cakewalk, as taught by a black instructor, Overton Walker.



Figure 6.
Photographer
unknown. Aida
Overton Walker and
George Walker
cakewalk in *In
Dahomey*. *The Tatler*
(London), no. 98,
May 13, 1903.

In the early 1900s, a mostly urban white nouveau riche sought to learn the cakewalk as a way to define their up-to-dateness and to escape from tradition. Such definition was important because emerging middle- and upper-class white Americans had obtained their social status through money, not birthright.²⁸ Krasner states: “For the new middle and upper classes, wealth was replacing lineage ... [T]he ‘formerly exclusive corridors’ of aristocracy by birth were being usurped at the turn of the century by ‘a conglomerate host that has climbed up from the lowlands of mediocrity,’ thereby acquiring social distinction ‘solely through the expenditure of wealth.’”²⁹ The cakewalk was a commodity that could be bought and sold, and learning the cakewalk from the “real” or authentic instructor—Overton Walker—became the white elite’s cultural signifier on both sides of the Atlantic.

Overton Walker brought authenticity to performing the cakewalk, and to instructing other performers in the cakewalk, through her knowledge of its African roots and its emergence as a dance conducted by enslaved blacks on the plantation. Many myths surround the origin of the cakewalk. Newman presumes that the dance

developed “when slaves imitated, exaggerated, and in fact satirically mocked and mimicked formal white cotillions.”³⁰ Dating from eighteenth-century France, cotillions were formal dances usually performed on the occasion of the debutante’s introduction to society. Once again, paradoxically under Overton Walker’s tutelage the cakewalk exemplified a series of authenticities and imitations realized by a black female performer who, while revamping and bringing her signature grace to the dance in the 1890s, was imitating white minstrels. Such minstrels, through their inclusion of the cakewalk in their finales were in turn imitating black slaves on the plantation, who themselves were pulling from a West African festival dance while satirically parodying their white master’s formal cotillions (see Figure 7).³¹ Through the process of instructing the “better classes of white people on both sides of the ocean”³² how to cakewalk, and thus integrating into white society, Overton Walker proved that a black female theater professional could make positive contributions to the race, commensurate to if not better than those of respected male professionals.



Figure 7. (top) “The Breakdown,” *Harper’s Weekly*, 1861, depicting the cakewalk as danced by slaves on Southern plantations.

(bottom) US military ball (cotillion), Alabama, 1864.

Overton Walker was the “real, genuine cakewalker.”³³ She branded herself as the authentic person from whom to learn the dance. As a result of her manipulation of the art form, she has been hailed by scholars such as Krasner as contributing to American modernity by transforming the dance from “old-fashioned and vulgar to modern and stylish.”³⁴ Overton Walker was the go-to person for the white upper- and middle-class society to learn the cakewalk, and receiving instruction from her was one way for them to demonstrate social status.³⁵ She had either instructed or been invited to entertain some of the most noted people in high society, including British royalty. In 1903, while touring with *In Dahomey* in London, she privately tutored leading

sophisticates in the art of cakewalking.³⁶ She performed a solo and afterward was granted an audience with King Edward VII, who, famous for his affections for beautiful women, bestowed upon her a diamond brooch.³⁷

Overton Walker's performances for and instructions to the British royalty and the white moneyed class in America exemplify how she used her talents and expertise to bridge the class and cultural divides, as well as engage in methods of transnational resistance to the stereotyped views of the black race in general and black women in particular. On and off the vaudeville stage, she trenchantly applied her performance skills to present a positive public display of her race and her gender. Her work was celebrated by white society, but more importantly, Overton Walker marketed herself as the premier cakewalker while simultaneously inventing an alternative role for black women to embody. She used her performances as tools for promoting herself as well as personifying racial uplift. This is demonstrated in her article in *The Colored American Magazine*, directed at the black American elite: "It has been my good fortune to entertain and instruct, privately, many members of the most select circles—both in this country and abroad—and I can truthfully state that my profession has given me entrée to [white] residences which members of my race in other professions would have a hard task in gaining if ever they did The fact of the matter is this, that we come in contact with more white people in a week than other professional colored people meet in a year and more than some meet in a whole decade."³⁸ In her own words, Overton Walker literally signifies transatlantic transnationalism as she elucidates and informs the black intelligentsia of the access proffered her and her performance colleagues to the exclusive circles of the white elite. Overton Walker was fully aware of the opportunity her position as a performer afforded her to not only integrate white society, but to remind the black intelligentsia that she had accomplished said task. Despite the black elite's negative characterizations of the theater as "unwholesome" and a "threat to racial progress,"³⁹ she emphasizes her contribution to racial respectability by stating twice that her profession engaged with more white people than the other "respected" professions—an association that contributed to uplift because it once again illustrates African Americans performing "exemplary behavior" in the United States and beyond.

During the early twentieth-century, when cultural identity was being redefined and reimaged by both black and white Americans, Overton Walker's performances, cakewalk lessons, and contributions to popular culture magazines elucidated an emerging transnational modernity rooted in African American culture. This modernity departed from the limits dictated by tradition, advancing toward a new movement in which authenticity or realness moved in fluid opposition to imitation. For instance, even though she was deeply entrenched in the era of minstrelsy, Overton Walker never played the minstrel coon nor applied burnt cork—a euphemism for putting on blackface. She was always aware of the power of her visual presence, especially during this time of pervasive racism; onstage, her characters were respectably costumed and offstage her comportment was perpetually impeccable.



Figure 8. White Studio, New York, NY. Portrait of Aida Overton Walker, 1905. Courtesy of New York Public Library Digital Collections, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Photographs and Prints Division.

In a final example, an image from 1905 and the accompanying text once again emblemize Overton Walker's transnational resistance to America's black intelligentsia and white supremacy. Although the portrait offers the perception of an innocent young woman (see Figure 8), the article she authored—addressed specifically to the black elite—says otherwise: “Some of our so-called society people regard the Stage as a place to be ashamed of. Whenever it is my good fortune to meet such

persons, I sympathize with them for I know they are ignorant as to what is really being done in their own behalf by members of their race on the Stage.”⁴⁰ In line with her previously quoted views, Overton Walker clearly articulates the importance of the performance profession’s contribution to racial uplift. Her words are to the point while on the edge of expressing pity for the “so-called” black society’s ignorance.

Wresting away uplift as the sole property of the educated black male sophisticates—and of her two vaudeville partners—substantiated Overton Walker’s agency and feminist pursuits at a time of an emerging American modernity, or to state it plainly, a time of experimentation and exploration of new ways of thinking. Her act of selecting the theater as a profession made Overton Walker a woman exercising choice in response to an oppressive social climate that marginalized black women. She refused to accept the predicament in which the dominant society and black patriarchy tried to place her. Performance scholar, cultural historian, and professor Daphne Brooks contextualizes Overton Walker’s contributions to transnational black female resistance when she states, “Overton Walker self-consciously imagined her work in theatre as a social, political, and aesthetic intervention in American popular culture.”⁴¹ This project articulates Overton Walker’s use of her own visibility and position as a platform to counter negative and stereotypical perceptions of African Americans and black women of the theater. During this time of a developing American modernity, Overton Walker not only performed feminism while contributing to racial uplift. She epitomized both.

Notes

¹ Regarding the capitalization of Black vs. black, I prefer the lower case “b” because it is the format used in the scholarly writing that I admire and have researched. For example, scholars Daphne Brooks, Kevin Gaines, and Louis Chude-Sokei use the lowercase *b* in their writings. An uppercase *B* juxtaposed with a lowercase *w* is not the message I want this essay to convey. It places a distracting emphasis on the spelling of the words when the reader’s focus should be on the true meaning and purpose of the essay.

² Aida Overton Walker, “Opportunities the Stage Offers Intelligent and Talented Women,” *New York Age*, December 24, 1908, 1.

³ Overton Walker, “Opportunities the Stage Offers Intelligent and Talented Women,” 1.

⁴ Mrs. Booker T. Washington, “The New Negro Woman” (1895), in *The American New Woman Revisited: A Reader, 1894–1930*, ed. Martha H. Patterson (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2008), 55–56.

⁵ Kevin K. Gaines, “Racial Uplift Ideology in the Era of ‘the Negro Problem,’” *Freedom’s Story: Teaching African American Literature and History* (National Humanities Center),

accessed October 7, 2015, <http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/tserve/freedom/1865-1917/essays/racialuplift.htm>.

⁶ Overton Walker, "Opportunities the Stage Offers Intelligent and Talented Women," 1.

⁷ Kevin K. Gaines, *Uplifting the Race: Black Leadership, Politics and Culture in the Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 3.

⁸ Gaines, "Racial Uplift Ideology in the Era of 'the Negro Problem.'"

⁹ Aida Overton Walker, "Colored Men and Women On the Stage," *Colored American Magazine* 8–9 1905 (New York: Negro University Press, 1969), 574.

¹⁰ Camille F. Forbes, *Introducing Bert Williams: Burnt Cork, Broadway, and the Story of America's First Black Star* (New York: Basic Civitas, 2008), 22.

¹¹ Louis Chude-Sokei, *The Last Darky: Bert Williams, Black-on-Black Minstrelsy, and the African Diaspora* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 24.

¹² George W. Walker, "The Real 'Coon' on the American Stage," *Theatre Magazine* 6, no. 66 (August 1906): 224, Theatre Magazine Company.

¹³ Walker, "The Real 'Coon' on the American Stage," 224.

¹⁴ George W. Walker, "Bert and Me and Them," *New York Age*, December 24, 1908, 4.

¹⁵ Forbes, *Introducing Bert Williams*, 25.

¹⁶ Walker, "The Real 'Coon' on the American Stage," 225.

¹⁷ Richard Newman, "'The Brightest Star': Aida Overton Walker in the Age of Ragtime and Cakewalk," *Prospects: An Annual of American Cultural Studies* 18 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 470.

¹⁸ Overton Walker, "Colored Men and Women On the Stage," 574.

¹⁹ Frank Cullen, *Vaudeville Old and New: An Encyclopedia of Variety Performers in America*, vol. 2 (New York: Routledge Taylor and Francis Group, 2007), 1209.

²⁰ David Krasner, *A Beautiful Pageant: African American Theatre, Drama, and Performance in the Harlem Renaissance, 1910–1927* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 56.

²¹ Constance Valis Hill, *Tap Dancing America: A Cultural History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 41.

²² Newman, "'The Brightest Star,'" 469.

²³ Newman, "'The Brightest Star,'" 471.

²⁴ David Krasner, “The Real Thing,” in *Beyond Blackface: African American and the Creation of American Popular Culture, 1890–1930*, ed. W. Fitzhugh Brundage (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 99.

²⁵ Krasner, “The Real Thing,” 101.

²⁶ Krasner, “The Real Thing,” 108–09.

²⁷ David Krasner, “Rewriting the Body: Aida Overton Walker and the Social Formation of Cakewalking,” *Theatre Survey* 37, no. 2 (November 1996), 79–81.

²⁸ Krasner, “Rewriting the Body,” 78.

²⁹ Krasner, “Rewriting the Body,” 78.

³⁰ Newman, ““The Brightest Star,”” 467.

³¹ Hill, *Tap Dancing America*, 33.

³² Overton Walker, “Colored Men and Women On the Stage,” 573.

³³ Krasner, “Rewriting the Body,” 80.

³⁴ Krasner, “Rewriting the Body,” 80.

³⁵ Krasner, “The Real Thing,” 109.

³⁶ Jayna Brown, *Babylon Girls: Black Women Performers and the Shaping of the Modern* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 133.

³⁷ Newman, ““The Brightest Star,”” 470.

³⁸ Overton Walker, “Colored Men and Women On the Stage,” 571.

³⁹ Karen Sotiropoulos, *Staging Race: Black Performers in Turn of the Century America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press), 2.

⁴⁰ Overton Walker, “Colored Men and Women On the Stage,” 571.

⁴¹ Daphne A. Brooks, “Divas and Diasporic Consciousness,” in *Bodies in Dissent: Spectacular Performances of Race and Freedom, 1850–1910*, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 283.

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