Restructuring Respectability, Gender, and Power: Aida Overton Walker Performs Modernity

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From the beginning of her onstage career in 1897 to her 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 the popular theatre, were perceived by both black and white society. A de facto member 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. Almost from the beginning, she was their leading lady, principal choreographer, and creative director. Most importantly, Overton Walker was on a mission to execute her articulation of racial uplift while performing her right to choose the theatre as a profession (fig. 1)**.**

This essay's overarching aim is to examine Overton Walker's fearless enunciation of the concepts of racial uplift as meditated through a feminist position—in other words, a belief that men and women are equal. During the early twentieth century, African American women were typically limited in their methods of participation for creating positive black images. Patriarchal domination confined black women's respectable professions to those of schoolteacher, housewife, or domestic. Yet Overton Walker's restructuring and re-presenting of these perceptions of black women reflected her embodied pursuit of the strategy embraced by the educated,

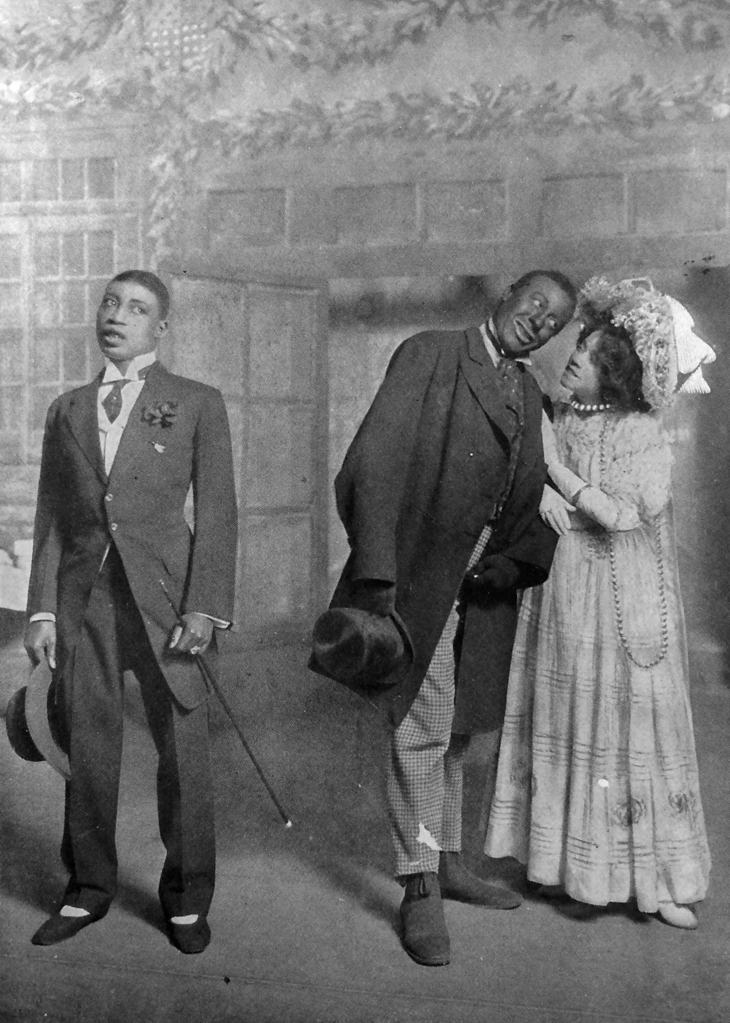

fig. 1 George Walker, Bert Williams, and Aida Overton Walker on stage in a Williams and Walker production, 1905.

middle-class, African American elite, whose calculated goal was to deliver “respectable” images of black people while also promoting “exemplary behavior by blacks.”[1] Extending well beyond the vocations prescribed for black women, Overton Walker’s contribution manifested through her choreography and dance, comedic and dramatic performances. A reexamination of her oeuvre therefore allows us to consider Overton Walker explicitly as a woman countering the black male elite’s domination over the ideology of racial respectability.

1 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.

This was a complex time in American society. 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 to manual labor or menial positions. In the midst of these restrictions, popular theatre aimed at white and black audiences alike 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.

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. The tropes of cultural authenticity embodied in song, dance, and humor were deployed by the Williams and Walker Company in order to define their version of performing “real blackness” on the vaudeville stage. Because white actors were mimicking other white performers lampooning the darky coon, their rendition of blackface minstrelsy was an act of imitation thrice over, a re-creation of an inherited stereotype. In contrast, as performance scholar and cultural historian David 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.”[2] 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.”[3] 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 darky 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.

2 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, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 99.

3 Ibid., 101.

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, "The '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.'"[4] 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 as 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 at the turn of the twentieth century (fig. 2).

4 Ibid., 108–09.

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."[5] These whites explored exoticism by sampling a signifier of black culture, the cakewalk, as taught by a black instructor, Overton Walker.

5 David Krasner, "Rewriting the Body: Aida Overton Walker and the Social Formation of Cakewalking," *Theatre Survey* 37:2 (November 1996): 79–81.

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

fig. 2 Overton Walker and Walker perform the cakewalk in *In Dahomey*, 1903. *Tatler* notice.

fig. 3 Cakewalk composite image (Southern plantation dance and Civil War cotillion), 1861 and 1864.

obtained their social status through money, not birthright.[6] Krasner states: "For the new middle and upper classes, wealth was replacing lineage…the '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.'"[7] 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.

6 Krasner, "Rewriting the Body," 78.

7 Ibid.

Overton Walker brought authenticity to performing and instructing the cakewalk through her knowledge of its African roots and emergence as a dance conducted by enslaved blacks on the plantation. Many myths surround the origin of the cakewalk. Overton Walker biographer Richard Newman presumes that the dance developed "when slaves imitated, exaggerated, and in fact satirically mocked and mimicked formal white cotillions."[8] Dating from eighteenth-century France, cotillions are formal dances usually performed on the occasion of the debutante's coming out.[9] 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 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 (fig. 3).[10] Through the process of instructing the "better classes of white people on both sides of the ocean"[11] how to cakewalk, and thus integrating into white society, Overton Walker proved that a black female theatre professional could make positive contributions to the race, commensurate to if not better than those of respected male professionals.

8 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): 467.

9 Oxford English Dictionary, Online ed., accessed February 17, 2016, http://www.oed.com.proxy.cca.edu/view/Entry/42428?isAdvanced=false&result=1&rskey=W6TxQt&.

10 Constance Valis Hill, *Tap Dancing America: A Cultural History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 33.

11 Aida Overton Walker, "Colored Men and Women On the Stage," *Colored American Magazine* 8–9 1905 (New York: Negro University Press, 1969), 573.

Overton Walker was the "real cakewalker." 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."[12] 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.[13] 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.[14] 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.[15]

12 Krasner, "Rewriting the Body," 80.

13 Krasner, "The Real Thing," 109.

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

15 Newman, "'The Brightest Star,'" 470.

Overton Walker's performances for and instructions to royalty and the white moneyed class in America exemplify how she used her talents and expertise to bridge the class and cultural divides. 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 Colored American magazine, directed at the black 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.[16]

16 Aida Overton Walker, "Colored Men and Women On the Stage," 571.

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 theatre as "unwholesome" and a "threat to racial progress,"[17] she emphasized her contribution to racial respectability by stating twice that her profession engages with more white people than the other "respected" professions—an engagement that contributed to uplift because it demonstrated African Americans performing "exemplary behavior."

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

At this early twentieth-century moment, when cultural identity was being redefined and reimagined by both black and white Americans, Overton Walker's performances, cakewalk lessons, and magazine articles elucidated an emerging American modernity—departing from the limits dictated by tradition 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 wore blackface. Her characters were respectably costumed, unlike her two male partners' buffoonish portrayals of darky coon roles, as evidenced in a 1905 triptych of the trio featured in an advertisement in Vanity Fair (fig. 4).

While most ads for the Williams and Walker Company featured the named principals only, in this instance, Overton Walker is given equal billing. 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 theatre 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 on stage, 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.[18]

18 George W. Walker, "The Real 'Coon' on the American Stage," *Theatre Magazine* 6, no. 59 (January 1906).

fig. 4 Williams, Overton Walker, and Walker advertisement in *Vanity Fair*, 1905; New York Public Library, Billy Rose Theatre Collection.

fig. 5 Cast of *In Dahomey*, 1902, New York Public Library, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Helen Armstead-Johnson Theater Photograph Collection.

fig. 6 Portrait of Overton Walker, 1905, New York Public Library Digital Collections, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Photographs and Prints Division.

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.

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 on stage. Like Aida, George was concerned with racial uplift. As he said in 1908, "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."[19] 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."[20] The Williams and Walker Company's storylines acknowledged their African heritage, and many of their revues not only had African-themed titles—In Dahomey, for example—but turned on plots in which characters traveled to the continent (fig. 5).

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

20 Camille F. Forbes, *Introducing Bert Williams: Burnt Cork, Broadway, and the Story of America's First Black Star* (New York: Basic Civitas, 2008), 25.

The triptych printed in Vanity Fair (fig. 4) illustrates Overton Walker's tendency toward high drama rather than the comedic tropes of minstrelsy. 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.

In another image from 1905, Overton Walker's gaze is once again direct (fig. 6). Even though this portrait offers the perception of an innocent and proper young woman, the article she authored—addressed specifically to the black elite and in which this likeness appeared—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.[21]

21 Aida Overton Walker, "Colored Men and Women On the Stage," 571.

Overton Walker continued to employ the power of choice by embarking on a solo career after her break with Williams in 1911. She died of kidney disease at the age of thirty-four in 1914. The theatrical world mourned her passing and reminisced about her achievements for decades. Less than a week after her death, Variety published an obituary proclaiming Overton Walker as "easily the foremost Afro-American woman stage artist."[22] On August 10, 1929, the Chicago Whip newspaper wrote, "GREATEST OF ALL... say old timers [sic] of Aida Overton-Walker, world renowned actress."[23] And in his 1930 publication Black Manhattan, the songwriter, author, and civil rights activist James Weldon Johnson dignified her as "beyond comparison the brightest star among women on the Negro stage of the period; and it is a question whether or not she has since been surpassed."[24] During this time of a developing American modernity, Overton Walker not only practiced feminism and contributed to racial uplift. She embodied both.

22 *Variety*, October 17, 1914, 13.

23 *Chicago Whip*, August 10, 1929, found in "Aida Overton Walker," Songbook, accessed March 18, 2016, https://songbook1.wordpress.com/fx/si/african-american-musical-theater-1896-1926/bert-williams-george-walker-and-aida-overton-walker/aida-overton-walker-slide-show-and-gallery/.

24 James Weldon Johnson, *Black Manhattan* (Salem, NH: Ayer Company Publishers Inc., 1988), 107.