The Black Dandyism of George Walker: A Case Study in Genealogical Method
Author(s): Barbara L. Webb
Published by: The MIT Press
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/1146926
Accessed: 10-01-2017 00:59 UTC

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at http://about.jstor.org/terms

The MIT Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to TDR (1988-)
The Black Dandyism of George Walker

A Case Study in Genealogical Method

Barbara L. Webb

Most scholarly and popular discussions of African American performance at the turn of the 20th century focus on the limitations of the minstrelsy “trap” that confined these performers to interpretations of existing stereotypes. Such assessments discount the possibilities for agency within these “minstrelsy-derived entertainments,” including those that proceeded from minstrelsy’s traditions of satire and parody, and the related intrinsic threat of a joke failing to remain a joke. In a recent issue of TDR, Michele Wallace called for an increased acceptance and interrogation of black participation in minstrelsy and an appreciation of black performers’ accomplishments in this field (2000:144–45). I hope this essay contributes to just such a project.

George Walker’s performance of the black dandy constituted a refusal to echo minstrel caricatures by causing the standard “joke” of the well-dressed, suave black man to fail, to be reclaimed by its object. An investigation of the resources available to Walker to perform such a sleight of hand turns up a possible kinship link with an unlikely relative: the European and Euro-American dandies who provided much of the inspiration for the initial minstrel joke. My contention is that Walker reclaimed the dandies’ point of view from the minstrels, rearticulating it from within an African American context. The theoretical impetus for this line of inquiry is Cities of the Dead (1996), Joseph Roach’s provocative, controversial study of circum-Atlantic performance.

Minstrelsy-Derived Entertainments and George Walker

George Walker is best known as the partner of comedian Bert Williams, and has been less thoroughly studied, perhaps in part because of his early death in 1911. Williams is best remembered today for his use of the blackface comedic convention, the most easily accessible symbol of a racist past we like to think contrasts with our own time. Walker is not as readily appropriated for such a symbolic function, since the conventions of his day did not require his dandy straight-man character to wear blackface. Thus, a photograph of Walker fails to rouse the same anger, sadness, or sense of tragedy as one of Williams.
Walker’s portraits show a well-dressed, handsome, confident, smiling man in the prime of life (plate I). Even so, late-20th-century scholarship often takes for granted that Walker’s performance of a stereotype, a dandy with roots in minstrelsy, was a response to the restrictive necessities of the era. The black press of his own time, however, lauded his originality as well as his business expertise. How can this picture be reconciled with the usual historical assumptions about culturally “trapped” performers of minstrelsy–derived entertainments at the height of the Jim Crow era? David Krasner has more recently proposed that black performers of this time actually ironically commented on, rather than uncritically embodied, the stereotypes of the minstrel stage (1997), creating new jokes accessible mainly to black audiences. I suggest a slightly different, though not contradictory, possibility for Walker, where the cultural memory of earlier dandies and the ambivalence of satire enabled him to foil the joke on the black dandy by becoming that type in a nonsatirical mode.

It is productive to examine George Walker’s performances in terms of the European dandy of the 1820s and later, as well as in comparison to the minstrel dandy that originated in the 1840s and continued in various forms through Walker’s own day. Comparing Walker to the minstrel dandy is not new, but most comparisons treat the dandy as a self-evident character upon whom Walker patterned himself. The perception of Walker’s performance lineage changes, however, and more interpretive possibilities open up, if we consider that the minstrel dandy was not a coherent stage type, but a spectrum of performance options. A minstrel dandy could be played out in character songs such as “Zip Coon,” “Long Tail Blue,” and “Dandy Jim from Caroline”; in the costuming conventions of individual companies; and in the idiosyncratic portrayal of stage types such as the interlocutor (plate 2). An 1830s sheet music cover for “The Crow Quadrilles” (a collection of musical arrangements for dancing that included “Zip Coon”) shows the black dandy in three different modes, which could be described as fop, soldier, and gentleman (plate 3). The variety of dandies represented by this early example of blackface iconography, while not evidence of actual performance practice, is an effective allegory of the contingency and variability inherent in the performance of stage “types.” The dress and deportment of minstrel dandies in performance could range from buffoonish and clearly satirical to an ambiguously elegant straight man. W.T. Lhamon writes:

The apparent stereotypes of rowdy and dandy, which eventuated in Bones and the interlocutor, are not rigidities that lock in behavior. Rather, they are fields which encourage querying of behavior. Within limits, they generate relational positions that sneak up and undercut expectations. (1998:164)

One method of categorizing the varieties of minstrel dandies within their field is to situate them along a spectrum on which degrees of “being” the dandy give way to degrees of satirizing the dandy. This approach leaves room to discuss Walker’s relationship to the extreme examples of “being” European and American dandies who were the cultural models for the minstrel stage types. Investigating such a position for Walker is one way of locating his agency within the sphere of minstrelsy–derived entertainments.

The European Dandy and the Minstrel Dandy

The “dandy,” signifying a well-dressed man, was first widely acknowledged in Europe as a cultural type (no doubt open to various interpretations) in the late 18th century (OED). Rhonda Garelick says that the Englishman George “Beau” Brummell (1778–1840) was the first “dandy celebrated specifically as

1. George Walker’s style pushed the theatrical into the sphere of the everyday without crossing the line of parody. (Photo courtesy of the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Photographs and Prints Division, George Walker Portrait Collection)
2. Mr. Interlocutor appears here in blackface, though the historical record is somewhat muddled regarding his usual racial identity. (Illustration courtesy of Barbara L. Webb)

such" (1998:6). In George Walker’s day, one chronicler of dandyism claimed, “Of all beaux, Brummell was the chief” (Jerrold 1910:10). The treatment of dandyism in contemporary scholarly criticism is varied, though a focus on the “literary” variety of dandy in the later 19th-century decadent movement, is most common (see Rossbach 1999 and Humphreys 1999). Such analyses tend to be concerned with concepts such as gender play, simulation and anti-naturalism, irony, and spectacle. Since both Walker and minstrelsy belonged to popular performance culture, however, the most commonly recognized traits of the dandy, such as dress and class affiliation, tend to be the most useful in this comparison.

According to Lhamon, George Washington Dixon, an early white blackface minstrel of the 1830s and ’40s, was:

already specializing in the figure of the dandy-dressing poseur, a heavily mannered type that cartoons and tales were shading in during the early 1820s. This cartoon figure was an Anglo-American aggression against local youths who were starting to pattern themselves on the Parisian flâneur.

(1998:161)

These American humorists who focused on the Yankee dandy owed a direct debt to the English cartoonists George and Robert Cruikshank, the most prominent satirists of early 19th-century European dandies (plate 4). It is instructive to compare and contrast such cartoons with minstrel song-sheet images. Such an exercise reminds us of the additional discourses within which early minstrelsy swam as well as how the reality of race in North America meaningfully transformed class-based European satires.

Dixon’s blackface dandy claims a genealogy traceable to the everyday performances of dandies in Europe and their imitators in the United States. William J. Mahar asserts that this antebellum minstrel dandy, whose anthem was the male display or boasting song such as “Long Tail Blue,” came in both
whiteface and blackface versions, and was primarily a vehicle for “feelings of
disdain coupled with class envy” directed at the upper classes and their mimics
in the lower classes (1999:209).

Simultaneously, these early blackface critiques of white dandies lent them-
selves easily to the policing of black male identity. The “black” character
onstage occupied a space of tension, assuming the dual role of both joke-
maker and the object of ridicule. This pairing of the white dandy and the
black man as the butts of the same joke would seem unlikely, but consider
that racial anxiety has been part and parcel of class anxiety for as long as free
blacks have been visible in Western societies. In the early days of minstrelsy,
both the humanity of the black man and the cultural pretensions of the dandy
threatened to expose the provisional nature of class affiliation in North
America. The claims of the former to equality and of the latter to superiority
required a disavowal, or “returning to place” through minstrel satire, which
reiterated boundaries defining “we” and “they” in terms of race and class.

In their study of African American self-expression, Shane White and Gra-
ham White provide evidence to support the explicit intersection of race and
class anxiety. Several anecdotes suggest that certain types of Northern free
blacks of the mid-19th century, in addition to white Yankee fops, also in-
spired the minstrel dandy characters. In an account that reads as more curious
than contemptuous, a Lady Emmeline Stuart Wortley, writing of her trip to
the United States, records a:

very curious specimen of a dandy [...] lounging down the street [...] a
sable Count D’Orsay, [...] whose] toilette was the most elaborately recerché
you can imagine. He seemed intensely happy in his coat and waistcoat,
of the finest possible materials; and the careful carelessness of the adjust-
ment of the wool and hat was not readily to be surpassed. (in White and
White 1998:92)

Wortley’s comparison is to Count Alfred D’Orsay (1801–1857), a well-
known French dandy who lived conspicuously in London for 20 years. Perhaps
not coincidentally, a London review of a 19th-century American minstrel show

3. A portion of the song-
sheet cover for “Crow Qua-
drilles.” (Courtesy of the
Lester S. Levy Collection,
Milton S. Eisenhower Li-
brary, and Johns Hopkins
University)
describes the white performers in similar terms: “They dress in dandy costume, à la Jullien—that is, white waistcoated and wristbanded, turned up in the most approved D’Orsay fashion” (Schomburg Center n.d.). Thus, by the late 19th century, the names of real European dandies such as Count D’Orsay had entered the cultural repertoire of the Atlantic world as types and adjectives that were at times explicitly associated with both actual black men and their minstrel impersonators.

In contrast to the above examples, however, violence rather than curiosity often marked the response to well-dressed blacks. In the 19th century, free African Americans in Northern cities such as Philadelphia, Boston, and New York claimed their rights to public spaces by holding parades and balls in which fancy dress played a prominent role. Whites responded by circulating caricatures that lampooned the idea of blacks dressing in fine clothes and aspiring to social graces, as well as by attacking the parades and carriages en route to the balls (White and White 1998:95–115). The situation of being black and well-dressed in the 19th century carried with it the threat of personal danger, and the persistence of the importance of dress at African American public gatherings during this time can be read as a serious statement of open defiance of the racial roles whites advocated (as well as a rebellious cultural statement of African retentions). The black dandy signified a rebellion not only against a prescribed class station, as did his white counterparts, but also against a prescribed position in the racial order.

A writer for the Pennsylvania Gazette expressed the anxiety inspired by this double rebellion as he reported on a fancy-dress African American ball in 1828 and wondered “how long it will be before servants and masters change places” (in White and White 1998:98). This question only half-jokingly acknowledges that the unthinkable could become reality, for the existence of a black man with fine clothes, property, and an interest in white women (as whites usually imputed) became increasingly possible with the implementation of steps toward manumission in the North in the 1780s (Berlin 1998:232). The satire of minstrelsy, which mocked the black dandy’s pretension to be “real,” provided an outlet for these anxieties. A satirical treatment of the black dandy in antebellum minstrelsy offered assurance that a black man who placed his aspirations above the very bottom of the social heap would remain laughable rather than legitimate.

Likewise, the dress of European dandies has also been read as a form of class and cultural rebellion. Beau Brummell carefully cultivated his “self” through dress and manners to rise above the social station into which he was born. The son of English commoner parents, Brummell constructed an aristocratic self, rejecting the static English class system, and attracted the notice of the Prince of Wales, the future King George IV, with whom he became a close friend. The 19th-century dandy’s quest to create a unique, exquisite self detached from inherited class position can be read as a display of agency, an attempt to rise above the “rabble of mass culture” (Garelick 1998:5).

Minstrel skits featuring the dandy aimed to quell these rebellions as well, which translated in American culture as “putting on airs” or putting down the common man which contradicts the national myth of the classless society.

Songs and sketches often used rural or unpretentious characters such as Jim Crow to mock the dandy. Jim boasts in his own self-titled song: “An’ I caution all white dandies / Not to come in my way / For if dey insult me / Dey’ll in de gutter lay” (in Lott 1994:24). At the very least, minstrelsy used both black and white dandies as fodder for satire as well as “comic” violence. In the minstrel dandy, race and class became inextricable from each other. Blackness functioned both as a signifier of working-class agency (as in the case of a Jim Crow or endman character) and a contaminant with which to “sully” the
Mr. Bones, one of the endmen comedians of the minstrel semicircle, usually played the rowdy and often donned parodic dandy dress in contrast with the interlocutor. (Illustration courtesy of Barbara L. Webb)
Minstrels was the last word in late-19th-century “refined” minstrelsy. (Courtesy of the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, The University of Texas at Austin)

6. Primrose and West’s Minstrels was the last word in late-19th-century “refined” minstrelsy. (Courtesy of the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, The University of Texas at Austin)

sion of the dandy, as well as the straight man to the comedic performers of the semicircle. His dress and speech suggested an upper-class identity. A retrospective argument on minstrelsy published in 1913 described the interlocutor as “always the same genial, gentlemanly, unruffled creature surveying the endmen [...] with the smiling forbearance which comes of innate superiority” (Brown 1913). Dailey Pasman and Sigmund Spaeth’s 1928 assessment agreed that, “there is no suggestion of comedy in the full-dress suit [sic] and expensive shirt front of his costume.” His manners were “unimpeachable” and he spoke “painfully correct” English (Paskman [1928] 1976:24). Within the performance grammar of this minstrel first part then, the interlocutor seemed to claim the dandy’s point of view rather than the burlesquer’s, if only for the purpose of being knocked down by the more comically exaggerated Tambo and Bones (plate 5).

In minstrelsy’s later days at the end of the century, “refined” minstrel companies such as the Primrose and West Minstrels opened their first part with a less parodic take on the dandies of the semicircle. Rather than provoking laughter, their costumes stunned audiences with calculated elegance (plate 6). Paskman and Spaeth’s reminiscence of minstrelsy complained that in these later years, “the settings began to look like a Drury Lane pantomime and the men dressed like gorgeous courtiers in a magnificent kingdom” (1928:239). These later interpretations of the minstrel dandy tradition illustrate the pliability of the
form, and suggest the broad range of dandies available to the cultural context in which George Walker performed.

In addition to the “straighter” interpretations of dandy dress, the dandy’s point of view sometimes even slipped through in minstrel skits when the joke was supposed to be on him. Zip Coon, a name that usually signified a nonambiguous comic dandy, seems to be taking jabs at the white working-class audience in one surviving skit. He sips mint juleps and says to Cuff, who is looking for a job: “You wouldn’t degrade you’self by workin’ would you? Well, go out dere among de white trash, den” (in Lewis 1996:270). Certainly, this exchange was part of the racist discourse that figured blacks as naturally indolent, but it also states the European dandy’s traditional view on the relationship between work and humanity, which figured those who accepted a working-class identity as inhuman drudges.

Though the above skit and the demeanor of the interlocutor use the dandy for the purpose of satire and comedy by placing an aristocratic attitude within the “mismatched” confines of black skin, the threat of comedy’s failure lingers. As Judith Butler has argued, both parody and censorship are risky, depending as they do on the invocation of that which they would mock or prohibit (1993:123–25; 1997:37). Parody thus runs the risk of perpetuating the life span of the targeted word, image, or character type by keeping it visible, if only in the carnival mirror. The historical efforts of whites and blacks of various classes to craft unique, exquisite personas, independent of mass culture and socially imposed identity, inspired the comic policing of the minstrel dandy. Paradoxically, it is the comedy itself that kept their efforts alive underneath the censorship of mockery. This subtext was available to Walker, who simultaneously engaged and rejected minstrel stereotypes, exploiting the pliability of the black dandy and choosing from a spectrum of possibilities for his interpretation. Walker succeeded in articulating the dandy’s point of view, but inflected it with specifically African American claims to humanity and dignity.

7. A song-sheet cover for “He’s Up Against the Real Thing Now.” (Courtesy of Brown University Library)
Echoing the aforementioned treatment of well-dressed blacks in early-20th-century Philadelphia, in some towns a successful minstrel performer who dressed well or wore jewelry “provoked” arrest and imprisonment until he could prove ownership of his clothing and possessions.⁸

Photographs and reviews indicate that Walker’s stage character negotiated the spheres of both the comic and the elegant, while his offstage persona was firmly rooted in the latter. An early song-sheet cover from William’s and Walker’s vaudeville days (1898) shows Walker’s stage dandy costume as clearly buffoonish, juxtaposed with an accompanying photo of Walker in elegant street dress (plate 7).⁹ Later theatre stills and song sheets from the team’s Broadway years (post-1903) sometimes still cast him in a comic light, somewhat toned down from earlier examples and usually signified by the exaggerated plaid fabric of his suit. This aspect of his character would have facilitated the comic plots in most Williams and Walker shows, comedy being the usual required foundation (along with dancing) for nearly every successful black show of the period. Walker’s public persona was better exemplified, however, by images that show him wearing exquisite, elegant outfits, which, though precisely detailed to the point of exaggeration, certainly do not suggest buffoonery or parody (plates 8 and 9).

This side of Walker’s stage persona suggests the tradition of the interlocutor and the Primrose and West shows. Walker also actually performed the structural function of the interlocutor, playing the elegant, articulate foil for Williams’s comic blackface persona.

Newspaper accounts of Walker suggest that this latter view of him was more prevalent in the public mind. Critics tended to refer primarily to Walker’s “clothes of extraordinary color and cut” (Theatre Magazine 1908:xii), and “[his] usual gorgeous raiment” (Chicago Tribune 1907:8). Though Williams received the bulk of the team’s praise, Walker was famous nationwide for his suits and his dancing, and seldom did a review fail to mention his dress and comportment. Reviews in the Indianapolis Freeman of In Dahomey (1903) reported that Walker was “dressed in the richest teutonic style and with his large cluster of real diamonds” (Russell 1903; also in Sampson 1988:290); “on this occasion he dressed at all times with good taste” (1904; 1988:327); and, from the Sunday Dispatch, “natural grace and refinement are his attributes” (1903; 1988:297). A review in Variety of one of Walker’s final performances notes, “Walker is wearing two very nifty suits” (1908; 1988:429). These descriptions indicate that neither blacks nor whites perceived Walker’s dress as strictly, or even primarily comic. Even blatantly racist assessments of Walker’s appearance, such as the following from the New York Clipper review of In Dahomey, do not give the impression that the critic viewed Walker as a failed fashion plate in the minstrel travesty tradition: “Mr. Walker, too, is a revelation of the smartness of the smart coon. His gleaming, dazzling teeth, his extraordinary vitality and humorous slyness, give him an attractive personality that will count for much in the success of the piece” (1903; 1988:296). These writers all show an awareness of being in the presence of an actual rather than parodied well-dressed black man.
Like other dandies of the 19th century, Walker carefully cultivated such responses. He once commented in the *Indianapolis Freeman* that the American public “expects to see me as a flashy sort of a darky and I do not disappoint them as far as that goes” (1908:5; also in Krasner 1997:149). Not only did Walker dress well onstage, he also carried his performance persona into the sphere of the everyday, appearing much the same on the street as he did for a show. Walker was able to afford these clothes in the first place because he was a smart businessman as well as a performer, and the cultivation of his everyday public appearance was part of his “product.” A writer for the *Indianapolis Freeman* wrote that dress “is George Walker’s stock and trade. It is part of his method of making business” (1908:5).

His contemporaries and historians have recognized Walker as a key business mind among African Americans involved in the theatre at the turn of the century. The prominent black theatre critic, Sylvester Russell, wrote in Walker’s obituary: “Mr. Walker’s business instinct was of a kind that would not accept anything that was forced upon him” (1911:5). In retrospect, the historian Thomas Riis acknowledges Walker as a major force in securing visibility for black entertainers: “With the perseverance and guidance of men like Bob Cole and George Walker, white investors had been rewarded for supporting black theatrical efforts” (1989:160). Walker insisted on controlling the conditions under which he and Williams would perform as judiciously as he controlled the marketing of himself as a “personality” to theatre managers and the general public. In an essay attributed to Bert Williams in *Son of Laughter*, the performer recalls:

In a business deal where the other party decided against us, I was usually willing to consider it settled rather than argue. Not so with Walker. He would talk on and on. “Arguing” he called it, and little by little the other side would begin to be convinced. (in Rowland [1923] 1969:21)

True to this description, Walker fired their white management team, Hurtig and Seamon, for not planning to book *In Abysinnia* (1906) in first-class houses (the management company sued Williams and Walker for breach of contract in 1905).

In developing a stage character that was the representation of a wealthy black man and by performing this persona in everyday life, Walker both garnered publicity and presented himself as a force that theatre managers and bookers had to reckon with. In the process, Walker actually became a wealthy black man. As one of Walker’s contemporaries described Beau Brummell, “He was the living example of the debated philosophical theory that Appearance is Reality” (Jerrold 1910:10). In the same tradition, “rising above the rabble” was Walker’s lifelong pursuit, regardless of the power and clout of those white managers and others who would have resigned him to his expected racial and class position. Just as earlier dandies rejected their inherited class positions and the “economy of ever-increasing ‘exchangeability’ and the accumulation of mass-produced products” (Garelick 1998:5), Walker rejected the racial order and the commodification of black people in a postslavery economy.

Just as Beau Brummell historically has been noted as the standard for all subsequent dandies, critics continued to perceive Walker’s uniqueness long after his retirement from the stage. As a member of the Whitney Musical Comedy Company, J. Homer Tutt attracted some notice and garnered comparisons to
Walker, but the latter remained the unique, irreplaceable standard: “He does not care to imitate Mr. Walker, and he does everything to prohibit it, but he must strut in a fashionable way when he sings ‘Struttin’ Sam,’ and he must change his silk attire very often” (Indianapolis Freeman 1910a; also in Sampson 1988:503). On another occasion, Tutt was again compared to Walker, who himself was likened to an earlier “original” European dandy: “In fact his wardrobe easily makes him the Beau Brummel of stage land since the days of George Walker” (Indianapolis Freeman 1910b). When Walker died, his obituaries confirmed the perception of him as an innovator and model for other performers. A writer for the Freeman observed: “The imitator feels honored when he is recognized as doing George Walker” (Lewis 1911).

The point of the dandy’s excessive attention to dress is to be “unique” (a somewhat paradoxical concept, considering that the function of a “standard” is to draw comparisons with others), to be worthy of Barbey d’Aurevilly’s assessment of Beau Brummell, “Indeed, there was only one dandy” (translation in Garelick 1998:6). Though he performed within a recognizable minstrel tradition, George Walker’s success in establishing a standard, his very status as a performing “star” challenges the general assumption that minstrel stereotypes were generic, static entities that we can now casually refer to with retrospective certainty.

While some African Americans embraced Walker’s unique dress and deportment as a point of pride, others criticized him for perpetuating racial stereotypes, mainly laziness, through his dandyism. A letter from an African American professor to Williams and Walker published in Variety criticizes Walker for reinforcing the stereotype of the black “scheming ‘grafter’” (Variety 1907:30). This seemingly racist stereotype, however, has roots not only in the rebellious tactics of the African tricksters of slave folklore, but also in the rebellions of earlier white dandies.

Minstrel sketches mocked the European dandy’s notorious aversion to work while simultaneously serving the racist discourse that portrayed blacks as naturally lazy. The overdressed fop was thus easily translated into a minstrel dandy with black particularities. Recall, however, that by attending to an elaborate toilette and the pursuit of leisure, the dandy rejected what he considered to be the machine-like existence of the laboring man. A black dandy from the dandy’s point of view, then, could be read as rejecting the dehumanizing forced labor of slavery and its aftermath. In Scenes of Subjection, Hartman reprints an excerpt from a manual for newly freed slaves, Advice to Freedmen, which encourages black men to “bend your back joyfully and hopefully to the burden [of the freedman’s duties].” Hartman explains:

The joyful bending of the back refigured the “backbreaking” regimen of slave labor and genuflected before the blessings and privileges of freedom. [...] This unsettling description divulges servility and submission as prerequisites to enjoying the privileges of freedom. (1997:135)

A 1903 photograph in the Byron Collection at the Museum of the City of New York, taken in the dusty streets of the “colored district” of New York at the same time In Dahomey was running on Broadway, illustrates the plain, purely functional dress of African American laborers in Walker’s day. Compared to photographs of Walker, it shows the extent to which Walker rejected this “bending of the back.” In fact, Walker explicitly claimed that the uniqueness of the Williams and Walker act was in its rejection of the perceived necessity for “hard labor” from black performers on the vaudeville stage. In 1908, Walker reminisced on the origins of the team’s success, writing that “we noticed that colored men had to be comedians and athletic comedians at that [...] so we figured: the
white man gets the desired results without perspiring—why?” (Walker 1908:4). In response to this realization, Williams and Walker developed a style of black entertainment based, as critics often noted, on subtlety and grace rather than on athleticism. Thus, the dandyist rejection of work that formed the basis for the minstrel stereotype became, in the hands of this African American dandy, a rebellious claim to a freedom not contingent on physical subjection and social submission. In light of its historical context, Walker’s dandyism appears not as a tired rehearsal of minstrel stereotypes, or even as an imitative copy of earlier real-life dandies, but as a reclamation, for a specifically African American point of view, of various dandyist traditions.

A Case Study in Genealogical Method

Return now to the question of articulating a genealogy that links the work of George Walker with real-life, often white, earlier European dandies. The contentious theoretical question is whether some “thing” called “the dandy” survived within the satirical performances of several generations to be available for George Walker to call upon and reinvoke. In Cities of the Dead, Roach skirts the question of ontology, seeming to insist on the presence of that which has been forgotten yet enacted in performance (but apparently remembered by the historian), while paradoxically relying on a Foucaultian concept of genealogical inquiry that uncovers not relationships, but disparity (1996:25).

The use of the word “dandy” has always been provisional, never completely encompassing the thing to which it refers. In fact, Derrida’s work supports an argument that the very occurrence of the word “dandy” in writing or preserved speech of any kind indicates both absence of the dandy himself as well as the existence of “an infinity of contexts [...] without any center or absolute anchorage” ([1972] 1988:12). We can never be certain who the dandy is or what his total context might be. Any coherent, knowable dandy that survives within this genealogy of performance is largely, then, of my own creation—a provisional patchwork of specific historical fragments. As I have argued above, “the minstrel dandy” encompassed a spectrum of types, performances, and behaviors grouped under a single sign. The dandy in general seems to be a fuzzy concept encompassing varieties of masculine self-display, which existed from the 1790s through Walker’s own time. To insist, however, upon the existence of a definitive dandyist tradition, parodic or otherwise, is to claim an omniscient knowledge of an infinite variety of contexts and ephemeral moments of improvisation within which he was created and re-created. The coherent, knowable dandy is perhaps not historic, but linguistic, a pretense necessary for language to function at all, to refer unequivocally to some “thing” rather than another.

What did critics mean when they called George Walker a “Beau Brummell”? How did Walker see himself? If we consider Derrida’s ([1972] 1988:17) and Judith Butler’s (1997:151) contentions that the power or force of a signifying form results from the possibility of candidates for failure under its terms, then we might do well to consider what George Walker was not: Jack Johnson (his contemporary, the black heavyweight boxer), Zip Coon, Bert Williams, or Jim Crow, for examples. He was more like a Beau Brummell, who, in turn, was not Davy Crockett, Mike Fink (to name popular “backwoods” American stage characters of Brummell’s day), or a common English laborer. The meaning and genealogy of Walker’s dandy exists at the crossroads of these names and many more, depending on the content of the cultural repertoire of his time—and of our own.

The details of the comparisons between Walker, the “dandy,” the “European dandy,” and the “minstrel dandy” are a product of the historical imagination that constructs relations within which Walker’s performances mean something
to us in retrospect. It is interesting to some of us, especially given the one-dimensional narrative we currently tell about the racial climate at the turn of the century (emphasizing systematic constraint and an undifferentiated oppression), to explore why and how audiences watching Walker move across the stage saw more than “a man moving,” and something different than Zip Coon.

So, was George Walker’s performance practice a “restored behavior” that (consciously or “unconsciously”) referenced earlier dandyisms? In Roach’s terms, was he engaged in a “historic practice” adapted to “changing conditions in which popular behaviors are resituated in new locales”; (1996:28; emphasis mine)? Walker’s performances might indeed be thought of as a copy of a copy of a copy, a sequence in which later versions might intuitively seem to be related to earlier versions. I part with Roach, however, by not insisting on the ontological integrity of that which is “forgotten but not gone” (2). If Walker’s dandyism was restored behavior, it demonstrates, in Richard Schechner’s words, a break in the relationship to the “causal system[s] [...] that brought [it]
into existence” (1985:35). In other words, I am not pointing to the influence of the ghost of Beau Brummell on Walker, but only to the failure of parody to remain satirical and contain its object, the identity of which is itself constantly shifting and uncertain. Considering this possibility, audience laughter at the minstrel and postminstrel dandy might be due as much to nervousness as to any recognition of absurdity. Moreover, it might be attributed to a desire to move the show along before the audience has to consider whether he really might have a leg up on them, whether his beauty stares back with distaste at their own drudgery, as George Walker did not fear to do (plate 10).

Other analyses of Walker will certainly be written, including some that articulate a genealogy in which African dress, comportment, and aesthetic sensibilities are “forgotten but not gone” in Walker’s performances. Such analyses will only increase the legitimacy with which we can truly claim to discuss a circum-Atlantic world. I would not insist that such alternatives acknowledge the “presence” of the European dandy in Walker’s persona, but hope instead that my performance genealogy as well as those others might contribute to the grammatical options with which we can articulate the always-incomplete contexts of African American performance and American performance in general at the turn of the century.

I predict that we are about to see a groundswell of interest in black minstrels and black performers of minstrelsy-derived entertainments. This era has thus far avoided all but our most cursory scrutiny, most likely because the idea of black entertainers willingly performing, in a very entertaining fashion, what we see as demeaning stereotypes perplexes and confuses us to the point where all we can do is weave presentist explanations for their seeming lack of agency. If, however, this era of African American performance and culture is going to receive the complex treatment it deserves, we need to be able to think imaginatively outside of our own historical sensibilities, to connect these entertainments with the vast array of available influences that pervaded the consciousness of smart, inventive, talented performers such as George Walker.

Notes

2. Williams’s high visibility historically as a tragic figure is actually not rooted as much in the blackface convention per se as in his known desire to move from comedy into dramatic work at a time when very few such outlets existed for black actors. His contemporaries, both black and white, agreed that “in a part combining comedy and pathos this colored thespian would score a great triumph and soon attain [a] prominent [...] place on the dramatic stage” (Da Bubna 1903:96). The circumstances of other African American blackface comedy performers were not widely considered in a tragic light during their lifetimes. As the simultaneous audience popularity and NAACP condemnation of the later blackface comedian Dewey “Pigmeat” Markham exemplifies, African American opinion on blackface convention historically was varied until its eventual elimination from the stage.
3. The reference to “Jullien” in the review is a nod to Louis Antoine Jullien, “a famous European bandmaster whose concerts were burlesqued by minstrel shows as early as 1849” (Winans [1984] 1996:161).
5. The endmen, Tambo and Bones (so named for the instruments they played), were the comedians of the post–Civil War minstrel semicircle, usually performed by the most talented members of a company. Their interaction with a straight-man interlocutor is part of a long humorous tradition (most familiar to us from vaudeville) in
which a poor, uneducated, or otherwise unfortunate character emerges as witty, commonsensical, or victorious via verbal repartee.

6. Mahar argues that it is not likely that performers appeared in character as dandies or plantation types in the two parts, since the songs included in each do not seem to have been arranged so thematically (1999:23). Further research may determine with more certainty the degree to which such designations were mere playbill conventions, or were augmented by appropriate dress (as Winans suggests) and stage mannerisms.

7. The Christy Minstrels, originally led by George and Edwin Christy (George's stepfather) and based in New York City, was one of the most well-known antebellum minstrel groups. The Christys claimed to have invented the semicircular arrangement and the first minstrel dandy costumes (Mahar 1999:19).

8. In 1902 showman Billy McClain was reportedly arrested in Kansas City “for having too much jewelry for a colored man” (Sampson 1988:245). Tom Fletcher described a ritual of a minstrel company he traveled with whereby performers were careful to change from performance clothes into street clothes when walking through a town between performances, presumably to avoid inspiring such censure (1954:58).

9. Note that Williams receives this same treatment on the cover, which was a convention on song sheets of the time. It has often been overlooked that because of this practice, the public was generally familiar with the uncostumed appearance of famous African American performers. Images of Walker in street dress are still uniquely notable, however, because his offstage demeanor garnered more attention than that of the more socially reticent Bert Williams.

10. Rhonda Garelick points out that Balzac’s “Traité de la Vie Élégante” (1830), an early dandiest text, divides humanity into the categories of those who work, those who think, and those who do nothing. The latter is reserved for the dandy, who is “born elegant.” Balzac equates the workingman with his tools and considers such men as no more than machines (1998:14–19).

11. In Jazz Dance, Marshall Stearns confirms in detail the athleticism in which black male dancers specialized, especially in medicine shows, late minstrelsy, and vaudeville (1968).


References

Berlin, Ira

Brown, T. Alston

Butler, Judith

Chicago Tribune

Da Bubna, Augusta

Derrida, Jacques

Fletcher, Tom
Garelick, Rhonda K.  

Hartman, Saidiya V.  

Humphreys, Karen  

Indianapolis Freeman  
1904 “A Word Endowed Prominent Stage Factors and Reform [sic].” 1 October.

Jerrold, Clare  

Krasner, David  

Lewis, Barbara  

Lewis, William H.  
1911 “The Stage.” Indianapolis Freeman, 21 January.

Lhamon, Jr., W.T.  

Lott, Eric  

Mahar, William J.  

Malone, Jacqui  

New York Clipper  
1903 Review of In Dahomey, Shaftesbury Theater, London. 20 May.

Paskman, Dailey  

Paskman, Dailey, and Sigmund Spaeth  

Reynolds, Harry  


*Sunday Dispatch* 1903 Review of *In Dahomey,* Shaftesbury Theater, London. 20 May.


1908 6 June.


