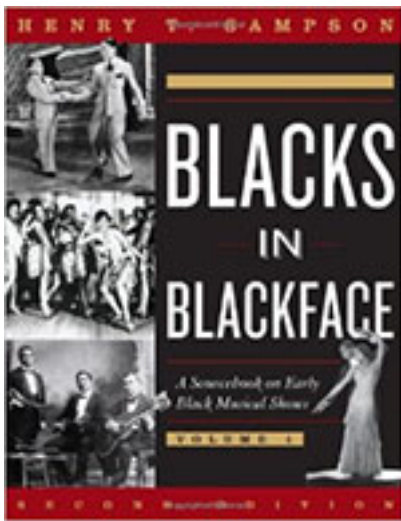


## ***Blacks in Blackface: A Sourcebook on Early Black Musical Shows*** by Henry T. Sampson

Rashida Z. Shaw | Wesleyan University

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In September 2014, New York City’s Museum of Modern Art announced that it had found a rare African American historical gem in its Biograph collection: seven reels of lost footage from an unreleased 1913 silent film featuring the once acclaimed African American comedic entertainer Bert Williams in blackface, performing alongside fellow African American artists of the early twentieth century. The resulting exhibit, “100 Years in Post-Production: Resurrecting a Lost Landmark of Black Film History,” running from October 2014 through May 2015, showcases this monumental discovery and sheds light on the complex history of minstrelsy and artistry in early black performance through visual media installations. In *Blacks in Blackface: A Sourcebook on Early Black Musical Shows*, Henry T. Sampson adds multiple layers to this very history through a densely-organized compilation of visual and print archival materials in an expanded second edition that reframes the terrain of early-twentieth-century performance within and beyond the African American minstrel mask of the stage and screen.

Sampson offers *Blacks in Blackface* as a companion publication to his 1988 book, *The Ghost Walks: A Chronological History of Blacks in Show Business, 1865–1910*, (also published by Scarecrow Press) without presenting duplicate information from the earlier text. Focusing on the years between the start of the twentieth century and the early backdrop of World War II, 1900–1940, Sampson presents an extensive two-volume compendium that chronologically or, in some chapters, alphabetically presents the development of African American entertainment and its critical reception. Each topical chapter is dedicated to an aspect of this broad history by

providing cross-sections of data on African American artists, producers, entrepreneurs, performance genres, production histories, performance venues and published music compositions, as well as critical reviews and related publications from black and white presses. Perhaps as expected, Sampson spends considerable time recording the history of African American participation in minstrelsy, stage musicals, vaudeville, nightclubs, cabarets, and orchestral performances through brief analytical essays, summaries, biographies, reviews, appendixes, numerous newly discovered images, and a comprehensive index. However, where his research comes alive is within the performance histories of the lesser-known African American artists of comedy, burlesque, carnival, exposition, circus sideshows, tabloid, and medicine shows. Sampson makes it clear in his preface that these new histories are meant to “provide a starting point for other researchers in the field” (viii), yet one cannot take for granted the expanse of the research that he definitively provides within the collection.

Indeed, *Blacks in Blackface* grants many unknown players a first-time entry into the historical records of American performance, while impressively expanding what we thought we knew about more familiar artists and performance contexts of the period. Sampson demands that his readers grasp the unlimited breadth and depth of African American performance through extensive examples that excavate the dynamism of racial and gendered performances, the context and characteristics of multiple genres and aesthetics, and the tones and perspectives of artists, critics, and spectators. For example, evident amongst the impressive array of performers recorded by Sampson are multiple shows that featured known and forgotten women solo artists, such as Josephine Baker, Queen Dora, Lottie Grady, and Bessie Smith. An assortment of familiar and unfamiliar male and female performance duos is also uncovered through the performance reviews of Butterbeans and Susie, Chapelle and Stinette, Freddie and Ginger, and Goodbar and Lewis, to name a few. The performance dates and contexts of oft-forgotten male duos are provided in the work of Buster and Rockpile, Nickerson and Anthony, Leon and Cooper, and Robinson and White, among others. The featured reviews and listings of song and dance group performers, such as Alberta Hunter and Company, Anita Bush and Company, the Dandridge Sisters, Octavia Brown and her High-Brown Syncopators, and The Whitman Sisters are included. There are also reviews that speak to the reception of black performances outside America, such as in the 19 July 1913, review of Charles Hart and Rosamond Johnson’s London performance, published in the *Indianapolis Freeman*, in which the African American performance pair was received with greater acclaim than the London performances of their white American minstrel competitors, McIntyre and Heath. Add to this the letter from African American producer Tim Owsley, who brought copyright issues to the forefront in a submission, also published in the *Indianapolis Freeman*, on 22 October 1910, that admonished the theft of shows by performers who reproduce performance content without the producer’s consent.

To be sure, in such an assortment of varied and multiple performance histories, the utility of

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Sampson's research for innumerable teaching and historical projects across multiple disciplines and area specialties becomes self-evident. While the title of the book inadequately limits the scope of Sampson's project, the archival surprises revealed inside more than make up for this misdirection. Taken together, Sampson fills innumerable gaps in the history of African American artistic innovation as he documents the accomplishments of these men and women who worked within the confines of racial segregation, discrimination, and changing American and international social, cultural, and economic landscapes.

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**Rashida Z. Shaw, Ph.D.**, is an Assistant Professor of English at Wesleyan University. Her current book project examines contemporary "Chitlin Circuit" theatrical productions and the reception practices of African American spectators. Shaw's scholarship and interviews with African American theater practitioners have appeared in the journals *Theatre Survey* and *Theatre Topics*, as well as *Time Out Chicago* magazine. Her ethnographic research has been featured, most recently, in *Black Theatre is Black Life: An Oral History of Chicago Theatre and Dance, 1970–2010* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2013).