Masking "My Face," Unmasking "My Soul": Bert Williams's Double Consciousness, Carnivalesque Inversion, and Nobodiness

⊙ Jia Zhang
University of Massachusetts, Amherst

Abstract: Known as the representative figure of black minstrelsy, Bert Williams's revolutionary success on Broadway and in the *Ziegfeld Follies* created a landmark opportunity for black voices to be heard in high-profile setting in a white world. The performance most notably preferred by his white audiences was Williams's minstrel song "Nobody," which from Williams's perspective was also an irreplaceable piece. Visually echoing his minstrel song, Williams's cakewalk performance success in the 1890s laid the basis for the song's popularity. Both the song and Williams's carnivalesque performance blurred the color line and transcended black minstrel stereotypes by taking African Americans' voices in the Jim Crow and lynching eras into serious consideration. However, though black minstrelsy has been largely misunderstood as exclusively racial stereotypes, what Bakhtin describes as the permeating carnivalesque inversion in black minstrel performance helps sharpen and clarify the double consciousness ideology between the burnt cork blackened face mask and the soul of black minstrel performers.

Keywords: Bert Williams, black minstrelsy, "Nobody," double consciousness, carnivalesque inversion

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1. Introduction

Best known as a blackface minstrel performer, Bert Williams was proclaimed by W. C. Fields to be "the funniest man I ever saw—the saddest man I ever knew" (Archeophone Records ARCH5002 5). Echoing this doubleness between his sadness and funniness, Bert Williams's revolutionary success in Broadway and the *Ziegfeld Follies* in the early 1900s, as a black man, he created a landmark opportunity for black voices to be heard in a white world. Most notably preferred by the audiences was Williams's minstrel song "Nobody," which was co-written by Williams and Alex Rogers in 1905 and publicly performed by Williams in 1906. Williams used this song to portray himself as a nobody in the white world, even though he had made unprecedented achievements as a black minstrel performer among both white and black audiences. In conversation

with his minstrel song "Nobody," the success of Williams's cakewalk performances in the 1890s, which demonstrated Williams's primacy as a stylish and humorous cakewalk performer, laid the basis for both the song's and Williams' popularity. Both the song and Williams's carnivalesque performance blurred the color line and transcended black minstrel stereotypes by taking African Americans' voices in the Jim Crow and lynching eras into serious consideration. However, although minstrelsy has been largely misunderstood as stereotyped ridicule of African Americans, the carnivalesque inversion in Williams's song performance helps sharpen and clarify the double consciousness between his burnt cork blackened face and the soul of Williams as a black minstrel performer.

Compared with those stereotyped minstrel songs, such as "Zip Coon", "Jim Dandy", and the "Jim Crow" performed by prominent blackface actors such as George Washington Dixon, Williams's "Nobody" subversively expresses black resistance to white violence with a sense of helplessness and abandonment. However, audiences or later academia, to some extent, partially misunderstood the meaning of black minstrelsy since "minstrelsy had become as much a product of subversion as it was of a repression" (Chude-Sokei 22). Though "Williams' stage persona would strike most modern observers as distasteful, if not revolting" by providing the black man with "the makeup of minstrelsy to blacken his face and exaggerate his lips" (Magee 349), unlike white minstrel performers who blackened up themselves so as to make themselves look more ridiculous, black minstrelsy is a racial mask for black performers like Bert Williams, who were forced to wear it reluctantly as a rule on stage. However, by wearing this blackface mask, black minstrel performers delivered the ideas of counter-white-violence and counter-discrimination in their performance; both resistant ideas could be found in Williams's carnivalesque style in performing "Nobody."

Carnivalesque inversion is an important element in Williams's "Nobody" performance. This inversion between musical performance and its lyrics, achieved by Williams's "comic timing, vocal inflection, facial expression, gesture, movement, and costume" (Magee 349), manifests the feature of what Mikhail Bakhtin describes as carnivalesque style. The carnivalesque inversion should be understood as "the carnivalesque ridiculing and profanation of the sacral" or "the crowning of a low-ranking vassal," which helps establish "a counter state that suspended the prevailing laws through its own set of counter-laws" (Lachmann et al. 122). It is a spirit of resisting dominant power "that is unleashed when everything is turned upside down" (122). Williams's musical performance of "Nobody" is a counter whiteness performance. As minstrelsy was taken for granted as a lower or inferior performance form in the early 20th century, Williams's seemingly hilarity in performing a sad song shapes a contrary emotion which helps foster the hidden sadness of the song. In addition, the carnivalesque inversion, according to Lachmann's definition, should be understood as a way of using profanity to express the sacredness.

Concerning black minstrelsy, there are some interrelations between the well-known and often referenced DuBoisian double consciousness and carnivalesque inversion. Both concepts convey a double-faceted ideology. Initially proposed by W. E. B. DuBois as an African American version of a pre-existing term, the concept of "double consciousness" in his 1903 *The Souls of Black Folk* tries to capture "African Americans' feelings of dissonance and dividedness between their

distant African ancestral homeland and their present American environment" (Rabaka 75). The connotations of this concept later expanded into African diaspora and other minority ethnic groups' bicultural or multicultural living experiences worldwide. Double consciousness deals directly with racism, the color-line, the tragic "mulatto," the mixed-race dilemma, and other situations related to racist accidental or deliberate misunderstandings. When it comes to racism, carnivalesque inversion focuses on acting and behaving in a reverse fashion so as to resist injustice or racial violence. In other words, it expresses what one intends to express in an externally opposite way (by performance) so as to create more powerful emotional effects on the audiences. However, double consciousness internally focuses on the individuals' relationship with the world they live in. Who are they? How shall they identify themselves, and in which way shall they keep their race pride in a white-supremacist world? It is an inner contemplation on the individual's identity and existence. Therefore, double consciousness should be understood as an internal form of carnivalesque inversion.

Bert Williams has been misunderstood by some of his audiences as a self-mocking black minstrel performer. By exploring into the inversion between the lyrics and the performance of Williams's representative minstrel song "Nobody," in which Williams portrayed himself as nobody in a white world, I have found that Williams actually unveiled the connotations of black minstrelsy as a legacy of black art form through the artist's double consciousness ideology and carnivalesque performance presented in his signature song "Nobody."

2. The Song "Nobody"

"Nobody" is a song interpolated in Walker and Williams's pioneering duet in *Abyssinia* (1906), which was established at that time as Williams's signature tune since it was required by the audience at every performance of Williams after its publication in 1905. Thematically, the song tells the story of a helpless and homeless man who is thrown into desperation, feeling like a nobody in this world. The narrator, by way of proposing a rhetorical question in each stanza, leads his listeners into a feeling of blankness. The 1905 version of this song consists of six stanzas in total with a playful single line, "I won't," by the end. The narrator's narration goes from his general feelings towards life to some specific helpless life situations that he has experienced without receiving any help. Each stanza ends with a self-provided negative answer, "Nobody." In his concept, he believes that there is nobody who would smooth his pain; help him with his hunger and homelessness; alleviate his difficulties with his working accidents; and even metaphorically pick him up when he was falling down. The narrator impresses his listeners with poverty, distraction, unhappiness, and helplessness throughout the song. He is absolutely sure about his unfortunate fate, and he is positive in a most negative sense that nobody would help him in this world. He is sure about his invisible existence as a nobody and he is certain in negating this existence and life left with nothing but pain and rain. This echoes Williams's inner monologue of being black and successful in between his white and black audiences, where life is doomed to be depressed and split for him. The ignorant responses from people towards the narrator are much related to Williams's thinking over his own identity as a man of black identity who had gained success in a white world. It was a rather racially involved dilemma

for Williams as he later received forceful criticism from the middle-class African Americans due to his "ridiculous performance" success in a white world.

In addition to its thematical matters in presenting the narrator's invisible existence, the song was characterized by its unique performance forms. Williams, by way of his beats, tones, and beguiling voices, presents the song in quite a carnival way. There is no direct sadness expressed by his singing, though the lyrics are quite sad. Instead, his tune releases a sense of uninhibitedness, indifference, playfulness, and blamelessness towards his tragic life situation. Together with the tune of mischievousness, the half-sung-half-spoken song draws out the strain in his voice, which creates a prolonged comical effect by the singer's indifferent and playful tune interacting with those misfortunes. Similar to the style of Williams's silent film *Fish* (1915), Williams inserts the rhetorical exaggeration in this song by prolonging the syllabus of "no" in the word "nobody" by the end of each stanza to enforce and emphasize the helplessness of the narrator in the song. These singing techniques turn such a sad story into an enlivened one by its carnival style.

In addition to its thematic and formal characteristics on stage, "Nobody" consolidated Williams's off-stage experiences. Though his performance on stage brought him recognition, his off-stage experience led him into self-doubt. The on-stage discipline of the blackened face and wide red mouth persona forced him to do what he did not really wish to do, something he thought was false. However, he wished to change the situation through his success. Both his on and off-stage experience produced a struggling and double consciousness within him, which evoked a contemplation over his self-identification within him. These could be well explained by Williams's inner feelings when wearing a burnt cork mask: "[r]ather than embarrassment or discomfort, Bert felt something else. 'I began to find myself,' he would simply say" (Forbes 34). It is from his performance career that Williams began to find himself as a black man, and perceive of himself as nobody in a white-dominated world. The blackened minstrel mask pushed him into a status of self-doubt, but he found himself through this self-doubt and "nobodiness." For Williams, nobodiness is a collective definition of black men's invisibility in his song. The song's carnivalesque elements and double consciousness struggles help explain for African American's invisible existence during the Jim Crow era.

3. Carnivalesque "Nobody"

Carnivalesque inversion related to this nobodiness is an element in Williams's "Nobody" performance. This inversion between musical performance and its lyrics manifests the feature of what Mikhail Bakhtin describes as "carnivalesque inversion" (Lachmann et al. 122). Black minstrelsy, as a form of African American folklore, is featured with what Bakhtin called "folk humor": Mikhail Bakhtin's "carnival," which "seeks to fill in the gap of "disorder," created by Bakhtin's image of anarchic 'folk humor,' with a socially and historically concrete image of carnival 'order'" (Elliot 135). This folk humor, in a carnival way, is a mode of negating or deconstructing the dominant power and culture through twisted comic performance and chaotic effects. In addition, the burnt cork painted black face in black minstrelsy performance serves as a mask for African American minstrel performers. This racial and cultural mask leaves space for

their soul inside: a degrading external burnt cork blackened mask, and an internal soul as African Americans to try to transcend stereotypes. Black minstrelsy was taken for granted by some arrogant audiences as a lower or inferior performance form in the early 20th century. Williams's seemingly hilarity in performing a sad song shapes a reverse emotion which helps foster the hidden sadness of the song. In addition, the carnivalesque inversion, according to Lachmann's interpretation, could be understood as the camouflaged profanity of the sacred. For example, African American art forms are sacred in an aesthetic sense, no matter whether it is in minstrel show, cake walk, blackened face, or vaudeville. The line between sacred and profane had been blurred from West African traditions to the traditions as they had been maintained by African Americans in their cultural resistance to slavery. However, the degrading dirty jokes, the exaggerated make up, the indifferent tones in expressing serious emotions are carnival images covered with irony towards white supremacy.

Carnivalesque black minstrel song sacrifices its sacredness for the purpose of popularity and the community's uplift by its entertaining function in an era when there was not much choice for the black community to speak for itself. Music and performance brought African Americans' voices to the stage, to be known to a wider audience. Williams's best-known song "Nobody" and his success in his minstrel performance career set a good example for readers to understand the meaning of this carnivalesque inversion:

I ain't never done nuthin' to nobody,/
I ain't never done nuthin' to nobody no time,/
Oh, until I get something from somebody some time,/
I'll never do nuthin' for nobody no time.

(transcribed from Archeophone ARCH 5004)

Following the echoes of Williams's voice, the shivering and quivering tone amid each verse of the song finally leads the audience to that "nobody." The nobodiness delivered to the audiences was well received among them as it was believed to have well explained the cruelty of people's life. That is why the song was required by the audience at every performance of Williams. However, for Williams's black audiences, for whom racial issues were infesting around them, the interpretation of misery in the song encompasses more than daily life of the white masses.

When winter comes with snow and sleet
And me with hunger and cold feet
Who says "Here's twenty five cents, go and eat, why don't you," Huh?
Nobody.

(transcribed from Archeophone ARCH 5004)

Why does the man have to suffer from coldness and hunger in a developed society? "I ain't never done nothin' to nobody" indicates his innocence (Archeophone Records ARCH 5004). The same question relates to why African Americans have to suffer from hunger and misery when they work all day long since slavery, but get nothing? They "ain't never done nothin' to nobody." The lyrics

recall slavery so as to indicate the reality that no matter how innocent they were, so long as they were black-skinned, misery was around. From this perspective, the lyrics indicate the violent injustice suffered by black people who were unfairly brutalized in the early 20th century Jim Crow era infested with lynching, segregation, and discrimination throughout their lives.

In addition to the carnivalesque counter-whiteness in its lyrics, the contemplation of African Americans' invisible existence and nobodiness are also reflected by the song's vocal features. "In the song 'Nobody,' he slowly twirls and untwirls himself in languorous contortions, his profound bass-overcast with gloom and fit for dirges—all the while unrolling the curious grievance which is the subject of that piece" (J. B. 22), therefore, Williams shows no violent emotions nor resentment to express his opposition and grievance. Instead, his slow rhythmic voice acts like the river flowing quietly with bumpy stones underlaid— "[n]o melodramatic tone manifest[s] resentment […] Slowly, he worked through the song as though his misfortune were certain" (Forbes 144), and the vocal swiftness in Williams's voice coincides with cake walk gliding, and the bumpiness suits with the dragging and shuffling in cake walk so as to well present the dichotomy between carnival laughter and the hidden wretchedness of the performer. The pain and wretchedness caused by his invisible existence lead to and act as the setting and background of African Americans' life during the Jim Crow era. What's more, the song confirms nobodiness through a sense of emptiness in the song as the negative form "no-" and "not" has repeated twenty-two times in total in the song, which further negates the existence of the narrator as "nobody."

In addition to the carnival nobodiness, the relation between Williams (the performer), and the narrator of the song who is miserable for his wretchedness, is reversive. This reversibility between the artist and the narrator indicates the carnivalesque and nobodiness of Williams's life experience in reality. As a black man, Williams went to Broadway, gained popularity, and earned more money than most white people did at that time. His success broke part of the stereotypes white people held for black people. His personal experience is a testimony that the insulting comments about black people like their laziness and inferiority were not true, as Williams, an African American, was a highly talented, diligent, respectable, and professional performer, which at times evoked the envious anger of white mobs. However, white mobs, guilty of the evil of enviousness, and their violent or threatening attempts in preventing Williams from his success, did not have their way. The character he depicted in "Nobody" is uniquely indifferent towards real life misfortunes though he has to experience those misfortunes. The song sounds like the narrator is indifferent towards nobody, towards nothing. This indifference explains Williams's attitude towards white mobs and discrimination against him as a black man in reality. This indifference and negation isolate the wretched man from his surroundings, and this absolute isolation of the narrator from the world he lives in is a carnivalesque of his own, which leads to an understanding of Williams's isolation from his surroundings as a carnivalesque in his real life.

4. Double Consciousness in "Nobody"

In "Nobody," the ideology of double consciousness is represented by three different dimensions. The first one is the doubleness within Williams as both the performer and the narrator

of the song. Williams knew his character well: "there is nothing about the fellow I work that I don't know. I have studied him, his joys, his sorrows" (J. B. 19). This dedication to his story characters transfer and insert his own personality into his performance. In short, "Nobody" is a song that tells the story of Williams himself. The sadness of the lyrics and the hilarity of the performance form the double conscious split within the song. As "'[d]ouble consciousness' was applied to cases of split personality" (Bruce Jr. 300), the man's split consciousness in "Nobody" happens when he feels his invisibility and his existence at the same time:

When life is full of clouds and rain
And I'm full of nothin' and pain

(transcribed from Archeophone 5004)

The narrator negates his existence on purpose by the concept that "I am full of nothin'," at the same time, he confirms his existence by the idea that "I am full of […] pain." In Williams's performance, at the very beginning of the song, there were auxiliaries "ah huh huh" laughter to help enlighten the whole scene. This liveliness constructs a sense of drunkenness through his voices with the circling and bumpy music on stage: "In carnival, laughter and excess push aside the seriousness and the hierarchies of 'official' life" (Elliot 129), while in double consciousness, the laughter of Williams as a performer in expressing the narrator's desperation and wretchedness shapes the split and doubled ideologies within both the performer and the narrator himself.

The second representation is the doubleness of compliments and criticism towards Williams's performance during Jim Crow segregation—from both black and white audiences. This doubleness focuses on the criticism towards the stereotypes in Williams's performance and the compliments for his contributions as an artist on stage. Williams is taken as the pioneer who helped blur the color line during the era when discrimination and segregation were in their full swing. There are certainly some contradictions and criticism towards him while he attracted both black people and white people together for his performance. This is why it was difficult for Williams to define himself in between. On the one hand, black minstrelsy was full of stereotypes, which is the reason why black minstrelsy became taboo to talk about during the 1960s and 1970s; on the other hand, according to Dr. Louis Chude-Sokei in *Bert Williams: Pioneer Work*, Williams stayed away from any identity definition on himself in front of both his white and black audiences. This refusal to self-identify directs audiences to view Williams as a performer and artist on stage. In this sense, the color line is blurred for him as an artist, and this helps explain that he blurred the color line as a successful minstrel performer. However, while some take him as a hero "central to the tale of racial uplift and progress" (Forbes 128), some take his performance as "beneath the dignity of the better class of 'the race,' and that it brings them into ridicule and contempt…and so should be frowned down by the better class of colored people" (125). Both the criticism and compliments from different groups of audiences towards Williams sharpen the doubleness of the artist himself.

The third representation goes back to the doubleness of the blackened facial mask. Similar to the origin of the cakewalk, which is believed to be a mocking by southern black people during slavery of white Americans' funny steps in imitating African American dance, blackened face was

originally an imitation made by African Americans from the white people who blackened their face so as to imitate black people and play black stereotypes for fun and malevolence. Therefore, there is a double imitation within the origin of blackened face as a mask. It marked as a satirical laughing of black people at white people, while white people took minstrelsy and blackened face as a way of jeering at black stereotypes that they felt were real. The whole scene impresses recent readers with a sense of weirdness and contradictions. Due to the cruelty of slavery, African Americans' dissatisfied emotions towards the injustice and brutalization from the white masters could not have been expressed directly. Satirical subversions and carnivalesque inversion availed in slave songs, dances, and black minstrelsy were generally the indirect way to express their anger, sadness, or dissatisfactions. Though many white people believed that slave songs and dances were quite joyous, they did not quite get the aesthetics and emotional spirits of these songs and dances. This is the same case for Williams in performing the song, "the blackface covered and effectively hid the real Williams […]. Burnt cork became part of what enable him to step into that onstage self, the buffer between the audience and the inner Williams" (Forbes 34). Concerning "Nobody," Williams sings in a quite carnival and hilarious way in his blackened facial mask and flowing tunes to tell a sad story:

Who soothes my thumpin', bumpin' brain?
Nobody
…
Who says "Here's twenty five cents, go and eat, why don't you," Huh?
Nobody
…
Who took the engine off my neck?
Nobody
…
Who cried out "Stop now, that's dynamite!"?
Not a soul

(transcribed from Archeophone 5004)

The blackened face adds to the effect of carnivalesque and doubleness of the song by enforcing and presenting the idea of what it is to be black in America. In addition, the doubleness of the blackened facial mask emphasizes the artist's interpretation of blackness in the Jim Crow era. Helplessness, poverty, isolation, worthlessness under discrimination, lynching, and white mobs infesting were the scenes connected to blackness, which helped define nobodiness in his song. The biased attitudes from middle class black people towards minstrel performers add to Williams's split within the community and help explain why he stayed away from self-identity definition and labelled himself as "nobody". However, in his late years, under his blackened face, "[r]ather than embarrassment or discomfort, Bert felt something else. 'I began to find myself,' he would simply say" (Forbes 34). If this blackened face led him to self-doubt in the early stage of his career, it helped him find his way back to his soul as a black man in his late years.

5. Conclusion

The connotations of black minstrelsy as a legacy of black art form through Bert Williams's double consciousness ideology and carnivalesque performance were presented in the song "Nobody." Historically, the Jim Crow era left African Americans with traumatic memories of discrimination, injustice, violence, brutalization, and death by lynching. Williams's "I am nobody" could be taken as a slogan for black people's invisible existence in that era. Out of the concern for their safety in America as black men, they were forced to partially hide themselves. Hiding means they could not expose their inner sides to their audiences and the fading of inner world from the public as public performers well explained their invisibility for the sake of self-protection.

Though the song tells about the wretchedness, sadness, isolation, abandonment, helplessness, misfortune, hunger, and poverty of a black man, it connects the next generations of African Americans with the former ones. By evoking contemplations among Black audiences and among its recent readers over the living and survival of African Americans during the Jim Crow era, it narrates a shared Black experience. "For Williams, songs were […] vehicles for his unique stage persona—the hard-luck, sad clown figure" (Magee 350), by the end, Bert Williams turned into real "Jonah Man," the most significant character in his solo musical performance:

> My luck started when I was born
> Leas' so the folks say.
> Dat same hard luck's been my bes' frien'
> To dis very day
>
> (Forbes 112)

Miserable and unfortunate as the "Jonah Man," whom Williams defined as "the man who, even if it rained soup, would be found with a fork in his hand and no spoon in sight" (113), Williams realized in 1909 that he was still nobody in the white world though he had made great achievements by his pioneering performance. Wearing a burnt cork blackened mask, the wish to be taken seriously as a black man and an African American was one of his life goals as a minstrel performer. He spent all his life in breaking the walls of stereotypes, color-line, shackles of Jim Crow, and violence of white mobs by his carnival performance. Though he came to the conclusion that "[n]obody really wants me" (Archeophone Records ARCH5002 5), the legacy he left now finally turned the misunderstood "Jonah Man" into the one who deserves much respect in the memory of African Americans.

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