Louis Chude-Sokei’s *The Last “Darky”: Bert Williams, Black-on-Black Minstrelsy and the African Diaspora* is a much needed and long overdue text that outlines the history of minstrelsy, the performance of “Blackness” and the significance of the African American guise on the global stage. The current climate of globalization and increasing tension in the United States around immigration pose a peculiar challenge to Black communities around the world. In particular this climate begs the question: who exactly does “African American” represent? Understanding race as part of the performance of power (or lack thereof) and looking at the history of Black minstrelsy, the dynamics of performing “African American”-ness reminds us of the fragility, permeability, and fluidity of Blackness and especially of “African Americanness.” Chude-Sokei’s case study centers Bert Williams, a founder of Black-on-Black minstrelsy. It allows Chude-Sokei to simultaneously enter conversations on racial representation, Black modernism, Pan-Africanism, assimilation, and the performance of “African Americanness” within the African Diaspora.

Bert Williams (1876–1922) was born in the Bahamas and trailblazed through the music theater industry by masquerading as an “African American” to become the first Black person to be cast in a white Broadway production and to achieve his period’s level of international stardom. Despite perceptions that Williams dehumanized himself and the “Black race,” Chude-Sokei asks the reader to dig deeper into the implications of a Black man darkening himself to play a Black “American” man. He also fittingly stresses the correlation between the stage Negro and the “New Negro.” Though it is not noted in much of the literature, both Williams and minstrelsy at large profoundly influenced mainstream American theater. Minstrelsy especially shaped the artistry of the Harlem Renaissance and the rise of Pan-Africanism, where the politics of representation were of paramount importance to its anti-racist agenda. With great clarity Chude-Sokei answers the questions: Why does “Black” in much of late nineteenth and early twentieth century theatre imply Black *American*? What does it mean that Williams...
was not American? What was Williams actually performing? Why was minstrelsy effective in Williams’ ability to perform on Broadway? How do the contradictions within Black-on-Black minstrelsy act as a site of resistance to racist constructs?

Though the text is heavily grounded in an historical and theoretical framework, Chude-Sokei remembers to account for Williams’ humanity. While he had a rounded understanding of why he performed in blackface, Williams also felt a level of rejection caused by the ridicule of many Black communities as well as the pressures of fame and celebrity. He found the companionship with his performing partners George Walker and Ada Overton Walker to be priceless in the face of a completely white pool of colleagues. This network of support is crucial in understanding the thick masking that Black performers in blackface endured.

In Chapter 4, “The Global Economy of Minstrelsy,” Chude-Sokei shows his strength as he situates minstrelsy not only within the political economy of imperialism, but also within intraracial politics. The inclusion of Claude McKay’s use of the African American south as a tool for representation (another West Indian employing African Americanness in the arts) and the discussion of gender politics in minstrelsy call for broader work on Black-on-Black and invisible-cork minstrelsy. Chude-Sokei’s insight on gender and nationality in Black-on-Black minstrelsy are worthy of expansion.

The text sometimes suffers from repetition, and there is some indulgence in rhetoric. However, these weaknesses are outweighed by Chude-Sokei’s understanding of intraracial performance politics and a refreshing absence of a focus on authenticity. His seamless navigation through these loaded areas distinguishes this work from other texts on minstrelsy. Chude-Sokei’s challenge to racial identity and representation deconstructs what he calls, “binary chromatism” (117) and “African American exceptionalism.” (117). Previous work on minstrelsy has been heavily invested in the white gaze and whites in blackface. The Last “Darky” expands this history because it unveils the complex relations between Blacks from different parts of the diaspora and how performance complicates these relationships. Let’s hope that Chude-Sokei offers us more and that others take his lead in presenting a more complete account of minstrelsy.

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