Although wireless storytelling was still in its early stages, it didn’t take long for radio to mature. Vital to the literary turn in radio, as chapter two shows, was the prestige movement launched by the underdog CBS network, which became a haven for inventive radio auteurs whose creative output rescued broadcast culture (at least for a spell) from the pull of daytime soaps and for-profit programming. American network radio was barely ten years old when CBS debuted the Columbia Workshop in the summer of 1936. The aim of the Workshop was to produce serious radio literature by pushing the envelope of playwriting as well as broadcast technology. Not only Orson Welles but other writers who moved into radio—including Norman Corwin, Arch Oboler, and Archibald MacLeish—were invited to press the boundaries of radiophonic storytelling. During the course of its eight-year run, the Workshop aired nearly 400 works for radio, many of them bold and experimental exceptions to what listeners ordinarily heard. Prestige radio contributed to what many saw as a novel body of enduring literature, a virtual public library that allowed CBS to characterize itself not just as a broadcaster but as a publisher.
This chapter examines issues of race, class, and gender in late nineteenth-century cross-racial performance from the perspective of black performers. It considers the work of black performers Bob Cole, Billy Johnson, and a collection of ambitious artists who decided to reexamine the role of the minstrel on Broadway, the epicenter of American entertainment. After performing in blackface minstrel companies, vaudeville houses, and colored road shows controlled by white producers, most Negro artists had a definite idea of what America's class- and race-coded theatrical industry had to offer them. In the 1890s, Cole and Johnson would introduce something legitimately new and different. Despite opposition from white producers, they launched a revolutionary theatrical venture, A Trip to Coontown, which would become the first Broadway musical written, produced, and performed solely by African American artists.