Masks and Masquerade: The Iconography of the Harlem Renaissance

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IN SOME PLACES the autumn of 1924 may have been an unremarkable season. In Harlem, it was like a foretaste of paradise. “A blue haze descended at night and with it strings of fairy lights on broad avenues” (Lewis, Vogue, 103). Arna Bontemps’s description of Harlem provides an appropriate backdrop for a world of magic and masquerade. The Harlem of the twenties was such a world—a mecca for black artists and performers and their supporters, and for white as well as black audiences. The Harlem of the twenties created a space in which African-American artists had an unparalleled environment for creativity, an environment in which both production and artistry were controlled by the “actor.”

The use of the term actor to designate the artists working in all areas of production—art, theatre, music, writing—implies control. The idea of control of production is vital to understanding the artistic creations of Harlem. The concept of artistic control also helps to reclaim the importance of what happened in Harlem, that world so often described as “almost heaven.” In his forward to Black Magic Ossie Davis writes:

Langston [Hughes] reminds us that our singing, our dancing, our music, our humor, our stories, our “entertainment”—spirituals, jazz, the blues, rap—was, and still is all too often, the one place where we have a chance to set standards and make definitions . . . the one thing about us that could never be fully explained or explained away . . . an island of self-sufficiency set
in a sea of almost universal doubt. Our art, to us, was always, and still is, a form of self-assertion, a form of struggle, a repository of self-esteem that racism, Jim Crow, and the Ku Klux Klan could never beat out of us—the only authentic history that black folks have in America, because we made it ourselves.

Harlem brought together a large group of African-American artists in one location. Close to white culture, 1920s Harlem allowed a community of artists the freedom to maintain control of artistic production. The Harlem Renaissance has often been accused of failure. Central to any examination of the success or failure of this movement is who controlled production. In Harlem, it was the artist who controlled the audience and the gaze. Neither a failed economy that affected whites and blacks alike, or the later relative submersion (except for musical forms) by the white mainstream of the production of the Renaissance could change that tradition of reversal of artist control.

In an examination of control, several aspects of African-American culture are important, but two seem vital. Both concern African-Americans as marginal to a white society that has controlled or attempted to control them. One has to do with the idea of carnival; and the power reversals that carnival creates; the other concerns the idea of speaking from behind a mask.

In Arna Bontemps's description of Harlem—a "blue haze" and "fairy lights"—a feeling of a special space eluding time is created, the atmosphere often connected with carnival. The iconography of the Harlem Renaissance is akin to that of the masque or carnival—of perceptions and reversals, of expectations about the performer, and of a reversal of societal positions in that the normally marginalized person or group gains control. The idea of the mask, the masque, and the masquerade—what Russian literary theorist Bakhtin would describe as Carnival—illuminates the phenomenon of Harlem during the 1920s in fascinating ways and provides additional credence to
Ossie Davis's statement of control from a performative view. It also creates a different view of spectators, of a white audience which becomes marginalized, losing ownership of the gaze rather than performing its usual function of marginalizing those others performing for it.

Examples of social reversals in instances of carnival appear in a long tradition of literary works—in Jonson's *Bartholomew Fair*, for instance, or in Hawthorne's description of carnival in his *The Marble Faun*. Annual examples of reversals through carnival occur in the festivals of Mardi Gras in New Orleans or Carnival in Rio de Janeiro. In each, the carnival atmosphere creates a new freedom of action and permits new interactions and power reversals to occur; a suspension of the everyday, the creation of a mythic world with mythic performers peopling it—performers like Florence Mills, Bill Robinson, "Duke" Ellington, or the "Empress of the Blues," Bessie Smith.

In Harlem, a normally marginalized group of African-American artists and performers gained control and became the locus of power that expressed and created a space of another kind, a space freed from convention and sometimes laced with exoticism and a return to primitive motifs.

For the African-American, a return to the primitive was a search for or a return to roots. For the white audience the primitive implied exoticism and the African-American artist embodied an "exotic other," an escape from "civilization." This white audience was alienated from "civilization" by the horrors of trench warfare and gas and by an increasingly mechanistic industrial society with its accompanying machine-age iconography. Popular conceptions of Einstein's theories of relativity had shaken not only scientific circles with a restructuring of physical bases, but they appeared in popular magazine articles and were transferred to the social and philosophical
worlds as well, causing a shifting relativity in interpersonal and individual relationships. This white audience also accepted the new psychological theories of Freud that presented the subconscious or the "id" as a repository of primitive and sexual desires wishing escape. Harlem, with its music and often primitive iconography, seemed a perfect escape for the tensions of modern life; an escape to the primitive with the promise of a freer sexuality to an audience whose paid guides took them on a safari to the clubs. This look to the "primitive other" was a circumstance the Harlem artist often used advantageously, turning the mask on the visitor and thus maintaining control of the production of art.

Masks have been essential to African-Americans. From the time of their importation as slaves, African-Americans have had to devise strategies for physical, emotional, and cultural survival. Any examination of the production of works in Harlem and the role of the artist or actor must take this history into account and examine two kinds of discourse or expression that arose out of "wearing the mask." The concept of the Signifying Monkey is vital to a discussion of masks and masquerade.

The Signifying Monkey is rooted in African folklore. The story was carried in stories from Africa to the United States, and it survived slavery. In fact, the idea of a signifying trickster became a survival technique for the African-American living in a white world. The Signifying Monkey was given new forms in slave tales, in both the Br'er Rabbit stories collected by white Joel Chandler Harris, and in African-American Charles Chestnutt's Conjure Woman stories. The Signifying Monkey is able to best a larger, more powerful creature through a quickness of wit and a false appearance of reality or desire. Through this ability, although appearing oppressed, the Signifying Monkey—or person—is often able to change circumstances and best the oppressor. Signifying's history ex-
tends through performances in Harlem to present-day rap and discourse in which the meaning of words often varies from the dictionary or "white" meaning. Signifying implies speaking from behind a mask to those who will not understand, and implies a complicit understanding of the wearing of the mask from those who do understand.

In his book, *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance*, Houston Baker, Jr., speaks of the masks used in two kinds of discourse or signifying traditionally used by African-American writers and speakers. The first is the mask assumed, as Baker says Booker T. Washington assumed it, within the "form" or a discourse of race that satisfied white assumptions about racial stereotypes. Baker contends that in his speeches and appeals for funds, Washington was careful to frame his discourse within the stereotypical expectations of a white audience, then to go beyond those stereotypes to attain his goals. The context in which Washington acted was one that Baker says had slavery as a beginning historical precedent, even though the signifying that it implies reaches back to African roots. This discourse, however, looks no further for its images than those images of slavery—of blacks as childlike, often without ambition or "white" morals, "needing" white guidance and support for survival. It is from this tradition that the white conception of the African-American embodied in the minstrel show character or in the characters familiar to the white audience that were created in both the book and the play *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, a white northern woman's conception of the Negro, appeared and grew.

In representational iconography that was created in the Harlem Renaissance, this mask can be seen in some of the work of painter Palmer Hayden. David Driskell writes:

Hayden saw no reason to refrain from borrowing from the popular images of Blacks by White artists. He often exaggerated Black features, stylizing eyes, noses, lips, and ears, and making the
heads of many of his subjects look bald and rounded in form. But he insisted that he was not poking fun at Black people. (132)

Hayden was interested in folklore and felt his images were creating a visual representation of that folklore. Because of a lack of critical acceptance, however, he was often placed in a position of defending his work. Hayden actually repainted his autobiographical The Janitor Who Paints. The “Black man wearing a beret” and the “beautiful young black woman holding a child” cover the original painting in which “the janitor looks like a caricature of a Black person” and “the beautiful black woman and her lovely newborn are a minstrel-faced mammy and a grinnin’ child” (Campbell, 33). In her introduction to Harlem Renaissance: Art of Black America Mary Campbell writes:

Hayden’s deliberately self-effacing interpretation of his efforts as an artist, his insistence on portraying Blacks with the masks of the minstrels—that is, as performers for a White audience—and his ingratiating reference to the benevolence of his liberators, are probably honest . . . portrayals of Hayden’s very real feelings about his efforts at making art. As such, they are poles apart from Meta Fuller’s aristocratic defiance and political sophistication or Aaron Douglas’s epic perspective on the history and origins of the African-American. (33)

Meta-Fuller’s work and that of Aaron Douglas better fit the second mask, or “veil,” of which Baker writes, that of deformation (essentially de-formation), in which the act of speech or performance goes beyond, or de-forms expectations in a return to an ancient trope of form—in this case a return to African and primitive motifs. This de-formation creates a space in which new forms and tropes, based on transformations of older ones, are possible. Through the use of de-formation, many diverse sounds, images, and voices are possible. A polyphonic present that includes many past forms, ways of being, or ways of seeing can be created: For example, the return to primitive motifs in the painting of Aaron Douglas goes
beyond the historical fact of slavery as the beginning point of his imagistic discourse, returning rather to African roots and to a long history that did not begin with, but included and survived, slavery. Douglas's flat, hard-edged style that harkens back to African motifs probably reached its greatest achievement in his thirties' mural "Aspects of Negro Life," a work that contains much reference not only to the history of the slave and to African roots, but also to the trope of music.

These divergent discourses, both Washington’s style and DuBois’s vision, have relationships to music. The musical form of jazz—is transformative in the same sense as any other discourse for the melodies of jazz can be traced through combinations of syncopated marching bands, ragtime, blues, and spirituals—transformations of those African melodies imported with persons sold as slaves. Through the use of one or the other of these forms of discourse, a freed world is provided to the audience. The form used extends from that of the expectations of a white audience (or a black audience enjoying the actors—and their own—ability to signify on the more powerful white world) to an interest in determining a past and rootedness through the tracing of roots and culture through slavery to African sources. The reversal, or the control that the performer holds, is contained in the private joke of the performers who act from behind this mask and in the vision of the black audience which is a party to the signifying being done. The signifying is not revealed to those outside. Performance, then, occurs to a greater or lesser degree as a masque depending on spectators’ understanding and expectations.

Genevieve Fabre cites a historical precedent for such masquerade and reversal in her *Drumbeats, Masks and Metaphor*:

From the time they boarded ships for the passage to the New World, slaves provided shows for the entertainment of whites. . . . From their very first appearances, these shows took
on a subversive character. Similar in form to African ceremonies or festivals, they were clearly occasions to perpetuate certain customs and to preserve the cultural heritage. . . . Mimed songs that had all the appearance of praising whites actually satirized them. Slaves were thus able to express their dissatisfaction and unhappiness without risking punishment for their insolence. (4)

The issue of control raised by Fabre is vital, as is the issue of an African-American standard for judging African-American art. In *Black Theatre: Premise and Presentation*, Carlton and Barbara Molette state:

> There is presently a great deal of concern that many Afro-American concepts or aesthetics are so totally a product of white oppression that we ought not to glorify them. Some have taken the position that we should consciously reject traditional Afro-American art that is clearly connected to oppression. (43)

The Molettes however, feel that art must reflect the cultural experience of the maker and of the audience for that art. They stress the importance of who is in control of the form and production of art. In speaking of Black theatre they say:

> Although the style of the language and other such surface characteristics may have changed through the years, there is no indication that the intended functions of Black theatre for Black audiences have changed concurrently. The combined use of double meaning and comic irony as a contributor to survival within an environment of systematic oppression appears to be a recurring function, as does the galvanizing of existing anti-slavery sentiment. (35)

Whenever a Black comic hero succeeds in controlling his destiny while exhibiting wit and comic irony, Black audiences seem to be willing to accept some accompanying racial cliches. So, as heroes in plays by Black playwrights are encountered, a key question must constantly be raised: Who is really in control? (113)

The question of control in theatre might best be looked at through a musical review that appealed strongly to both black and white audiences. "Shuffle Along," the first all-black musical play of the twenties to be seen on Broadway, appealed to both black and white audiences—although
it was conceived for black theatre. Written, directed, and acted by African-Americans, "Shuffle Along" was described as an "explosion" of energy, singing and dancing on stage. The plot was concerned with the campaign for mayor of one virtuous and one not-so-virtuous pair of candidates. Both black and white audiences loved the show. Stanley Green says "white audiences were happy to travel a bit north of the theatre district to enjoy the show's earthy humor, fast pacing, spirited dancing, and infectious rhythms" (1921 np).

We, looking back, are taken aback by the pictures of this production which show black actors in blackface. While familiar with Al Jolson's state renditions of black, minstrel-like characters in such plays as "Bombo" and "Sinbad," or his rendition of "Mammy," sung from his knees in the movie "The Jazz Singer," we do not expect to see black actors performing in blackface for a black audience. Yet the use of such a mask descends from the tradition of minstrel show where stereotypical portrayals of African-Americans were performed for white audiences and from which blacks were often barred as audience. As we do not expect Palmer Hayden's hidden janitor who paints, we do not expect such interpretations from black actors. Yet "Shuffle Along" had wide appeal for black audiences as well as white ones—for white audiences not only because of the power and energy of the performances, but also because expectations of black stereotypes were reinforced. The appeal for black audiences was because of excellence and energy of the performances and the signifying irony that bonded performers and audience members.

"Shuffle Along" as a musical revue differed from the Eugene O'Neill play that opened the white stage to black actors and that created white interest in Africa-American culture and theatre—the drama "The Emperor Jones." O'Neill's character Brutus Jones, while a fine psycholog-
ical portrait of a disintegrating man, is a portrait of a black man whose descent and spiritual collapse is directly related to the misuse of power; a concept that many black critics call a Eurocentric rather than an Afrocentric view of the psyche. O'Neill's creation, then, is seen by many black critics as a white creation for a white audience. Loften Mitchell in his book *Black Drama* says that, during the twenties revival of the play in Harlem, when Jules Bledsoe, the actor who played Brutus Jones, ran fearfully through the jungle "negroes shouted from the audience: 'Man, you come on outa that jungle! This is Harlem!'" (84).

Despite excellent stock companies, the cost of tickets and the production of plays like "The Emperor Jones" or "In Abraham's Bosom" by white authors and a failure to speak to the daily life of African-Americans caused a decline in black theatre. Mitchell says "It was . . . easy for people to turn from the lies and fairy tales placed on the American stage to those manufactured by Hollywood, especially since the latter were considerably less expensive" (84). Although black film companies were developed in Harlem, the stranglehold of Hollywood distribution made their continued existence problematic because of production costs and the limited revenues that could be gained without wide distribution. Images of blacks in Hollywood films were stereotypical and created for white audience expectations. The stereotypes of lazy, stupid, shiftless black male characters in the early silent films of "Rastas" and "Sambo," the later roles of Stepin Fetchit, the easily frightened, gullible black, or the singing mammy were the images that Hollywood projected for many years. Black audiences often had to create reversals in order to identify with movies. In Hollywood film, the locus of control was certainly not with the African-American performer engaging with an African-American audience. In *Black Magic* Langston Hughes and Milton
Meltzer indicate the extent of Hollywood stereotyping, the lack of control of the black artist or writer, and the failure to recognize the potential of a black audience.

If film characters were stereotyped, the characters created by African-American writers during the Harlem Renaissance were not. Writing had a wide range. Claude McKay’s *Home to Harlem*, a celebration of primitive sexuality and sensuality that caused W.E.B. DuBois to say that he felt he needed to take a bath (Lewis, “Harlem,” 72) explored a world of sex, clubs, and music that was entirely black. Like the artist Douglas, McKay was concerned with a primitive motif, but with a very different outlook and outcome, one greatly concerned with sexual prowess.

While McKay was criticized for the blatant sexuality of *Home to Harlem*, the Harlem community felt that white writer and critic, Carl Von Vechten, an avid supporter of the Harlem Renaissance and frequent visitor not only to clubs but to house parties as well, had betrayed them with the sexual portraits that made up his book about Harlem, *Nigger Heaven*.

In contrast, Nella Larsen’s fiction explores the African-American middle class world and examines the constructs of race in *Passing*, and in *Quicksand* the Mulatto’s place in society. Larsen’s protagonist, Helga Crane, is divided in her feeling about Harlem, at first feeling it is home, then feeling later that Harlem is a world from which she must escape. She is not comfortable in either the black or the white world, and is destroyed as a result of her search for identity.

In Larsen’s, McKay’s, and Von Vechten’s books, clubs, music and dancing are all important parts of Harlem life. It was, after all, primarily the music, musical artists, and new dance forms that attracted white audiences to the more “sexually free and primitive” Harlem. The influence of musical forms on literature may, however, be seen
most clearly in the poetry of Sterling Brown and Langston Hughes. Brown celebrates Blues singer Ma Rainey as well as the Blues form from which jazz developed. Kathy J. Ogren, in her essay “Controversial Sounds: Jazz Performance as Theme and Language in the Harlem Renaissance” says “Hughes equates the effect of the performance atmosphere with that of the Garden of Eden and of ancient Africa” in “Jazzonia” (172). She says Hughes's 1920s poems are his “own blues and jazz performances” (174).

The clubs were music, and music more than any other expression survived the slave voyages from Africa, slavery, emancipation, segregation, and the Jim Crow laws. Transformations of musical forms and the interpretations given by musicians are perhaps the most outstanding heritage of the Harlem Renaissance. Music not only informed the other art productions of the time, but more than art, theatre, film or writing, music has been the transformative trope that created the most cultural and artistic appreciation for black artists.

Jazz, the musical drawing card of Harlem, was not unknown to the white population. World War I disseminated and popularized jazz. When James Reese Europe enlisted in the army and was asked to form a musical regiment, he presented concerts in the States before debarkation for Europe and left the trenches to play in Paris, taking France and Europe by storm with the innovative musical techniques that Europe described as innately black. Europe said:

I have come back from France more firmly convinced than ever that negroes should write negro music. We have our own racial feeling and if we try to copy whites we will make bad copies. . . . Our musicians do their best work when using negro material. (Southern, 225)

In the jazz clubs of Harlem, the musician ruled. The world of Harlem, that pre-taste of paradise, was greatest for the musician. As Doctor Clayton wrote in “Angels in
Harlem,“ Harlem was the place where brown-skinned angels in the form of blues singers, worldly angels, helped to find a way for an exchange of culture in an increasingly changing and transformative world. He wrote:

I know Harlem can’t be Heaven ’cause New York is right down here on earth,

But it’s headquarters for brownskin angels from everywhere else in this world. . . .

I know blues singers don’t go to Heaven ’cause Gabriel bawls ’em out,

But all the good ones go to Harlem and help them angles beat it out. (Oliver, 77)

Those angels of the blues and jazz musicians helped to carry the poetry, writing, music and art of Harlem far beyond its geographic boundaries as well as beyond the relational boundaries of time, leaving us not only with a memory of a nostalgic past, but with a tradition that continues to grow and change, and transform.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


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