'And he shall be called woman': behind the mask of selected black male actors cross-dressing in entertainment

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ABSTRACT

DEPARTMENT OF AFRICAN AMERICAN/AFRICANA WOMEN'S STUDIES

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B. A. COMMUNICATION BROADCASTING, ALCORN STATE UNIVERSITY, 1995

'AND HE SHALL BE CALLED WOMAN:'

BEHIND THE MASK OF BLACK MALE ACTORS CROSS-DRESSING IN ENTERTAINMENT

Advisor: Dr. Daniel Black

Thesis dated December 2009

This research explored Dunbar's concept of the mask in order to examine why select black male actors, Flip Wilson (as Geraldine), Eddie Murphy (as Rasputia), Martin Lawrence (as Sheneneh), and Tyler Perry (as Madea), have worn the mask of femininity to survive the vicissitudes of the American stage. It explained what factors compelled these selected black male actors to mask their appearance and why the outward signs of femininity are used as vehicles of communication in their artistic expression.

The methodology involved a visual deconstruction of media utilizing literary texts as the instrument to analyze the movies and television shows of these actors, and the research centered on the theories of W. E. B. Du Bois' notions of the veil and double consciousness, Stephen Greenblatt's idea of self-fashioning and self-cancellation, and Franz Fanon's views on language found in the book Black Skin White Masks.
While wearing the mask, Wilson, Murphy, Lawrence, and Perry challenge society’s notion of black manhood, the limitation of the black man’s freedom of speech, and the role of black women in their plight for an uninhibited existence. These actors also tackle crucial matters, namely black female sexuality, classism, obesity, and the black family. These actors achieve their objective and combat the gaze of both black and white America by self-fashioning and self-canceling their identities at will.
'AND He SHALL BE CALLED WOMAN:'
BEHIND THE MASK OF SELECTED BLACK MALE ACTORS CROSS-DRESSING IN ENTERTAINMENT

A THESIS
SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF CLARK ATLANTA UNIVERSITY IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF ARTS

BY
JENNIFER RENEE' PAGE

DEPARTMENT OF AFRICAN AMERICAN/AFRICANA WOMEN'S STUDIES

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS ........................................................................................................... ii

Chapter

ONE  INTRODUCTION: BEHIND THE MASK ......................................................... 1

  Statement of Problem ................................................................................................. 5
  Significance of the Study ............................................................................................ 7
  Conceptual Framework ............................................................................................... 7
  Methodology ................................................................................................................ 12
  Research Questions .................................................................................................... 13
  Chapter Organization ................................................................................................... 13
  Limitation of the Study ............................................................................................... 14
  Definition of Terms ..................................................................................................... 15

TWO  REVIEW OF LITERATURE .............................................................................. 16

THREE  HISTORICAL LOOK AT BLACK MALE ACTORS, CROSS-DRESSING AND MASKING (FROM AFRICA TO MINISTREL SHOWS) ........................................................................................................ 30

FOUR  THE FEMALE AND THE SILENCE OF A MAN ......................................... 42

FIVE  CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH .................................................................................................................. 76

BIBLIOGRAPHY .............................................................................................................. 84
CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION: BEHIND THE MASK

We wear the mask that grins and lies,
It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes,
This debt we pay to human guile;
With torn and bleeding hearts we smile,
And mouth with myriad subtleties.

-Paul Laurence Dunbar, “We Wear the Mask,” 1895

The purpose of this research is to explore Dunbar’s concept of the mask in order to examine why select black male actors have worn the mask of femininity to survive the vicissitudes of the American stage. Paul Laurence Dunbar further speaks of the mask that “grins and lies” in one of his most poignant poems, “We Wear the Mask.” He questions,

Why should the world be overwise,
In counting all our tears and sighs?
Nay, let them only see us, while
We wear the mask.

We smile, but, O great Christ, our cries
To thee from tortured souls arise.
We sing, but oh the clay is vile
Beneath our feet, and long the mile;
But let the world dream otherwise,
We wear the mask!  

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Henry Louis Gates affirms that “a reading of Dunbar’s most enduring poem...suggests that
[Dunbar] may well have been aware of the liability of allowing his own poetry to evoke an
image of black folk that played on thoughtless prejudices and degrading stereotypes. ... 
[T]hat mask lets [black people] ‘mouth with myriad subtleties’ truths that whites refused to
confront face to face.”
Dunbar understood the power and the necessity of the mask in black America. He knew that the world should not be “over-wise” in counting the
mounting sorrows that he (and his race) underwent. Their pain must be shielded from the
world in which they lived—and shielded with grins and lies. Present day readers might call
this behavior signifyin’. More specifically, black actors have assumed various masks over
the years such as minstrelsy in order to participate in an industry which found their
presence laughable. And ever more pointedly, a few bold black male actors have created
masks of femininity behind which to hide as they speak to the world. Namely, Flip Wilson,
Martin Lawrence, Eddie Murphy, and Tyler Perry, all utilize a feminized-masked
appearance in order to address controversial social issues and to create a voice which
allows them to say what, as men, they might not be allowed to say.

The characters these actors play are Geraldine Jones, Sheneneh Jenkins, Rasputia,
and Mabel Simmons (Madea), respectively. Geraldine, a character played by Flip Wilson
in the 1970s, is a sassy, modern woman who has a boyfriend named Killer that usually is in
prison or at the local pool hall. Sheneneh Jenkins, a gaudy ghetto girl from Detroit,
Michigan and owner of Sheneneh’s Sho Nuff Hair Salon, is one of the two female
characters played by Martin Lawrence (Martin Payne on the show). The other character he
plays in drag is Mama Payne. Sheneneh Jenkins is known for calling herself “a lady,” yet

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her actions and her behavior may suggest otherwise. In the movie *Norbit*, Eddie Murphy plays Rasputia, a grossly overweight, domineering woman, who forces the character Norbit (also played by Murphy) to be her boyfriend and later her husband. Rasputia’s catch phrase is “How you doin’?” and she constantly mistreats and dominates Norbit and others throughout the movie. Tyler Perry’s best known character, Mabel Simmons or Madea, is an overbearing, yet well-meaning elderly woman, who serves both as comic relief and the blaring voice of reason in Perry’s movies and plays.

Each actor uses the feminine form in different ways for a variety of reasons, yet their reasons seem to come together for a unified purpose. This research investigates how these actors “fashion and cancel” their identities during their performances as female characters. These black actors use comedy as a revolutionary tool while utilizing the business of “masking”: “Masking...enables [one] to be double mouth.” Comedy affords these actors a freedom they would not normally have in American society. Acting becomes beneficial and financially profitable, for the actors are able to gain greater public voices, mainstream influence, and personal identities through their guised artistic expression in entertainment.

On stage, the black male actors destroy their former identities and formulate new ones. These actors appear to construct a world, define that world, and then dismantle it in order to revisit their own individualities. They seem to embody the acting skill of Ira Aldridge, who was known for his ability to transform himself on stage. Aldridge was the

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first major African American actor with a lengthy career. He dominated the stage through his performances of Shakespeare’s tragic characters in the nineteenth century with his extraordinary physical presence, powerful, clear voice, and realistic style. He was known for interpreting his many roles in ways that non-English speakers could quickly grasp. Aldridge mastered the skill of presenting alternate selves much like the actors referenced in this research. Like Aldridge, these actors embrace the ironic nature of their existence and attempt to influence the world in which they live. These actors each become this ironic character, Northrop Frye believes, occurs in literature. In Frye’s *Anatomy of Criticism*, he contends that literature reflects humanity’s view of the real world and the ideal world:

“Irony is the real world seen through a tragic lens, a world in which [the] protagonist [is] defeated by the puzzling complexities of life.” These actors “try to be heroic, but never achieve [e] heroic stature,” “[they] dream of happiness, but never [fully] attain it,” and they “[are] human, like us, and... suffer.”

As “masked” characters, these black male actors represent “the real world [which] is the world of experience [and] uncertainty.” This research establishes the rationale behind how and why the mask of femininity becomes the trope of black male survival. This thesis explores why these Black males mask their identities in order to perform socially-charged and controversial roles and what factor(s) cause them to have to wear the mask. For despite the generations of black actors who have been accepted in

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7 Ibid., 210.

8 Ibid.
entertainment, there is still a need for some black male actors to guise their appearances when dealing with racial, social, gender-based, and sexuality issues.

Ultimately, this research investigates the reasons for the mask and its social functions in America. Black male actors appear to abide in two separated yet connected worlds. Conclusively, this research looks behind the mask of these entertainers to better understand “the two worlds within and without the Veil” that the African American male actors must reside in order to perform.

Statement of the Problem

The media was and still is a prevalent force behind society’s perception of the black man. At times, the media’s content, characterization, and representation of black males appear to obstruct positive views of them to the world. Modern media, which include television, movies, and theater, all critique the skills of black male actors, and these men are never removed from the gaze of white and black America. Because of this present critique, black male actors have devised new means of rebellion while performing. These actors, ironically and ingeniously, triumph over the images of the media’s stereotypes by masking themselves as female characters; they simplify the complexity of their existence through comedy and costume.

As descendent of traumatic occurrences (slavery, racism, segregation, and discrimination), these aforementioned actors call to the world of entertainment for answers and for liberation. Simultaneously, they become the epitome of controversy and confrontation, entertainment and enlightenment. They have become accustomed to dealing

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with a hostile world that does not first look at their humanity but instead assumes that they
are stereotypes of malicious deeds and crimes (or possibly exceptions to that rule). With the
knowledge of how they are viewed by the world, these actors creatively manipulate their
physical appearance and impart their creative power to others through their performances.
They have rechanneled the traumatic repressed emotions and have found a paradoxical
mean for healing. Through the outward mask of the female body, they are ironically reborn.

Dressing as females in performance is not a new occurrence in entertainment, but
black males adopting and reinventing the trade is revolutionary. Actors like Flip Wilson,
Eddie Murphy, Martin Lawrence, and Tyler Perry “mask their genders” during
performances simultaneously challenging the mass media’s representation of their own
identities. This unique craft reflects Stephen Greenblatt’s theory of “self-fashioning” and
“self-cancellation,” which is defined as “the crafting of a public role and the profound
desire to escape from the identity so crafted.” Within their double conscious state, these
black male actors position themselves at a place in which they may survey and critique the

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10 Shanetta Harris, “Constructing a Psychological Perspective: Observation and the Observed in
Souls of Black Folk,” in The Souls of Black Folk: One Hundred Years Later, ed., Donald Hubbard (Columbia:
1978), 127. In Harris’s work she referenced Jacques Lacan who argues that “the unconscious houses all the
events, thoughts, and feeling repressed by the ego.” Sigmund Freud states that the repression process does not
end there. He believes,

[t]he ego fends off the danger by the process of repression.
The instinctual impulse is in some way inhibited, its precipitating
cause, with its attendant perception and ideas is forgotten....
[T]he instinct has either retained its forces, or collects them again, or it is
reawakened by some new precipitating cause. Thereupon it renews
its demand, and, since the path to normal satisfaction remains closed
to it by what we call the scar of the repression, somewhere, at a weak
spot, it opens another path for itself to what is known as a substitutive
satisfaction, which comes to light as a symptom, without the acquiescence
of the ego, but also without its understanding.

11 Greenblatt, 13.
world. They become both an insider and outsider in the world they have created. While acting, they create a public role and also attempt to fashion a life of security and freedom. Greenblatt would suggest that these actors are always "renewing themselves] . . . and [are] forever aware of [their] unreality." Their ability to self-fashion permeates entertainment and evokes mystery and complexity into their personalities and individual lives.

Significance of the Study

Richard Wright once said that "men can starve from a lack of self-realization as much as they can from a lack of bread," yet self-realization without the freedom to truly express one's self is all-the-more oppressive. This research is significant because it adds to the discipline concerning black male identity issues, the black male's critique of black women, and the black male's subversive rebellion against society's oppressive norms. This body of research hopes to serve as a medium of liberations for those aforementioned black male actors who are compelled to mask their identities in order to perform. This research investigates the reasons for the mask and its social functions in America, which is vital in continuing to destroy racial and gender barriers.

Conceptual Framework

The theories that drive this body of research center on the masking of the self (or one's identity). More specifically, these theories show how one uses masking as a weapon for rebellion. This research hinges on the theories of W. E. B. Du Bois, Stephen Greenblatt, and Franz Fanon. Given that selected black male actors rely heavily on masking as women, it is safe to assume that there is a rationale behind these actors veiling themselves in a feminine form. The conceptual framework of this paper focuses on Du

12 Ibid., 31.
Bois’s notion of the “the veil and double consciousness” and Stephen Greenblatt’s concept of “self-fashioning and self-cancellation.” The conceptual framework also highlights Franz Fanon’s notion of language in his book, *Black Face White Mask*.

Although born “a flood of Negro blood, a strain of French, a bit of Dutch, and thank God no ‘Anglo Saxon,’ Du Bois did escaped outright racism and segregation in his small England town.” 14 As he grows older, Du Bois begins to feel more of the impossibility of escaping his fate as a Negro15 in America. He questions “[w]hy did God make [him] an outcast and a stranger in [his] own house?”16 He knows quite well the injustice in America and like Esther, the Jewish queen of the Persians, he goes before “the king” in defense of his people. Du Bois chooses Esther’s words as his “gesture of virtue” within his personal statement of his philosophy and goals and thus embarked on a similar journey to secure economic, political, and social rights for his people, the Negro race. He, like Esther, is alone in the world, having neither father nor mother during this time and therefore “dedicates himself to ‘raising’ the race.”17 He also, like Esther, reacts because the outside world attacks threaten his personal security and that of his people. Du Bois contributes to the African-American life and culture by dedicated his life to racial service. He vowed to be an agent for change and for advancement of the Negro race. His view of

14 James, Draper, *Black Literary Criticism* (Detroit: Gale Research, 1992), 597.

15 The term “Negro” was utilized here to reflect the terminology used during the time period of W. E. B. Du Bois’s writing. During the early 1900’s, this word was a widely used and accepted term referring to African Americans. It will be noted that around the 1970s, this term (and the use of it in reference to African Americans) was challenged and later rejected by the African American community and its supporters. Negro is simply stated here to stay in cultural context of the time of Du Bois and will not be employed interchangeably with the terms African Americans or black throughout this thesis.


the double consciousness illustrates the duality of the nature of the black male actor while he is performing.

As an African American scholar and socialist, Du Bois expounds on the nation’s problem, the issue of the color line in the early 1900’s. He realizes that when he was viewed by the outside world, in their minds they were wondering: “How does it feel to be a problem.” Du Bois further explains how this color line psychologically disturbs the Negro: “It dawned upon me with a certain suddenness that I was different from the others; or like, may—hap, in heart and life and longing, but shut out from their world by a vast veil.” Gates and McKay explain the significance of the veil:

The metaphor of the veil denotes throughout *The Soul of Black Folk* the shadowy yet substantial line that separates whites from person African descent in the turn of the century United States. . . . [I]t was Du Bois’s genius to realize that to protest the color line most effectively and originally in a new century, he had to find ways to personalize it, to make its reality not merely a social and legal fact but a profound psychological factor in the African American’s sense of self and relationship to society. Thus, from the beginning of his book, Du Bois introduces his white reader to peculiar dualities and conflicts in African American self-perception—known ever since by Du Bois’s term *double-consciousness*—which for Du Bois defined both the crux of black American’s struggle to identify themselves and the crucible in which African and American identifies could merge into a unity of which they and the nation could be proud.

In his writing, Du Bois takes white readers into the lives of the black communities in the early 20th century and presents to the readers a people who are conscious and thinking individuals. Within *Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois also acquaints white readers with his

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19 Ibid., 608.
notion of “double consciousness” (or the life behind the veil)\textsuperscript{21} of the Negro who embodies the complexity of a two-fold entity:

It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness— an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled striving; two warring ideals in a dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. \textsuperscript{22}

Du Bois’s solution for the paradoxical nature of African Americans is centered on liberal education, economic movement, and political/social rights. Wilson, Murphy, Lawrence, and Perry all embrace this paradoxical nature Du Bois discusses in \textit{Souls of Black Folk} and add to their own complexity by adorning themselves in female apparel and mask. They seem to form a truce between the “warring ideals in [the] dark body” and divert the eyes that look upon them to another form of amusement— their comic performances.

Moreover, Stephen Greenblatt’s notion of “self-fashioning and self-cancellation” also elaborates on this paradoxical nature that Du Bois discusses, which can be noted in the performances of these African American male actors. Greenblatt defines self-fashioning and self-cancellation as “the crafting of a public role and the profound desire to escape from the identity so crafted.”\textsuperscript{23} He characterizes self-fashioning and self-cancellation as “the invention of a disturbingly unfamiliar form of consciousness, tense, ironic, witty, poised between engagement and detachment, and above all, fully aware of its own status as an invention”\textsuperscript{24} and outlines 10 governing standards common to most instances of self-fashioning:

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{22} Ibid., 615.
  \item \textsuperscript{23} Greenblatt, 13.
  \item \textsuperscript{24} Ibid., 31.
\end{itemize}
1. None of the figures inherits a title, an ancient family tradition or hierarchical status that might have rooted personal identity of a clan or caste.
2. Self-fashioning for such figures involves submission to an absolute power or authority situated at least particularly outside the self.
3. Self-fashioning is achieved in relation to something perceived as alien, strange, or hostile. This threatening Other must be discovered or invented in order to be attacked or destroyed.
4. The alien is perceived by the authority either as that which unformed or chaotic (the absence or order) or that which is negative (the demonic parody of order). Since accounts of the former tend inevitably to organize and thematize it, the chaotic constantly slides into the demonic, and consequently the alien is always constructed as a distorted image of authority.
5. One man's authority is another man's alien.
6. When one authority or alien is destroyed, another takes its place.
7. There is always more than one authority and no more than one alien in existence at a given time.
8. If both the authority and the alien are located outside the self, they are at the same time experienced as inward necessities, so that both submission and destruction are always already internalized.
9. Self-fashioning is always, though not exclusively, in language.
10. The power generated to attack the alien in the name of authority is produced in excess and threatens the authority it sets out to defend. Hence self-fashioning always involves some experience of threat, some effacement or undermining, some loss of self.25

These elements are seen in the practices of self-fashioning and self-cancellation and can be applied to the performances of the actors to better explain the female impersonation practices they undertake. Greenblatt's theory speaks to the inventive nature of masking and how such creations are complex and serve as a means for one to escape and create an identity. Greenblatt claims that the reason these individuals embrace this practice is to impose their views on the world. Again, Greenblatt contends that as individuals participates in self-fashioning and self-cancellation, they are always aware of his own unreality.

25 Ibid., 9.
Understanding the discourse of black male actors is also thoroughly addressed in Franz Fanon’s *Black Skin White Mask*. In his book, Fanon deals with the psychological aspect of double consciousness and the importance and conflicts of language. Fanon maintains that “to speak is to exist.” He asserts that many view mastery of a language as a sign of the dominant culture, for “to speak a language is to take on a world, a culture.” He deals with the complexity of language, revealing that the dominant party of many cultures believes that when one masters the native language, he or she has become more human. According to an in-depth look at the reading, rejection of one’s “mother language or tongue” is a sign of dehumanization. Franz Fanon’s discussion about language appears to echo the discourse in Du Bois’s double consciousness. Fanon believes racial issues are embedded in the language of one’s society. This knowledge is vital in understanding the discourse of black male actors and their need to rebel against the accepted norms of the society in order to declare their humanity through their own means of expression.

**Methodology**

The methodology used in this paper involves a visual deconstruction of media utilizing literary texts as the instrument to analyze the movies and television shows of Flip Wilson, Eddie Murphy, Martin Lawrence, and Tyler Perry. Research involves evaluating the role of the characters and understanding how those characters are defined in reference to the characters’ appearances and behaviors, their cultural location and experience, and the messages that each actor presents within his respective performance. Through a visual deconstructive analysis, this research addresses the action and communication of the actors,

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27 Ibid, 38.
investigating what they are saying, how they are saying, what judgments and critiques are being made, what effect does the masking have on the freedom of their communication, and what boundaries and freedoms exist for the actors because of this form of communication.

The analysis focuses on particular performances of the actors. Flip Wilson and Martin Lawrence both play feisty, no-nonsense women on television, Geraldine and Sheneneh. Individual television shows are studied for both performers. Murphy and Perry both appear in movies and both play overweight, overbearing women, who controlled both the men and women they encounter. Murphy’s role as a female is seen in many of his movies, but this thesis focuses primarily on his role as Rasputia played in the movie *Norbit*. Perry’s character, Madea, appears in numerous movies and stage plays: *Diary of a Mad Black Women*, *Madea’s Family Reunion*, *Meet the Browns*, and *Madea Goes to Jail*. This research references on the movie *Madea Goes to Jail* since this movie centers on Madea’s life and theatrical performances.

**Research Questions**

Despite the apparent growth of black identity from the time of minstrel shows to the present, two research questions still linger: (1) what are the factors that compel selected Black male actors to mask their identities in order to perform socially charged and controversial roles, and (2) why are the outward signs of femininity used as vehicles of communication for artistic expression?

**Chapter Organization**

This study is divided into five chapters. The first chapter is the introduction which gives a brief overview of the purpose of this document and provides a statement of the
problem related to the subject of “‘And He Shall be Called Woman:’ Behind the Mask of Black Male Actors Cross-Dressing in Entertainment.” The second chapter is a literature review discussing what scholars have contributed to the research addressing the art, history, and the tradition of masking and cross-dressing; secondary sources briefly address the arts both literary and dramatic performances, black identity, gender issues, and sexuality concerns. The third chapter discusses the historical practice of masking and blacks in entertainment, the tradition of masking that was developed in the Western African societies and its influence on the minstrel shows. This chapter also highlights key practices of the feminized masks that are still seen in entertainment today. The fourth chapter focuses on the analysis gathered from the visual deconstructive analysis of media utilizing certain selective literary texts. It highlights the findings on the works of Flip Wilson, Eddie Murphy, Martin Lawrence and Tyler Perry as female characters addressing how they self-fashion and self-cancel their identities. As a whole, this chapter explains information found on the research questions posed, which are what are the factors that compel selected Black male actors to mask their identities in order to perform socially charged and controversial roles and why are the outward signs of femininity used as vehicles for communication of artistic expression. The fifth and concluding chapter provides a conclusion, implication, and recommendations for future research.

**Limitation of the Study**

One of the limitations of the study is the inability to speak directly to the actors being researched in order to discover their personal views on masking as a female. Information is drawn from watching their respective television shows and movies and even viewing interviews that they have given to others on the topic. However, there is a
limitation within the study for not having a one-on-one interview with each actor, which is
due to location of the actors, lack of professional connections with them, and the death of
Flip Wilson.

Also, even though there are extensive resources on the area of double
consciousness, the African tradition of masking, and the role of black males in
entertainment, there is little being addressed to how these three topics are interrelated and
how African American male actors use these masks (in comical acting situations) to rebel
against the changes of the American stage and to challenge stereotypical issues in our own
society. I hope to reveal the relationship among these topics.

**Definition of Terms**

**Freedom (liberation).** The power to determine one’s action without resistant and the
power to exercise and make decisions without constraint from within or without
one’s own self.

**Identity.** The sense of self, providing sameness and continuity in personality; the state of
being oneself and not another.

**Mask.** The mask will be addressed in three parts: (1) To mask as a covering, as of cloth,
that has openings for the eyes, entirely or partly conceals the face, and is worn
especially at a masquerade ball. (2) To cover one’s face and/or body in order to
conceal, protect, or disguise. (3) To exist in two mental states (looking at Double
Consciousness by W. E. B. Dubois).

**Media.** The means of communication, as radio and television, movies, newspapers, and
magazines that reach or influence people.

**Self-fashioning and self-cancellation.** “The invention of a disturbingly unfamiliar form of
consciousness, tense, ironic, witty, poised between engagement and detachment,
and above all, fully aware of its own status as an invention” (Greenblatt 1980, 31).

**Social charged and controversial roles.** Acting roles and appearances that center on
racial, social, gender-based, and sexuality issues.
CHAPTER TWO
REVIEW OF LITERATURE

It is this power of revelation which is the business of the [researcher], this journey toward a more vast reality which must take precedence over all other claims.

-James Baldwin, "Everybody's Protest Novel," 1949

The African American male actor is ever conscious of his dual existence as a performer and rebelliously sets forth to change the way the world sees him as a man. Ironically, some actors have chosen to do this through the guise of a woman. Their masked appearances invoke change and personal liberation. In a world where the dominant society is slow in hearing the demands for justice by the oppressed, select African American male actors have developed new means in which to invoke freedom. To better understand why some black male actors mask in the form of a female in order to perform socially-charged and controversial issues, research has been done addressing cross-dressing and its relationship to the tradition of masking. Also, issues are briefly addressed concerning identity, gender, sexuality matters and the representation of the black female body.

Cross-dressing is defined as a complex occurrence. According to Vern and Bonnie Bullough, cross-dressing

ranges from simply wearing one or two items of clothing to a full scale burlesque, from a comic impersonation to a serious attempt to pass as the opposite gender, from an occasional desire to experiment with
gender identity to the attempt to live most of one’s life as a member with the opposite sex.¹

Magus Hirschfeld first coined the phrase transvestism, or cross-dressing, in 1910. He used this term to describe the behavior of those that cross-dressed and he published a revolutionary work on the subject. The text is entitled Transvestites Cross dress (Translated)²; and within his work, he had a case study of 16 subjects—15 male cross-dressers and one female. Hirschfeld investigated how cross-dressing started in early childhood, became more apparent during puberty and continued on into adulthood. He rationalized that cross-dressing was more a personal choice rather than an issue of sexuality: “Although most of the persons he studied were heterosexual in their orientation, Hirschfeld noted there were a few homosexuals, but argued that the dominant sexual urge among transvestites was focused on themselves dressed in women’s finery rather than other persons of either sex.”³ Hirshfeld’s research sparked additional interest in the research of cross-dressing. According to the critical study on the phenomena of cross-dressing, the practice of cross-dressing moved from simply being a behavior exercise to a system characterized as a disease in psychopathology and viewed as condition that should be cured.

Interestingly, some scholars contend that cross-dressing deals not only with the sexual orientation of an individual but also relates to the cultural practices in which that individual resides. Some scholars state that “[c]ross dressing represent[s] a mismatched

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¹ Bonnie Bullough and Vern Bullough, Cross Dressing, Sex, and Gender (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1993), vii.


between individual temperaments and socially demanded requirements of particular cultures." Sigmund Freud maintains that when a person first meets an individual the distinction is made is if the person is male of female. Such an observation is normal; yet at times that observation becomes distorted when an individual takes on the gender of another. Judith Butler would disagree with Freud’s concept on the issue of gender. In her article “Performance Acts and Gender Constitution,” she asserts that

"gender is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed; rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time—an identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts. . . . [And] [i]f the ground of gender identity is the stylized repetition of acts through time, and not a seemingly seamless identity, then the possibilities of gender transformation are to be found in the arbitrary relation between such acts, in the possibility of a different sort of repeating, in the breaking or subversive repetition of style."

Her discussion looks at gender as a social construct versus a biological certainty.

Evaluating Butler’s work sheds light on the issue of gender and its instability. Her concept adds to the ability of black male performances to change their gender appearance at will—since gender, according to Butler, is an aspect that can be constructed. Vern and Bonnie Bullough support Butler’s notion in Cross Dressing, Sex, and Gender when they express that “when one gender finds itself in an unique circumstance that demanded behavior of the other, they simply adopt a bit of the other gender’s culture.”

Understandably, this practice of changing the self is quite complex. Author Richard Ekins of Male Femaling believes that when males involve themselves in cross-dressing, they are participating in what he termed “male femaling.” Ekins asserts that when male

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6 Bullough and Bullough, 4.
performers take on the appearance of a woman they are involved in one of unique five stages. These five stages explain the growth and changes of males “femaling.” When Ekins reveals his findings, he states he has “found that the staged career paths of male femalers processed out into five major stages—‘beginning femaling,’ ‘fantasy femaling,’ ‘doing femaling,’ constituting femaling and consolidating femaling.” The description of cross-dressing that best relates to acting is “doing femaling”: “‘Doing femaling’ might best be said to take place whenever male femalers adopt what they take to be the feelings, attitudes, behaviors, accoutrements, and attributes of genetic females.” These actors being studied are taking on the attitudes, appearances, and behaviors of females while they are entertaining. Typically in this phase, males are “humiliated, derided, rejected, ostracized, and even criminally sanctioned.” Ironically, for black male actors, this phase of ‘doing femaling’ is one of empowerment, where black males are able to voice their views, thoughts, and opinions in a manner that is non-threatening and entertaining.

Moreover, Vern and Bonnie Bullough also have distinct views on gender and one’s ability to adopt other sexual characteristics. In *Cross Dressing, Sex, and Gender*, they posit that gender is “an achieved status rather than ascribed biological characteristic and is based on tasks preformed and significance of clothing as well as anatomical and other factors.” They seem to dispute Freud’s notion of gender and highlight the various modes of gender swapping espoused by Butler and Ekins. Vern and Bonnie Bullough also argue that “masculinity has been the standard by which society defines itself. Femininity, on the other

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8 Ibid., 86.
9 Ibid.
10 Bullough and Bullough, 5.
hand, has been a catchall category for all those characteristics males have not claimed as their own.11 The tradition of masking—and cross-dressing—is practiced worldwide. The Bulloughs believe “[c]ross [d]ressing implies different things in different cultures and has been viewed historically in widely varying ways.”12

From the beginning of the masking tradition, men have used and have seen masking (through cross-dressing) as a sign of empowerment. In reference to female impersonation, Bullough and Bullough give examples of several cultures that participate in that tradition:

[In Hindu.] female impersonation often has erotic connotations because the cross-dressing either led to sexual arousal or gave access to the company of women, which might not have been possible otherwise. . . . [More surprisingly,] one of the major teachings of Hinduism is that every man and woman contain within himself or herself both male and female principles.13

Other cultures who involve themselves in female impersonation include the Elizabethan age, Africans, Greeks, Muslims, etc. The commonalities of these cultures are notable. For example for muslims, “[l]ike men and boys who used to act the female parts in Elizabethan drama because women were forbidden on stage, these cross dressers were tolerated because men acting women’s roles in public allowed the Muslims to keep women in purah.”14 Just like in other cultures, cross-dressing is a common practice in America. More profoundly, some black male actors go beyond this tradition of masking to transform society’s view of them and to bring to light controversial issues that affect their race.

Furthermore, the masking of Black male actors cannot be considered in isolation but also should be juxtaposed to other cultures to understand its own uniqueness, as well as common factors it shares with other ethnic and racial groups. For even though Meg

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11 Ibid., 174.
12 Ibid., 3.
13 Ibid., 12.
14 Ibid.
Twycross and Sarah Carpenter speak of the nature of masking as it reflects the Medieval and early Tudor England in their book *Masks and Masking in Medieval English and Early Tudor English*, it is relevant to this body of study. Although the cultures differ from that of the African American male actors, Twycross and Carpenter’s work is insightful because it discusses the masking tradition and how masking influences entertainment, namely theatrical performances. Twycross and Carpenter articulate it best when discussing the issue concerning masks. They believe “[m]asks have fascinated virtually all human societies, including our own, and activities which involve the deliberate covering of the face remain compelling and paradoxically revealing of the cultures of their participants.”

Just as Twycross and Carpenter posit that masks reveal much about its wearers’ culture, these actors’ need to wear a mask reveals insight about their personal existence.

Even though these actors seem to rise above the exploitive and judgmental views of society, they still are viewed as members of the oppressed. This world of experience, uncertainty, and failure exists; and the black male actors are constantly under the microscope of scrutiny. In chapter 1 of Paulo Freire’s book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire reflects on the ironic life of the oppressed mirroring that of the black male actor encounters. Freire outlines the nature of the relationship between the oppressed and the oppressor in his work and argues that the oppressed must receive instruction concerning the dynamics and the reality of their relationship with their oppressor in order to achieve liberation from their oppression. He also discusses the issues of humanization and dehumanization and how the two are interrelated. Freire believes that Man’s central problem is humanization; and for one to understand the concept of humanization, she or he

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eventually must recognize its relationship to dehumanization. When an individual is dehumanized, she or he eventually becomes rebellious.

This type of dehumanization is seen through the action of the black actors. They rebel against the labels that have been given to them, and they seek to find their own freedom and identity—their own voice. Ironically, this rebellion liberates not only the oppressed but also the oppressor. Yet as Freire states, in the struggle for liberation, problems do arise. Initially, the oppressed pattern themselves after their oppressors because they view their oppressors as "models of manhood,"\(^\text{16}\) which is seen with black male actors' early depiction of black folk life in minstrel shows. The oppressed also becomes "fear(ful) of freedom and live in a state of duality—the desire for freedom and the fear of it."\(^\text{17}\) Regardless of these setbacks, Freire argues that the oppressed must be the controlling participants in their quest for freedom. These actors appear to recognize this call. Like Freire suggest, they must understand the reality of their oppression, know how to transform it, and be able to make their liberation permanent. Within the performances of black male actors, they are the oppressed in a racially biased society. They have learned that they must perform in a dual state—masking both gender and at times race—in order to achieve a level of liberation. Ironically, this liberation comes from their not performing as themselves, but as female (the female replica of the self).

Freire contends that the oppressed must be taught to understand their dehumanization, objective reality, and dual consciousness in order to liberate themselves. Any oppressors who desire to aid the oppressed in their fight for liberation must be willing to follow the directives of the oppressed and understand that change in their life style does


\(^{17}\) Ibid.
not denote oppression. Those who cannot be led by the oppressed are only extending
“false gratitude”\textsuperscript{18} and will not be beneficial in the fight for freedom. Freire closes his
argument by highlighting the effective tools needed for humanization and explaining that
the revolutionary leadership of the oppressed must be one who has experienced oppression.
By constructing false identities, these black actors are able to forge a newly liberated one,
even if they are received in the guise of a female.

Overall, these actors seek to define their own reality and to determine their own
identity. Their identity is different from other races of actors who reside outside of the
Africa cosmology. Joseph Baldwin explains in “Notes on an Africentric Theory of Black
Personality” the differences in the cosmology among racial groups and how the African
cosmology is said to be characterized by the basic theme of “man-nature harmony or unity,
oneness of being.”\textsuperscript{19} He implies that one’s race determines who and where one is. He also
states that “as race varies, then so do cosmology, culture, and survival thrust. Hence, race
is conceptualized as the basis of one’s cosmology and [the] cosmology reflects and
facilitates the survival thrust of the racial-cultural group to which it is naturally
identified.”\textsuperscript{20} This theory is vital in understanding the survival techniques that black actors
employ as a means of securing freedom of expression and identity. Baldwin furthers his
premise on the black personality, concluding that there are three fundamental propositions
that make up its composition:

(a) [T]he Black personality is definitively African (racially-culturally) in its
basic nature; (b) that exposure to European culture and the psychological

\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., 59.

Press, 1990), 134.

\textsuperscript{20} Ibid.
forces of racial cultural oppression has affected only conscious mediums of Black personality and not its basic African nature as well—[this justifying the ever-looming tradition of masking in black male performances]; and (c) that “Africanity” or Africanism dominates the personality pattern of racially mixed individuals.  

Understanding the black personality as defined by Baldwin gives more insight into the mind set and behavior of these male actors. Their personal behaviors flow into their performances, demonstrating the aspects Baldwin calls the “African Self-Consciousness,” “African Self-Extension,” “Africanisms,” “African Survival Propensity” and “African Survival.”

Additionally, the practice of cross-dressing involves itself in the wonderful world of mystery and entertainment. This practice is liberating to some people, yet it has its limitation for others. The black male actors, and countless other men who cross-dress, appear to enter a taboo world of homosexual tendencies. It is vital to draw the distinction between the homosexual nature of cross-dressing and the liberation aspects of what these black male actors are undergoing. At times, it is difficult for a society to accept the male cross-dresser, because “it [i]s harder for men to understand why any man would want to be a woman except in jest.” These actors have taken on the female persona in order to develop a new “non-threatening” personality. In his book *Acting Gay*, John M. Clum addresses the change of displaying homosexuality (for this research, practices that mirror homosexual practices) in dramatic works. In his work, Clum claims such theatrical performances have gone from “shame-filled hints and indirection to proud assertion.”

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21 Ibid.
22 Ibid., 136.
24 Ibid., xiii.
According to Clum, heterosexism, which used to be upheld and the norm, is now driven offstage in a comforting fantasy not fully enacted outside the theater. Clum asserts that homosexuality illusion has moved from the “unspoken” to the “spoken” and from the “seen” to the “unseen” as it relates to theater practices, and much of this is due to the changing of attitudes toward homosexuality in American society.\(^\text{25}\) Clum also discusses two categories of “gay dramas”: post-Stonewall plays and pre-Stonewall plays. Post-Stonewall plays are written primarily for gay audiences and which speak of their shared experience, and pre-Stonewall plays or “closet dramas,” are written for the mainstream theater by a homosexual playwright who expresses negative feelings about his own homosexuality and who presents homosexuality as a “problem” that threatens the community and is introduced only to be expunged at the end of the play. It is vital to understand that the differences with the black male actors that are being studied in this thesis. It is ironic that even though these men are displaying homosexual actions by cross-dressing, these actors are not participating in what Clum calls “gay drama” because they are not maintaining their male personality while on stage. They are using the feminine form as a shield in order to speak out against social issues. They are not using the stage as a platform to divulge their own sexual tendencies.

Also referencing the topic of homosexuality, Charles Nero in “Towards a Black Gay Aesthetic” gives explanation on both race and gender. His work serves as a basis in discovering the importance of race and of gender, as well as sexuality, as it relates to black male actors cross-dressing. Nero begins by pointing out “[that] ’male homosexuality is

\(^{25}\) Ibid., xii-xiii.
associated with the biblical ideas of weakness as effeminacy." Strangely, the black male actor becomes empowered when taking on the female form through cross-dressing rather than weak. The actors become critics to the world, outsiders who are able to survey society's actions. According to the article, many intellectuals argue that the Judeo-Christian tradition is a major tool of the Western-Eurocentric view of reality that furthers the oppression of blacks. Nero continues his argument by stating that "historically, religion has served as a liberating force in the African American community. . . . The organized black church, however, has not been free from oppressing its constituents. Historically, the black church has [also] practiced sexism." Wilson, Murphy, Martin, and especially Perry seem to have found means of utilizing the black church, cross-dressing, and femininity without including the homosexual nature (and the oppression views) as Nero would argue. Tyler Perry specially makes use of the black church in both his movies and stage plays. He utilizes the church as an instrument to help build up the weak and not destroy one's identity.

Also, acting is the dramatization of both oral and written text for the actors; and in "Plentitude in Black Textuality," Claudia Tate focuses the study on the view that the inscription of personal desire and its indulgence in black textuality which must be a focal point of critical investigations. Tate shows how the fantasy of "personal plentitude" complicates expression of the subtle goal of freedom in black texts. Although Tate is referencing black texts, her notion still can be applied to the aforementioned performers because they are performing written language. Much of an actor's personal repressed

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emotion slips out during performances into the creation of their characters. Her study focuses on a critical strategy for analyzing a unique form of desire in written works of African Americans. Her theory is centered on Jacques Lacan’s condition of language which he identified as the implicit expression of the unconscious desire in speaking and writing subjects. Tate claims that the focus on black texts is centered more on race than desire—unique, personal fantasies of the narrator—even though desire occurs through the Freudian slip. Tate shows how the literary work speaks muted desire of passion and goes beyond race to explains the complex connection between personal expression of acknowledged wishes and social wants. Her work draws a direct connection to the black centered mind set and the written word which the actors encounter in the production of their scripts.

Moreover, it is vital in understanding the rationale behind black male actors’ guising themselves as women for controversial roles. Barbara Monroe’s article “Courtship, Comedy and the African American Expressive Culture in Zora Neale Hurston’s Fiction” centers on the use of humor in Hurston’s work, which she claims is a direct result of the African American expressive culture seen in antebellum minstrelsy, the man and wife of vaudeville, the blues tradition, and modern day stand up comedy. It also speaks to the role of women and why they are utilized in black male performances. Monroe furthers her argument by suggesting that the contextual use of humor is quite prevalent among African American females, who “break a breath” in a male dominated society. Historically, black women have been allowed more vocal freedom, especially in comedic performance.

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Because of this practice, Wilson, Murphy, Lawrence, and Perry utilize the feminine vessel to speak freely. Ironically, as women, they are allowed to “break a breath” as well.

Other important secondary sources that are beneficial to the development of this thesis include work from Karla F. C. Holloway, Tejumola Olaniyan, and Brenda Dixon. In *Scraps of Conquest*/ *Masks of Resistance*, Tejumola Olaniyan investigates the “refashioning of the cultural self in the drama of English-speaking peoples of African origin”\(^29\) and evaluates the invention of cultural identity for these particular groups, of relevance, African Americans. Olaniyan looks at the black dramatic voice that is embedded in the cultural matrix and examines the implication of articulation, genre, and language for these cultural groups. Olaniyan’s research aids in understanding identity and the importance of the black voice in performing. In *Digging the Africanist Presence in American Performance*, Brenda Dixon gives a brief textual overview on the influence of dance and she brings to light current dance as it relates to the current discussions of the African presence in American culture, in reference to American Minstrel Shows. Dixon dissects American performances and investigates any African-centered elements that may be found in these forms of entertainment. Looking at these two works will give insight on the challenges of black male in projecting their voices before white audiences and the cultural struggles and challenges they face while performing. These works will also shed light on African-centered entertainment and the many facets of such forms of expression. Lastly, in Karla F. C. Holloway article, “(Re) membrance: A Theory of Literary Structures in Literature by African American Women Writers,” Holloway discusses how “(re)membrance” relates to the wholeness of the parts within the text. While focusing on Keith Byerman, who states

the importance of revisiting those authors that identify the "wholeness, creativity, endurance[,] and concreteness" in maintaining perspectives of the past as 'vital to their own sensibilities,"30 Holloway references scenes from Morrison's *Beloved*, where the issue of "rememory" is first introduced. Although Holloway's theory focuses on the recursive nature of language in contemporary writings by black women, her notion of (re)membrance—a "floating picture" (thought picture) that has a place both in the past and one's vision of the past and through its dual and contradictory form helps to achieve a kind of presence, even if only mental—relates to black male performances through the way they present a kind of "floating picture" of thought in the action and deeds of female characters.

All of this research speaks of the world of cross-dressing, gender issues, and identity. Cross-dressing is a peculiar practice that select black male actors have adopted as part of their artistic trade. The change of their outward appearance helps change society's perception of black America, even though their actions provoke speculation of stronger sexual implications. Invariably, the practice of cross-dressing is instituted continually by these actors and has made these actors both wealthy and liberated in its practice.

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CHAPTER THREE

HISTORICAL LOOK AT BLACK ACTORS, CROSS DRESSING, AND MASKING
(FROM AFRICA TO THE MINSTREL SHOWS)

"...[W]e celebrate the thing which our own actions proclaim we do not believe in."
- Paul Laurence Dunbar, *The Fourth of July and Race Outrage*, 1903

"...Nay, let them only see us while we wear the mask!"
- Paul Laurence Dunbar, "We Wear the Mask," 1895

These two epigraphs establish the history of masking that is discussed in this chapter. The quotes seem to speak of the silently celebrated tradition practiced in the African American culture, while the actors being referenced also seem to understand the "mask" of which Paul Laurence Dunbar speaks in his poem "We Wear the Mask."

Masking is a tradition that has circumvented both historical periods and cultures. This lasting practice appears to know no bounds and is continually executed for more than mere entertainment. The particular purposes of this practice include penetrating pain, performing religious rituals, performing ceremonial exercises, and prevailing against the oppressed. In the book *Gender Blending*, William A. Henry discusses why masking and pain are interrelated in his article, "Multiple Personality Order." He states that "[w]hen people are confronted with circumstances that seem to threaten them in someway they cannot accommodate, they tend to split off facets of themselves to deal with them until their mind resemble cut gemstones: one heart with many faces."1

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From the Biblical theatrical presentations, the Renaissance performances, and modern American television and film, men and women both have engaged in the tradition of masking. What is unique about Wilson, Murphy, Lawrence, and Perry is their reasoning for utilizing the feminine mask, for these actors appear to articulate their views about racial and social injustices while evoking the apparent need for change to their viewers. Thus, masking has given these actors a platform to speak out, to be heard, and to assert their identities outside of the stereotypes normally associated with black men.

Interestingly, the masking tradition in which Wilson, Murphy, Lawrence, and Perry participate did not begin with the minstrel shows of 19th America. It began in Africa with the oral storytelling tradition of the ancient griot, and this oral tradition represents the voice of history, genealogy, and progress of African people, both historically and presently. Within several West African cultures and communities, there is a griot, who is known as a tribal member that is a combination of historian, musician, and storyteller. These storytellers are respected individuals who provide a vital service to their communities and have been portrayed as "walking history books that travel throughout all the villages impressing people with their memories of the past and the present." In Griots and Griottes, Thomas Hale describes the nature of the griot and the reason this system, to some extent, has silenced the female voice in its practice. In his work, Hale explains the social functions of the griot, also called "praise-singer," which involves recounting history, providing advice, serving as spokesperson, representing a ruler as diplomat, mediating conflicts, interpreting the words of others into different languages, playing music, composing songs and tunes, teaching students, exhorting participants in wars and sports, reporting news,

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overseeing, witnessing or contributing to important life ceremonies, and praise-singing.  

Additionally, Hale informs the reader of how the griot serves as the genealogist of the community and as one who speaks of both the birth of individuals and the virtues and challenges that the individual encounters. Surprisingly, the recounted history is undocumented. Hale affirms that the griot is “a ‘time-binder,’ a person who links the past to present and serves as a witness to the events in the present, which he or she may convey to persons living in the future. . . . In their narratives, griots provide deep insight into the values of a people and their social structure.” The present-day griots continue to carry on the same tradition of their forefathers, for they possess the historical wealth and insight of their people. They incorporate masking into their profession, and they have displayed themselves in various forms in order to share the history of their people. Africans continue to show the importance of this kind of storytelling through diverse forms of entertainment and written verse.

When researching masking and the cross-dressing practice of black male actors in entertainment, one discovers a practice that stems far from the shores of ancient Africa to modern day America. Closely examining the history of Africa reveals the multifaceted nature of one wearing of the mask. It is more than decoration or covering for the face:

> It includes the costume and adornment worn on the body. It also is more than a mere mask, for it gives expression to the bond between a group of people and their ancestors. At the same time, a mask is the embodiment of a tradition and a guarantee of the continuity of an order hallowed by tradition.  

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4 Ibid., 23.
Within Africa, the tradition of cross-dressing and masking is used for entertainment, warrior traditions, social and political gatherings, and many other community functions. In “Cootah and Rabby Compare Notes: Shared Images in the Sea Island and Yoruba Folklore,” the relevance of masking is made more apparent. Within the article, William Fagg informs that the art of masking is used to distinguish the diversity among different African groups. Twining reveals the presence of Africanism within American Culture, especially in the artistic expressions and explains the way that Western Africans used masks, exposing their vital position in that society. According to Twining, the masks give liveliness to its wearer, hide characteristics, and play various roles. She states,

In reality masks are expressions areas of importance within the society... [1] The body movements of the wearer endow them with dramatic liveliness and power. [2] The mask bearer’s human characteristics are hidden or de-emphasized by the masks. [3] The embodied masks operate as arms of justice and arbiters of socially unacceptable behavior, are like the story characters because the humanity of the person covered. It leaves the actors freer to tell the story, teach the morals or mete out justice. The mask lends certain anonymity to the person as he enacts the force of justice or the voice of a god.7

The wearers of masks feel uninhibited and use this freedom to tell stories, teach morals, or proclaim their independence. When masked, these actors are much like the griots and are able to mediate behavior and criticize the actions of society, for “the masked figures are not only amusing, entertaining, pedagogical in function, but are accepted to humans as imitators and preceptors of their behavior.”8 Twining’s article “Cootah and Rabby” reveals how masked figures appear in artistic expression, namely folktales and folk drama.

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6 Mary Twining, “Cootah and Rabby Compare Notes: Shared Images in the Sea Island and Yoruba Folklore” (Course Document, African and African American Folklore, Clark Atlanta University, Atlanta, GA, Spring 2007). Unpublished article by Dr. Mary Twining, Clark Atlanta University.
7 Ibid., 3.
8 Ibid.
Twining’s work highlights the practice of the Yoruba culture and expounds on the use of other motifs and animals within these works giving clarity to the purposes of masks in entertainment.

In Africa, the styles of masks are unique and specifically categorized. There is one category that speaks specifically to this course of study. Andreas Lommel affirms that

>african masks can be divided stylistically into four groups: a realistic type, often representing a beautiful woman with classical features; masks representing animals; abstract masks; and masks in an expressionistic style. The first type, the ‘beautiful’ mask, is found throughout West Africa and the Congo. . . . All these styles may have existed in Africa since time immemorial, but the perishable material of most masks precludes any great antiquity in those hands. Only bronzes from Benin and others [found] excavated in Nigeria have proved to be ancient, and these date back several centuries. The bronze and terracotta heads from Ife have faces with classically beautiful features, and it is possible that the origins of the ‘beautiful’ type of mask may be partly traced back to these heads.9

The ‘beautiful’ mask relates to males masking as female in modern entertainment. Actors like Flip Wilson, Eddie Murphy, Martin Lawrence, and Tyler Perry continue the traditions of masking in the “beautiful” face of a woman. In Western Africa, cross-dressing and masking was not shunned. Male performers adore themselves with the feminine mask on various occasions. Not surprisingly, this tradition continues to be accepted within the 21st century.

As seen within the Yoruba ceremonial tradition—in the past and present, the Gelede “offer a comedic, often farcical, spectacle that belies more serious functions of social and spiritual control. Gelede masks symbolize the omnipotent force of the ancestral mother, lya Nla, who is believed both to nurture and threaten stability in Yoruba

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9 Lommel, 11.
These male dancers dress as women and attempt to remove all the negative aspect of women and input the positive energy of "fecundity, maternity, and well being" in the communal area. Within the dance, they also strive to teach a lesson to the community on moral correction and ethical values. The dancers create a satirical world during their performances that "convey[s] a powerful message of moral and social instruction."

When African tribes are not portraying themselves as females, they are emulating the physical attributes of women in their ceremonial activities. Within Niger, there is a group of people called the Wodaabe, meaning People of the Taboo, who utilize the feminine wiles of women to attract women. During ceremonial dances, men display themselves in a feminine manner in order to show their beauty handed down from ancestors. Beckwith and Fisher reveal the uniqueness of this practice:

In the golden light of the late afternoon, Wodaabe men perform the Yakee, a competition of charm and personality judged by young women. . . . The male dancers stand side by side, forming a long line in front of admiring women who scrutinize their every move. Shoulder to shoulder, they quiver forward on tiptoe to accentuate their height, and launch into a series of wildly exaggerated facial expressions from which their charm, magnetism, and personality will be judged: eyes roll, teeth flash, lips purse, part, and tremble, and cheeks pout in short puffs of breath.

The attributes displayed by the Wodaabe men are usually assigned to women as a form of attracting the opposite sex. These men adorn themselves with facial paint to beautify their features even more. These men even wear perfume, for "the Wodabee believe that wearing a perfume infused with secret potions they will become irresistible to their female

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11 Ibid., 120.
12 Ibid.
13 Ibid., vol.1,181.
judges." Wilson, Murphy, Lawrence, and Perry all appear to adopt the feminine form used by the Wodaabe. These actors each strive to woo and to persuade their audiences of their own self-worth.

Also like the Wodaabee, other Africans, did and still do, use masking and cross-dressing for ceremonial purposes:

Invariably, this belief is expressed at initiation ceremonies through various cross-dressing ceremonies. For example, among the Masai, Nandi, Nuba, and other African tribes, boy initiates dress as girls; similarly, boy novices to be initiated into the Arioi society in Tahiti are dressed as women.

. . . In areas [like Egypt and the upper Congo] of African men attempted to fool the devil (or evil eye) by disguising themselves as women since they believed evil forces did not regard women as being as important. . . . Zulu men dressed in female girdles when drought threaten their land; in the belief that a change in their outward appearance might bring about a change in nature and bring about rain.  

For these African groups, the mask helps to tell stories, teach morals, or mediate conflict.

The mask makers and mask wearers utilize the mask's vivacity and authority; and even though there are some differences between the masking tradition of Africa and acting in America, similarities between the two cultures are present and visible on the American stage. The influence of masking appears to have survived from Africa during the Middle Passage and has remained embedded in the makeup of those African descendants through what Du Bois terms as "double consciousness."  

According to American history, minstrel shows were the first signs of African American male actors masking in female form. At first, blacks were not allowed to perform in minstrel shows and were the object of ridicule and mockery on stage. This form of

14 Ibid.
16 See footnote 20 of Chapter One for explanation of double consciousness.
entertainment, which involved the black mask, hit the American stage in the early 1900's and continued for over a century. According to Eric Lott, "[t]he black masked offered a way to play with the collective fears of a degraded and threatening male—otherwise at the same time maintaining some symbolic control them." During the early 1900's, black face entertainment, also called minstrel shows, was accepted as norms on American stages: "In these shows, white men blackened their faces with burnt cork to lampoon Negroes, performing songs and skits that sentimentalized the nightmare of slave life on Southern plantations." It was a unique form of entertainment and performance:

Blackface minstrelsy was the first distinctly American theatrical form. In the 1830s and 1840s, it was at the core of the rise of an American music industry, and for several decades it provided the lens through which white American saw black America. On the one hand, it had strong racist aspects; on the other it resulted in the first broad awareness by white Americans of aspects of black culture.

It must be understood that [b]lackface is a style of theatrical makeup that originated in the United States, used to affect the countenance of an ironic, racist American archetype—that of the darky or coon. Blackface also refers to genre of musical comedic theatrical presentation in which black face performers in past used burnt cork and later grease paint or shoe polish to blacken their skin and exaggerate their lips, often wearing wooly wigs, gloves, tailcoats, or ragged clothes to complete the transformation.

Later, black artists also performed in blackface.

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19 Lott, 17-18.

This pretense of black life was viewed and enjoyed for decades by both black and white audiences. Initially, white performers “mask their identities” in order to portray black life and existence to white audiences. On stage, “blacks were shown as naive buffoons who sang and danced the days away, gobbling ‘chitlins,’ stealing the occasional watermelon, and expressing their inexplicable love for ‘ol’ massuh.” These white performers adorned themselves with black cork substances and exaggerated their physical features to appear more ethnic and comical. Eventually, both white and black performers donned blackface makeup, and the audiences of all colors grew enthusiastic to see their performances, yet the white actors who impersonated African American life in their performances use of the “black disguise” theoretically is different from the masking done by African American men in minstrel shows, theater, and movies.

At the outset, black performers did mimic the minstrel tradition of white Americans actors: “For a time, blacks imitated, to varying degrees, the caricatures previously institutionalized by white minstrels in blackface.” Eventually, they developed their own self-awareness and seemed to define and redefine blackness through their own performances, even though there were some outside influences that strove to manipulate that identity. Black performers like William Alexander Brown, James Hewlett, and Ira Aldridge all wowed audiences and showed their creativity and multiplicity of theatrical abilities to their actors. In their performances, they displayed the ability to mask their true thoughts. This was not uncommon for black actors to do. Robert Toll writes that

[a]lthough black minstrels sy lent credence to racist ideals of blackness, many African American minstrels worked subtly to alter those stereotypes and

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poke fun at ‘white America.’ [For example] [i]n plantation material, aged black characters rarely united with long lost mastered like they were in white minstrelsy.\textsuperscript{23}

In minstrel shows, various skillful techniques are utilized during performances; and despite the black actors noteworthy performances, they endured racial tension and discrimination, which saturated their time period. Black performers learned early that a mockery of the self was a “necessary evil” in profiting and propelling their own identity to the forefront of gazing white America. They embraced the wearing of black cork and thicken there lips for comedy. They even took on the themes of plantation life, which some of the white performers had mastered. Through masked performances, these actors helped present a personality of blackness to the world, regardless of the lasting perception. These actors cunningly adjusted to the time period they lived in and have conquered oppressive situations through comical impressions and performances: “Adjustments meant resisting at times on a subterranean level; parody, as a case in point, surfaced often as a means of resisting without calling direct attention to it.”\textsuperscript{24} Challenging the old discourse of minstrel shows established by white male actors, black performers attempted to control and eventually change their own representation to the American society. This change was a difficult task for these black performers, and producers: “[T]he black show producer had to retain enough of the ‘plantation’ element in his show to appeal to whites and to convince managers of white house to book the show while at the same time not make the show so demeaning that it would not appeal to blacks.”\textsuperscript{25} Black male actors strove to make


\textsuperscript{24} Krasner, 5.

\textsuperscript{25} Ibid., 28.
audiences aware of their creativity and abilities when every social door seemed close to them. They persisted in magnifying the great spirit each had within him.

Eventually in the 21st Century, the tradition of masking and cross-dressing has morphed into a type of "lipstick rebellion" for black identity. During the changing time in American entertainment, audiences have gained insight on how masking and cross dressing relates to the world of entertainment, namely with the performances of Flip Wilson, Eddie Murphy, Martin Lawrence, and Tyler Perry. Wilson, Murphy, Lawrence, and Perry have all mastered the art of taking on another role and not offending those who are being emulated: "[B]lack performers recognizing the time and place in which performance, contention, and risk taking were encouraged' took advantage of the opportunities the racial authenticity provided for expressing their own style. Black performers attempted to evoke new forms of representation." [26] After gaining an understanding of general roles of black male actors on the American stage, this research looks deeper into the role playing of actors Flip Wilson, Eddie Murphy, Martin Lawrence, and Tyler Perry as they portrayed female character on the American Stage, in modern television, and recent movies. This study hopes to bring clarity to masking, for "[m]asking is often theorized as a complex performance of subversion and deception that enables a Black subject within the pathologically hostile environment of white racism." [27] Black identity has been historically defined and redefined by various sources, and how these actors seem to use gender and sexual issues to redefine black male identity and black rebellion is still an ongoing study. This research highlights the role of the image of the female body used by particular black

[26] Ibid., 25.

male actors, and how this usage of femininity serve as a means for defining black identity and rebelling against controversial issues.
CHAPTER 4
THE FEMALE AND THE SILENCE OF A MAN*

Our task then is always to challenge the apparent form of reality—that is, the fixed manners and values of a few, and to struggle with it until it reveals its mad, vari-implicated chaos, its false faces, and on until it surrenders its insight, its truth.
-Ralph Ellison, “Address for Presentation Ceremony,” National Book Award, 1953

No one quite understands the mystery behind the wearing of a mask. Its allure is both intriguing and unexplainable, for the mask possesses the ability to transform, to disguise, and ironically, to reveal new dimensions of existence. Masks conceal secrets while speaking truths. As the epigraph would suggest, a mask is fantasy turned reality, challenging the fixed “manners and values” of what one perceives as real. The craft of masking bestows power upon its wearers to create a unique identity through his or her performance and to impose one’s perspective on the viewing audience. Jane Blocker adds clarity to this idea of masking while performing in her text Where is Ana Mendieta? In her work, Blocker posits that “performative identities are not false; they are not the function of the kind of artifice or masking that implies a hidden ‘real’ self; rather they challenge the coherence of that presumed real.”1 Flip Wilson, Eddie Murphy, Martin Lawrence, and Tyler Perry all embrace the tradition of masking of which Blocker speaks through their guised feminine attire and their manipulation of the

* Title taken from Joyce Jordan’s work published in 1989. This chapter of my thesis discusses the analysis and findings of the works of Flip Wilson, Eddie Murphy, Martin Lawrence, and Tyler Perry utilizing literary sources as tools for deconstruction of the actors’ artistic works.

feminine physical form. The challenges they set before their viewers are to question what is perceived as real and to resist the social norms. What is most fascinating about the black actors’ cross-dressed performances is that they only perform in comedy. In this research, comedy is defined as a “dramatic work that is light and often humorous satirical in tone and usually contains a happy resolution of the thematic conflict.”\(^2\) These actors all embrace the satirical world of comedy (much like that of the Gelede mask wearers of the Yoruba culture) and make light of controversial and socially-charged issues with the unconscious desire to arrive at a happy resolution.

The actors’ comedic-transgendered-performances become combative against society’s stereotypes. Their cross-dressing attires evolve into corrective tools that will be use to promote change while their witty performances convey a subtle yet subversive message of moral correction and social instruction. A dissection of their feminine costume discloses a unique correlation among their concepts. Wilson, Murphy, Lawrence, and Perry all have chosen to align themselves with the semblance of the dark skinned sistas; who, though not portrayed as a beauty queen, represent the illusion of beauty redefined through strength, self-reliance, and humor. While simultaneously paying homage to the feminine vessels, these black actors address issues of sexuality, classism, obesity, and the black family. In a unique and flattering manner, these actors also propose a new appreciation for the black female form that typically does not fit the stereotype of the “light-skinned, fair haired, slender white woman, who [is] clearly objectified and

sexualized [and] constructed to be the standard of female beauty." The black women emulate mirror Karintha's appearance that Jean Toomer speaks of in *Cane*:

> Her skin is like dusk on the eastern horizon,
> Oh cant you see it, O cant you see it,
> Her skin is like dust on the eastern horizon
> . . . When the sun goes down.  

Moreover, Gwendolyn Brooks best explains the beauty and admiration behind cloak of femininity that these African American actors have adopted for their performances in her poem "Dark Girl." Brooks writes,

> I love you for your brownness
> And the rounded darkness of your breast.
> I love you for the breaking sadness in your voice
> And shadows where your wayward eye-lids rest.

> Something of old forgotten queens
> Lurks in the lithe abandon of your walk,
> And something of the shackled slave
> Sobs in the rhythm of your talk.

> Oh, little brown girl, born for sorrow's mate,
> Keep all you have of queenliness,
> Forgetting that you once were slave,
> And let your full lips laugh at Fate!  

The types of women that each actor portrays are not initially revered for their outward beauty, but each character possesses a splendor that is undeniable, a beauty that laughs at fate. These actors understand that "beauty consists of substance, most of which comes from

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within. . .[T]he most beautiful women are black but it doesn’t have to do with race but character—a quality that is not easy to define or put your finger on.”

As these actors grapple with the misconceptions surrounding black beauty, they also tackle other controversial issues with the utilization of distinctive characters. Geraldine, Rasputia, Sheneneh, and Madea are the chosen names of the fictional characters that Wilson, Murphy, Lawrence, and Perry bring to life on stage, on television and in movies. Each character appears to seize the attention of their viewers with enormous personality, while abiding harmoniously in a complex cross-gendered state. Wilson, Murphy, Lawrence, and Perry, individually combine wit and sexuality, power and vulnerability into a “she” image where gender is muddled by humor and satire. The formation of these “she” images repeatedly are disassembled by the actors in an effort to return to their own realities. Oddly enough, this form of entertainment through self-fashioning and self-cancellation becomes a redemptive solution to heal the communal and controversial infirmities that have stricken the actors’ social surroundings in America.

Furthermore, history has shown that America prides itself on being the “Land of the Free and the Home of the Brave,” where one can enjoy luxury, wealth, and opportunity. It is a country that proclaims to its diverse population that “[w]e hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these rights are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.” Yet despite its proclamations, America continues to harbor prejudice, discrimination, and racism, and many Americans are excluded from enjoying the “American Dream.”

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6 St. Jean and Feagin, 95.

7 Taken from the Preamble to the Declaration of Independence.
Lewis Farrakhan suggests “America is clearly suffering, and . . . the root of her suffering is basic immorality and vanity where greed, lust and inordinate self-interest have become the way of life.” Because of these ailments, these selected black actors have chosen to address America’s infestation of social ills with the underlying and unconscious focus on what affects Black America; among these issues are black representation, the aesthetic of black women, black masculinity, and black social and sexual concerns.

Thus disguised as women, these actors embark upon the business of “passing,” that “breaking away from all that [is] familiar and friendly to take one’s chances in another environment” in order to combat negative social norms in this country. Relying on the notion of passing by fashioning into another gender identity, these actors encounter a matrix of complexities, for “the conflict between the [masculinity] of [cross-gendered] characters and their imputed [femininity] serve[s] to [rationalize] their [masculinity], to both name it and express the impossibility of naming it by relying on what is not.” The actors’ ability to pass as females creates a transitory utopian existence for the actors, where they may temporarily express their views uninhibited. Nella Larsen, a writer and poet of the Harlem Renaissance, testifies about the freedom one finds in “passing” with her character Clare Kendry, who is the protagonist in Larsen’s novel Passing. In the novel, Clare Kendry is a fictional character who has “enormous energy, talent, and sensitivity

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10 Ronald Jackson, Scripting the Black Masculine Body: Identity Discourse and Racial Politics in Popular Media (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2006), 115. Jackson’s initial reference centers on racial passing and it has been converted to reflect cross-gendered passing in this thesis.
[and] finds no release for or realization of those gifts in either black or white society."

In *Passing*, Clare self-fashions through the manipulation of racial identities by passing for both black and white, passing within marriage and motherhood, and crafting a public and private role in both racial communities. She shows how “passing expresse[s] the readable boundary between the races as well as the crossing of that boundary.” Yet for this research, passing expresses the apparent border line between genders. Like the black male actors being discussed, Clare is an inventor of various selves. Clare finds herself abiding in an almost colorless existence and is one who, as Thadious Davis explains about the author Nella Larsen herself, is on “a continual human struggle for identity” in her fictional world. The art of passing becomes Clare’s only means of survival, and she must self-fashion and self-cancel her identity in order to maintain her false and waveringly stability. In her life, passing promotes positive change while simultaneously destroying the possibility of a positive existence. Clare becomes the master of her fate and chooses to live a life of “duplicity and isolation,” as, in some ways, does the characters of Wilson, Murphy, Lawrence, and Perry.

Just as Larsen reveals the multifaceted nature of passing with Clare in her novel, Bryant Keith Alexander also exposes the complex composition of passing, which mirrors the same gender switching that the actors undergo. This deed is “not the process of

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12 Jackson, 115.


becoming but the state of being betwixt and between two performance communities, the point of origin and the territory of desire; with the performative expectations of both communities serving as mediators in a tense feud (or maybe a fraud) of identity—of acceptance and denial.\footnote{15} Alexander examines the many facets of passing, such as performing drag, which echoes what Wilson, Murphy, Lawrence, and Perry experience while on stage, in movies, and on television. This unique practice reveals that passing is a product (an assessed state); passing is a process (a constructed and active engagement); passing is performativity (depended on a ritualized reception of communicative acts known and interpreted within specified social systems); and passing is a reflection of one's positionality (politicized location, which is always relational to people and that which is being passed)—knowing that the existential accomplishment of passing always resides in liminality.\footnote{16}

All these actors create masks of craftiness, sexuality, promiscuity, danger, and humor, which Alexander explains by stating that, [i]n actuality, the performative accomplishment of passing is a dialogically negotiated act between the one passing and those who accept or deny, support or sanction, that passage. Each must buy into a prescription of racialized [for this research—gendered] materiality giving way to a set of social and performative executions of identity that maintain a farce in human social relations.\footnote{17}

Wilson, Murphy, Lawrence, and Perry all involve themselves with “passing and the fiction of identity”\footnote{18} where their cross-dressing performances are under scrutiny. Despite the gaze of both black and white America, these actors each self-fashion and self-cancel their

\footnote{15} Bryant Keith Alexander, \textit{Performing Black Masculinity: Race, Culture, and Queer Identity} (Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press, 2006), 73.


\footnote{17} Alexander, 70-71.

identities at will. Greenblatt would suggest that they are always “renewing themselves... and [are] forever aware of their unreality.” These actors appear to reinvent themselves for public consumption while speaking out for social change.

Deciphering what these actors are doing while masking is essential, but what is most crucial to this research is understanding why it is necessary for these actors to mask their identities in the first place. One wonders, what does the feminine nature get allowed to say that the male voice does not? Or more directly stated, what prevents these male actors from simply speaking as themselves in order to eliminate the negative aspects of black male perception and pertinent social concerns? These questions bring to light the issue of language and one’s freedom of speech, making it a dire need to understand language’s value in seeking an answer to these questions.

Looking to Franz Fanon, author of Black Skin White Mask, one sees that Fanon maintains that “to speak is to exist.” Accepting Fanon’s premise as true, it appears that a person’s very being irrefutably is connected to his or her ability to speak for himself or herself. Initially, language holds the wealth to life; but for this research, language’s value denotes freedom of manhood for the aforementioned black actors. As Zora Neale Hurston states,

> Language is like money. In primitive communication actual goods, however bulky, are bartered for what one wants. This finally evolves into coin, the coin being not real wealth but a symbol of wealth. Still later even coin is abandoned for legal tender, and still later for checks in certain usages.  

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Although the forms of language change, language nevertheless remains a means of exchange; and ultimately, a means of control. So through acting, these actors barter for what they want, which is to speak. In order to achieve this freedom of expression, the actors involve themselves in the practice of masking as woman. Because these actors have chosen to address controversial issues masked as females, they reveal limitations to their own freedom of speech. They do not have complete control over their words as men. Their use of words and the method in which they deliver those words reveals a reality that is troubled. The trade is mimicking women is empowering for the actors, for it makes the person gazing at the dismantled male figure—masking as a woman—comfortable and void of competition. Thus, the dismantled, disfigured voice is allowed to speak. The voice is betwixt and between the male and female voice.

For these actors seem to realize that because language is so valuable to survival and the effects of language are life-changing, a person must master it since “to speak a language is to take on a world, a culture.” The ability to articulate one’s views freely symbolizes true humanity. In essence,

[w]ords have users, but as well, users have words. And it is the users that establish the world’s reality. Realities being those fantasies that control your immediate span of life. Usually they are not your own fantasies that belong to governments, traditions, etc. which, it must be clear by now, can make for conflict with the singular human life all ways. The fantasy of America might hurt you, but the things that makes such touching or seeing “normal.” Then words, like their users, have hegemony. Socially---which is final, right now.  

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22 Fanon, 38.

Alas, these actors lack some dominance in their articulation because society perception of them prevents such control. They reside in a double conscious state of who they are and who society says they are. Fanon makes known the psychological aspect of this double conscious existence and the conflicts of language one experiences as he or she resides there. Fanon believes that racial issues are embedded in the language of a society. They are inescapable and play a role in an individual’s personal freedom and means of expression. What seems to be most troubling or rather threatened is the actors’ freedom of communication on serious social and racial concerns. Freedom of “speech, the way one describes the natural proposition of being alive, is much more crucial than even the artists realize.”

It is more than the satire found behind a well-delivered joke, for it is common knowledge that the aforementioned actors all have amassed fortunes utilizing that basic skill. It is one’s existence as person. This research does not limit speech to simply being the ability “to utter or articulate sounds, as being human beings.” This research addresses the deeper and more pertinent aspects of language denied these actors as men—language that will “elevate and enlighten [its] people and lead them toward an awareness of self... [Language that] will show them mirrors. Beautiful symbols. And will aid in the destruction of anything nasty and detrimental to [their] advancement as a people.”

It has been theorized that when one masters the native language, he or she has become more human. Yet, the essence of black humanity and racial equality is, in itself, is an act of protest against the native language of a society. Joyce Jordan reaffirms this notion

24 Ibid.


when she states that the "affirmation of black values and life style within the American context is indeed, an act of protest." By addressing concerns that affect black male identity, the black family, and the black aesthetic, these actors are in a rebellious position; which, ironically, is good for the entire American population. Through the rebellious tactics the actors attempt in their cross-dressing performances, they unknowing appear to redefine what mastery of the language is. Zora Neale Hurston supports this rebellious concept in “Characteristics of Negro Expression” when she states that

> [d]iscord is more natural than accord...Humanity places premium on all things necessary to its well-being, and a valiant and good fighter is valuable in any community. So why hide the light under a bushel?...Besides, one does the community a service...[and] [t]here is nothing more exhilarating as watching well-matched opponents go into action. The entire world likes action, for that matter.\(^{28}\)

History has shown that the black male voice, although strong, has been threatened with much opposition. African Americans like Fredrick Douglass, Booker T. Washington, W. E. Du Bois, Marcus Garvey, along with countless others, all have voiced their resistance against the social norms of black life and were met by contention. Fredrick Douglass (1818-1895) is held as “a Representative American—a type of his countrymen” and during his time, he was “black America’s most electrifying speaker and writer”\(^{29}\) who was also a world renown abolitionist. Booker T. Washington (1856-1915) was “catapulted to national leadership of black America [in 1895]. He suggested that the best way to ensure progress and peace in the South was for whites to respect the blacks’ desire for improved economic opportunities and for blacks to accept the whites’ desire for social separation of


\(^{28}\) Hurston, 1027.

the races.” He advised his “fellow American Americans that they could regain their rights in the South only by accepting the political status quo and working gradually to change it by proving themselves valuable, productive members of society who deserved fair treatment before the law.”30 W.E.B. Du Bois (1868-1963) was “the Renaissance man of African American letters during the first fifty year of the twentieth century. He was the most multifaceted, prolific, and influential writer that black America has ever produced, with one of the one of the widest-ranging intellects of any of his American contemporaries,”31 while Marcus Garvey (1887-1940) was “easily the most controversial figure associated with Harlem in the 1920s.”32 These individuals all sought to define and redefine black manhood and all were met with contention.

Sadly, “enslavement [has] severed the black man from his former notion of manhood.”33 Before slavery, the black man represented one empowered—one who could use words to promote a desired outcome. But since his enslavement, he became the instable part of his former self—one who dreams yet never able to make those dreams an overwhelming reality. The black man has suffered, like all men, and now sees the real world and all its complexities. Through his quest for change, he reveals the savagery and the inhumane nature of mankind by exposing how situation and environment controls the rational actions of humanity. Yet, despite all that is encountered “African men seem never

to have relinquished the desire for natural manhood in America.\textsuperscript{34} They continue to grapple with the premise that “[m]anhood in America was not every man’s to enjoy; rather, it was a luxury enjoyed by white men, as they had the resources African men deemed necessary to consider oneself a man.”\textsuperscript{35} This research seems to indicate that one of the key resources needed for the liberation of black manhood is the ability to speak unreservedly in defense of himself and his race. There were and still are “obstacles—social, economic or political—which retard a black man’s material progression, so much so that attempting to secure manhood appears useless.”\textsuperscript{36} These men, as are the actors referenced in this research, appear to address America just as James Weldon Johnson questions the country in his poem “To America.” In his poem, he states,

\begin{quote}
How would you have us, as we are?
Or sinking ‘neath the load we bear,
Our eyes fixed forward on a star,
Or gazing empty at despair?
\end{quote}

For many, the answer is a resounding no. According to Daniel Black in \textit{Dismantling Black Manhood}, black men “explored every avenue—including death—whereby they might stand in defense of themselves.”\textsuperscript{37} Increased education, social and political involvement, written and verbal discourse, and acquisition of materialistic possessions only provided limited success in the black man securing his manhood; and thereby his voice,

\begin{quote}
\textit{[a]s far as the larger power structure was concerned-that entity run by those who enjoyed the power to limit a black man’s possibilities—all black men
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{34} Ibid., 64.

\textsuperscript{35} Ibid., 4.

\textsuperscript{36} Ibid., 3.

\textsuperscript{37} Ibid., 6.
were simply 'niggas in America' who would do well to understand that they were never to assume themselves equal to their white male counterparts. And if they did, the establishment stood ready and able to teach them the errors of their ways. 

Although Black is referencing the free black male of the 19th Century, his observation—in some ways—still holds true today. Unfortunately, the residue of this bigoted way of thinking continues to permeate society's psyche and the racist and degrading treatment is not far removed from anyone, not even from the Harvard graduate, turned Senator, turned Commander-in-Chief of the United States of America, currently President Barack Obama. He, too, must censor his voice and have his manhood challenged, even though he holds the most powerful position in the world.

Moreover, many African American men still feel the invisible state of which Ralph Ellison speaks in *Invisible Man*. Ellison posits,

> I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me. . . You ache with the need to convince yourself that you do exist in the real world, that you're a part of all the sounds and anguish, and you strike out with your fists, you curse and you swear to make them recognize you. And, alas, it's seldom successful. 

At times, the black man feels invisible; and sadly, he is only recognized for the deplorable deeds that are committed by a few. Bryant Alexander who calls it the "Good Man—Bad Man": Performative Agency and Choice" states,

>The Black male body is polemical. It is a site of public and private contestation; competing investments in Black masculinity that are historical and localized affecting notions of intellect and character, as well as virility and fertility. The diversity within the character of the black man is not acknowledged, hence is relegated to a stereotypically pathologized position,

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38 Ibid., 198.

in which any variation might be constructed as inauthentic or not being real, passing for something that he is not.\textsuperscript{40}

Because of the complex nature of the black man’s existence, some actors (namely Wilson, Murphy, Lawrence, and Perry) self-fashion into insiders and outsiders within their own gender community. Through masking, these actors are not met with contention but laughter. They are able to defuse any resentment or hostility from onlookers; and (referencing Dunbar) through grins and comedic satiric lies, these actors are able to speak freely to both black and white audiences. The duality of being both male and female allows the actors to create “a fictional world that can mediate and perhaps resolve the tension that exists in the differences between the socially constructed identities,”\textsuperscript{41} as well address the issues of sexual freedom, racial barriers and social classes. They continue to construct a morally driven discourse that radically addresses the social disorders that had sought to entrap all of black humanity. These actors make public the limitation they face being black male actors by showing the inability to speak as themselves— as men. As they call to the world and their own community in hope of change, their masks present the blues of their oppressive state in a comedic form. The burden that black men still bear is expressed in another one of Dunbar’s prolific poems, “Sympathy.” This poem embodies the restraints that men of African descent yet face. Dunbar says,

\begin{quote}
I know what the caged bird feels, alas!
When the sun is bright on the upland slopes;
When the wind stirs soft through the springing grass,
And the river flows like a stream of glass;
When the first bird sings and the first buds opes,
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{40} Alexander, 74.

And the faint perfume from it chalice steals—
I know what the caged bird feels!

I know why the caged bird beats his wing
Till its blood is red on the cruel bars;
For he must fly back to his perch and cling
When he fain would be on the bough a-swing;
And a pain still throbs in the old, old scars
And they pulse again with a keener sting—
I know why he beats his wings!

I know why the caged bird sings, ah me,
When his wing is bruised and his bosom sore,
When he beats his bars and he would be free;
It is not a carol of joy or glee,
But a prayer that he sends from his heart's deep core,
But a plea, that upward to Heaven he flings—
I know why the caged bird sings!^{42}

Caged but not completely contained, these actors reinvent themselves on stage. Knowing that, “[m]anhood is a dangerous pursuit”^{43} and because they are compelled to seek other means for social freedom, these aforementioned actors mask their gender by becoming their female counterparts. Why the female form? Vern and Bonnie Bullough would argue in *Cross Dressing, Sex, and Gender* that when one of the gender communities no longer supplies what they need for change, an individual ventures into the other.^{44}

These actors seem to support the Bulloughs’ concept while implementing the notion espoused by Annie Julia Cooper that “the fundamental agency under God in the regeneration, the retaining of the race, as well as the ground work and starting point of its

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^{44} Bonnie Bullough and Vern Bullough, *Cross Dressing, Sex, and Gender* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1993), vii. Referencing Bullough and Bullough’s reasoning for cross-dressing found in their book *Cross Dressing, Sex, and Gender*. 
progress upward, must be the black woman. Wilson, Murphy, Lawrence, and Perry create their feminine illusions through self-fashioning, while addressing the community issues and controversial concerns. It should be noted that according to critical reviews, women are allotted more vocal freedom in their ritualistic play of humor because a regression of speech would cost African American women respect in their racial community. Because of this freedom given to black women, the actors seem to benefit for emulating their gender. These performers take the influences of females, refine their acting skills, and place themselves among the feminine voices of the signify tradition: a "double-voiced" articulation. This double voice "is in the vernacular that, since slavery, the black person has encoded private yet communal rituals." This type of cross-dressing performance become almost testimonial where the actors use "witnessing" as a "weapon" to combat the negative social norms that minorities have to undergo. Diana Miles argues in Women, Violence, and Testimony in the Works of Zora Neale Hurston that Hurston gives testimony of her life in Their Eyes Were Watching God and claims that Hurston’s influential literary value is noticeable in the works of other writers as Gates debates in Signifying Monkey. This includes the love, life, misery, and pain of the common folk. Just

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46 Reference to Hazel Carby's argument in History and Memory in African Culture.

47 Reference made by Henry Louis Gates in his discussion of the “Talking Text,” found in the intro to the Signifying Monkey.


as Hurston gives testimony of her life experience, so do these black actors while under the guise of a woman. Each actor becomes “a man ‘fighting, fighting with words. . . using words as a weapon. . . as one would use a club.’”

Understandably, the black male actors’ pursuit (and that of all black men’s) for wholeness and humanity is different from their female counterpart, who has historically led different lives. To better understand why select African American actors utilize the appearance of women in performances, one must look at the role of black women in America. The black gaze sees the black woman as superwoman since the black woman often defines herself as the breadwinner, the bearer of children, and “the boss.” While the white gaze perceives her as matriarchal—the alternative mother and nurturer. Although stereotyped, degraded, and objectified, black women have been allotted greater liberty to gain their own individuality, awareness, and purpose. However, it must be understood that the condition of black women was far from desirable:

During slavery and subsequent Jim Crow segregation, the cultural devaluing of black women was very clear, and racial attitudes and practices perpetuated course and grotesque images of black women. [White] women were overt and obvious about this degrading of black women.

By contrast, modern racial oppression has a new or disguised countenance. It often hides behind kind-faced, generous looking, sophisticated masks that seem so refined that the roots in old racist habits are no longer recognizable. . . . Today, as in the past, the dominant group seeks to dissemble its wrongs and to discourage the circulation of any proof or memories of the past or present racial immorality.

On the surface, the role of black women in American society mirror Barbara Smith’s 1984 argument about black women writers in her article “Towards a Black Feminist Criticism.”

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51 St. Jean and Feagin, 28.
Smith maintains that the black woman's experience, existence, and culture reside in an invisible state.\textsuperscript{52} But a deeper look at the role of black women is and has been essential to the black community as a whole

[b]ecause women, especially mothers and grandmothers, often hold much of the memory of the black family[;] they also hold much of the collective memory of the black community, for the communities are at the base composed of families. Moreover, in a large sense, the general history of African Americans is in their hands.\textsuperscript{53}

Knowing this, Wilson, Murphy, Lawrence, and Perry all use rhetoric tropes of the black mother, the strong grandmother, and the aggressive "sista-girl" figure to entertain and to present controversial issues. Unintentionally, they present arguments for women's right, black male concerns, sexual freedom, empowerment of the obese, all while representing women of the common folk: the big mamma, the hood chick, and the feisty and overbearing vixens.

Furthermore, these actors become a voice of political protest having come from similar places of oppression and appear to mask their speech, which is "the effective form of a culture."\textsuperscript{54} By utilizing the African aesthetic "call and response" in their performances on television and in the movies, the actors, like other black artists, resemble a gospel pastor during Sunday morning service. Like a pastor's sermon, these actors offers redemption to the lost, comfort to the lonely and peace to the weary, if they would simply heed their warnings, obey their recommendations; and, as Baby Suggs in Beloved urges, simply love themselves. Baby Suggs preaches,


\textsuperscript{53} St. Jean and Feagin, 200.

\textsuperscript{54} Jones (Amiri Baraka), 62.
we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs, flesh that dances on the bare grass. Love it. Love it hard. Yonder they don’t love your flesh. They despise it. They don’t love your eyes; they’d just as soon pick ’em out. No more do they love your skin on your back. Yonder they flay it. And O my people they do not love your hands. Those they use, tie, bind, chop off and leave empty. Love your hands! Love them. . . You got to love it, you! And no they ain’t in love with your mouth. . . . You got to love it. This is flesh I’m talking about here. Flesh that needs to be love. . . . So love your neck. . . . And all your inside parts. . . . you got to love them. The dark, dark liver—love it, love it and the beating heart, love it too. More than eyes and feet. More than lungs that have yet to draw free air. More than your life giving wombs and live giving private parts, hear me know, love your heart. For this is the prize.  

Self love, self appreciation, and self admiration are all themes that resonate in the performances of the aforementioned actors. These actors serve as teachers for black viewers, encouraging the community to get in touch with their own heritage, culture, and past, so they may fully find peace and enjoyment in their present and future. Ironically, the actors’ actions also seem to echo Sterling Brown’s poem “Strong Men” about the pilot of black men. According to Brown,

One thing that can not prohibit
The strong men. . . . coming on
The strong men getting stronger.
Strong men. . .
Stronger. . .

While getting stronger, these actors recognize the profound role that black women have played in their community and have adopted some of the women’s characteristics during performances. These actors each become characters who speak both for the male and female alike. Tearing off the layers of this conventional role of black women, silent and boisterous voices of political protest can be heard, where they rise against human social


injustices, proclaim the intelligence and importance of the African Americans, and further the validity of the independent black woman. Ironically and simultaneously while the actors are performing, they are giving African American women a platform in which to speak, to be heard, and to assert their own identities. Barbara Monroe furthers this argument in her discussion about Zora Neale Hurston’s fiction by suggesting that the contextual use of humor is quite prevalent among African American females, who “break a breathe”\textsuperscript{57} in a male dominated society. These actors help to produce that “break” for black women, thereby reinforcing the ideas of liberation and radical voice for themselves, as well as equality their female counterparts.

After addressing the rationale and motives of why these actors are masking, a closer examination at how these actors are self-fashioning and self-cancelling their identities during performances must be made. In addition to the process of masking, as Dunbar speaks of, the actor’s communication, judgments, and critiques are addressed to understand what boundaries and freedoms exist for the actors because of this form of communication and how they each exist in their double conscious state. Stephen Greenblatt’s notion of self-fashioning and self-cancellation serves as a guideline in the dissection of the actor’s cross dressing performances. Greenblatt lays out ten governing standards\textsuperscript{58} which are common to most instances of self-fashioning and self-cancellation, and these guidelines are employed to assess the actors’ performances. These actors are able to create their unique character by unknowingly adhering to Greenblatt’s model. It appears that some, if not all,


\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{58} Greenblatt, 9. See the conceptual framework of Chapter 1 for a detail explanation.}
of these characteristics are found in the actors’ performances. Each actor’s cross-gendered form of expression contains a message to both the black community and the American people. From Flip Wilson to Tyler Perry, there is a collective aim, even if unconsciously done, to secure a sense of freedom of expression, thereby claiming control over one’s own humanity.

To reiterate, Greenblatt outlines the condition of self-fashioning and self-cancellation. As Greenblatt prescribes, none of these actors are descendents from “an ancient family tradition or hierarchical status that might have rooted personal identity of a clan or caste”59; they each share common history of being descendents from enslaved ancestors. Their pasts create an obstacle for their black male identity and masculinity because they each are faced with racism, discrimination, and other social ills on various levels. Although these are unwilling participants to this trauma, they each must “show submission to an absolute power or authority”60 in this country. Despite the power of the ruling majority, these actors find means to empower themselves. Wilson, Murphy, Lawrence, and Perry each create a world on either the stage, the television, or the movie screen, where they may identify what one perceives as “alien, strange, or hostile. . .in order [to] attac[k] or destro[y]”61 that misconception. Greenblatt states that

\[ \text{[t]he alien is perceived by the authority either as that which uniformed or chaotic (the absence or order) or that which is negative (the demonic parody of order). Since accounts of the former tend inevitably to organize and thematize it, the chaotic constantly slides into the demonic, and consequently the alien is always constructed as a distorted image of authority.}^{62} \]

59 Ibid.
60 Ibid.
61 Ibid.
62 Ibid.
These actors realize that what is “one man’s authority is another man’s alien,”63 and they seek to destroy the authority of discrimination and replace it with the notion of individual freedom and unrestrained ability. They realize that “when one authority or alien is destroyed, another takes its place.”64 For according to Greenblatt, “if both the authority and the alien are located outside the self, they are at the same time experienced as inward necessities, so that both submission and destruction are always already internalized.”65 They counteract any negativity by injecting their views for moral behavior into the conversation. Most importantly, and what has being already been discussed, “self-fashioning is always, though not exclusively, in language.”66 These actors embrace this concept surrounding language and manipulate it to benefit themselves. They have not only self-fashioned their language but also their outer appearance as well. Lastly, as Greenblatt states, “the power generated to attack the alien in the name authority is produced in excess and threatens the authority it sets out to defend. Hence self-fashioning always undergoes some experience of threat, some effacement or undermining, some loss of self.”67 Consequently, despite Greenblatt’s final notion of losing self, the black actors seem to gain a greater control over their identities because their notion of self has already been threatened. The actors self-fashion as a means to redefine the black community, black

63 Ibid.
64 Ibid.
65 Ibid.
66 Ibid.
67 Ibid.
male identity, the aesthetic of the black woman, and other social concerns looming over them.

Taking into consideration the parallel means in which these actors transform, there are some similarities in their finished product. Collectively, the characters they play are comparable in their appearance, behavior, performance roles, and apparent cultural experience. Geraldine, Rasputia, Sheneneh, and Madea are all independent women, who aggressively take control of every situation they encounter. They all love excitement, enjoy a good party, and are forever the centers of attention. These women express their emotions freely and are ever aware of their presence in any given situation. They are womanly in their demeanor, always adorned in very feminine attire, even though the bulky and muscular physiques of their creators sometimes are visible. Alas, they really are never revered for their physical beauty but that never hinders them from finding themselves attractive. Although limited in their academic studies, each of these characters possesses a wealth of wisdom that they offer freely to the people in their middle class surroundings.

Despite these apparent collations, there are some differences in the manner in which the actors self-fashion these characters, deliver their messages, and present the mask of which Paul Laurence Dunbar speaks. Wilson, Murphy, Lawrence, and Perry each convey different messages, but they all strive towards the same common good. Flip Wilson, born Cleow Wilson Jr. in 1933, is an African American actor and comedian praised for transforming American television with his interpretation of the character Geraldine on the *Flip Wilson Show*:

> "By his own admission, Flip Wilson owed a considerable chunk of his

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fame and fortune to Geraldine Jones, his distaff alter ego. Wilson received the name “Flip” from his military buddies who felt his comedic performances were flipped out; he was always natural before an audience. With his character Geraldine, “what you see is [not always] what you get” in his performances. Geraldine is a seductress, is liked by others, and is known for saying “the devil made me do it.” Adhering to her competitive nature, Geraldine appears to always have the sense of “looking at one’s self through the eyes of others.”

In Wilson’s comedy sketch with Muhammad Ali on the “Flip Wilson Show” which aired in the 1970’s, Wilson had Geraldine entertain and converse with the then boxing champion about his sport, her boyfriend Killer, and other racial issues. Aggressively flirting with Muhammad Ali, Geraldine instructs the champ not to hurt Joe Frasier “because he is one of us,” meaning Frasier was African American. Ali and the predominately black audience understand Wilson’s implication of “one of us” and agrees with smirks and laughter. Geraldine finishes her performance by telling Ali if he goes light on Frasier, she will go light on him, alluding to sexual acts. Again, boisterous laughter is heard by Geraldine’s sexual advances. Surprisingly, Ali ridicules Geraldine for her insatiable talking. A bit annoyed, Geraldine humorously continues and even calls her


70 Famous line used by Flip Wilson as Geraldine.

71 Reference to “We Wear the Mask” by Paul Laurence Dunbar.

boyfriend Killer about meeting the champ. She concludes her comedic segment by saying the Ali is the greatest “next to Geraldine.”

In all of Wilson’s skits, Geraldine sexuality and flirty nature is undeniable. Wilson speaks to the inner desire for women to unleash their sexual inhibitions. With his character Geraldine, Wilson exercises sexual freedom for black woman and advocates men’s acceptance of sexually emancipated woman: “He put a firm racial spin on even his most lighthearted bits.”73 An example of his ability to self-fashion when dealing with racial issues is seen in another one of his comedic cross-gendered skits:

An early crowd-pleaser was a stand-up routine in which the comedian impersonated Queen Isabella of Spain sending Christopher Columbus off on his mission to find the New World. “Chris gon’ find Ray Charles!” Wilson’s Isabella yelled triumphantly, over and over; for Wilson’s Africanized queen, the king of rhythm & blues was America.74

With the gyrating antics of his character Geraldine, Wilson is able to address the “alien, strange, or hostile” of black sexuality and attack society’s misconception with humor. Yanick St. Jean believes that “black women endure a special kind of racialized sexism.”75 Wilson takes that stereotype and puts the power back into the hand of black women with his character Geraldine. As a man, he stands with the black woman; as a woman, he speaks for her. As Geraldine, Wilson is a black woman one who is free to express her sexuality without concern from onlooker. Geraldine is free to be Geraldine. Wilson seems to empower his audience with the same freedom he found from masking as a female himself.

Ken Tucker believes that

Wilson made it possible for blacks to take creative freedom for granted; he

73 Tucker, I.
74 Ibid.
75 St. Jean and Feagin, 100.
demonstrated that you could be a clown without sacrificing your dignity or becoming an Uncle Tom. You could assume the mask of another person, but your true soul would shine through. Wilson had this knack and used it with an effectiveness all the more impressive for the way he made it seem so casual and natural. His talent made him do it.  

For Wilson, creativity was a must. What is more astounding, Eddie Murphy seems to possess the same creative freedom and power of Wilson with his depiction of his character, Rasputia from the movie, Norbit. For years, Murphy has dazzled audiences with his comedic performance in movies like Coming to America, Trading Places, The Clumps I & II, Dr. Dolittle, and Daddy Day Care. He has even received a Golden Globe and has been nominated for an Oscar for his performance in the movie Dreamgirls, co-starring Jennifer Hudson, Beyonce Knowles, and Jamie Foxx. One of his most poignant, yet for some critics his most disappointing, performance was his role as Rasputia, who is described as “a foul-mouthed, oversexed, aggressive, morbidly obese man-eater who barrels through the movie as a plus-sized King Kong, just about destroying everyone in her path.” Although critics like Annette John-Hall berates his performance, Murphy seems to be addressing new issues of obesity and black women aggressiveness in this particular movie. He seems to empower the obese person, unlike the butt of the joke Professor Clump in his movies, The Chumps I and II. Murphy fashions his character into the unlikely villain realizing Greenblatt concept that “one man’s authority is another man’s alien.” For in America, the issue of weight plays a major role in one’s acceptance and equality.

Interestingly, Murphy turns the table on this practice and makes the one who usually is

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76 Tucker, 1.


mocked the new oppressor. However, there are some negatives to Rasputia’s character to consider. Annette John-Hall in her newspaper article “‘Norbit’ Tarnishes Eddie Murphy” states that

movies like Norbit continue to harm. ‘The unfortunate thing is that people carry away these distortions,’ says film historian Donald Boggle, author of ‘Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, & Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films.’ You wonder what effect it has on a larger woman or girl who for some reason sees themselves in this character.79

True, the unfortunate thing is that people may carry away these distortions, but some may not. But the agreeable observation is that Rasputia is not the victim in this tale. Viewers leave knowing that despite the ridicule overweight people receive, obese people are still empowered, for Rasputia controls and dominates the movie’s environment. It is only at the end of the movie that Rasputia is seen running out of town; but even then, she gains self-control as a professional sexual dancer in what appears to be a city in Mexico.

Arguably, Rasputia is a formidable character who uses her domineering appearance as a weapon: No one dare cross her—no one dare insult her. Rasputia shows that her weight is an asset, for she is able to maintain her sexual appeal. She shows that she is a desired female by having an affair with the dance instructor played by Marlon Wayans. She also shows that she is personally pleased with her own body and wears sexy outfits, even adorning herself in a slinky bikini while going down the water slide at the town’s theme park. She is both empowered and beautiful while being obese. Rasputia’s unusually large body is not a handicap to her, but it is a super power that allows her, if but for a season, to rule her fictional world.

79 Ibid.
Eddie Murphy’s use of the feminine character Rasputia, attacks the misconception that overweight black women are not desirable or persons to be mocked. Rasputia will not let her individuality be defined by the views of others; she becomes as “two ideals in a dark body.” With that in mind, Rasputia becomes the poster child for unconformity.

In addition to being outrageously entertaining and immensely popular, Martin Lawrence also adheres to Greenblatt’s idea of self-fashioning and self-cancellation with his depiction of Sheneneh Jenkins on the show “Martin”: “Like Eddie Murphy, this comic actor is able to tickle the lamest of funny bones.” Born in 1965, Lawrence is well-known for his outrageous antics of various characters on his self-named sitcom, but the most-notable of all his characters is Sheneneh. Lawrence’s nonthreatening comedy attracts both black and white audiences with shared cultural enthusiasm. Lawrence understands the power of his comedy and the impact it has on black audience. In a 1993 interview with Rolling Stone, Lawrence brashly recounts that

[a]nnyone who likes me, gets me. But to me, to make black people laugh—you can go no higher. To me. . . . [a]ll the pressure and shit that black people go through in everyday life—you wonder why we wake up and we have a mood that looks like ‘Muhfucker, I am not in the mood to be laughing today.’ Because, a lot of times with black people, ain’t shit funny. But black, along with white audiences, do laugh at Lawrence’s cross-dressed performances, especially the ones of Sheneneh. People appear to understand his brashness and also find comfort in his crafting of his key female character. Sheneneh is a female in which many

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80 Reference to Du Bois’s notion of Double Consciousness.

81 “Sheneneh Jenkins,” in Martin: The Complete First Season, 4 discs (Home Box Office), 2006.


people could relate; she is a “Saturday’s Child” as Countee Cullen’s describes in the same titled poem:

Some are teethed on a silver spoon,
With the stars strung for a rattle;
I cut my teeth as the black raccoon—
For implements of battle.
Some are swaddled in swaddled in silk and down,
And herald by a star;
They swathed my limbs in a sackcloth gown
On a night that was black as tar.

For some, godfather and goddame
The opulent fairies be;
Dame Poverty gave me my name,
And Pain godfathered me.  

For Sheneneh, life is not one of silver spoons and stars, for she does not appear to be born to a life of privilege. She appears to be accustomed to the life of an inner-city environment, and she uses her street smarts to maneuver situations. Spunky, free-spirited, and owner of the Sheneneh Sho-Nuff Salon, Sheneneh combines urban street flavor and business-like behavior to construct a trendy liberated and formidable black woman. She is the phenomenal woman of which Maya Angelou speaks, for

Pretty women wonder where [her] secret lies.
[She’s] not cute or built to suit a fashion model size.
But when [she] start to tell them,
They think [she’s] telling lies...  

Alas, it is her no nonsense attitude and her hip yet seductive attire that makes her phenomenal. She is witty and overt—never afraid to speak her mind. Lines like “oh no she didn’t” and “punks jump up to get beat down” are common in her vernacular. And

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according to her, she will “bash a nigga’s head in” if necessary. Aggressive, abrasive, urban, and liberated are a few words that describe the complex yet simplistic nature of Sheneneh Jenkins.

Remarkably, Lawrence seems to use Sheneneh’s character in two ways. Primarily, she is the height of comic relief in an already hilarious sitcom. Secondly, Lawrence appears to speak to the notion of what connotes a successful black female. Initially, women are portrayed as docile and loving people in a normal society. They are nurturing, accepting, loving, and understanding. In an ideal situation, they are the symbols of humanity and compassion. However, when the accepted norm of their world is threatened they become the strength and vengeance of their community. This characteristic is apparent when audiences see Sheneneh. Lawrence combines unnatural cruelty and humor to soften the message of redefining black womanhood. With all the depictions of Sheneneh on the sitcom, Lawrence addresses the social issue of classism. Even though Sheneneh is a loud and unruly woman, she is wise. She remains financially secure throughout the run of the show syndication and is always the one sought to out by Gina, Pam and Martin if they need extra money. She remains a fixed supplier to the community because she is self-sufficient, runs her own business, and is able to give freely, when necessary. Lawrence apparently is redefining the “successful” black woman with his character that does not fit the normal stereotype of a successful woman.

Much like Lawrence, the one time homeless Tyler Perry also has risen to stardom with his portrayal of a street smart woman. Perry is known for his theater and television productions, which include (but not limited to) *Diary of a Mad Black Women*, *Madea’s Family Reunion*, *Meet the Browns*, *Why Did I Get Married*, *I Can Do Bad All By Myself*,
and *Madea Goes to Jail*. In his work, Perry elevates the black female voice in his cross-gender performances and positions her in a medium that has systematically silenced her. While stressing the importance of self-awareness and cultural identity through oral storytelling, Perry also highlights the vital component of the black family. Through his work, he reconnects the history of the African aesthetic to the Africa American society, moves the matriarchal figure to the forefront of the community, and emphasizes the importance of strong family values. He tailors the African American experience effectively to address the “modern-day” African American people. Tyler Perry also redefines the essence of the black woman with his female character, Mable Simmon, affectionately called Madea. Annette John-Hall writes that

> Perry first came to prominence on the stage-play circuit wearing a fat suit. His Madea, a no-nonsense, cigarette-smoking matriarch, was quickly embraced by audiences, who recognized their own relatives in her. Perry played Madea as a neighborhood sage who dispensed influence and homespun wisdom to empower women, not as a caricature to humiliate.\(^{86}\)

Within his movies, Perry presents Madea, a frisky, gun toting, elderly old woman, who critiques the actions and events of her life and the people surrounding her. Madea seems to possess the qualities of a female griot, or griotte. As a griotte, Madea is forever “teaching students” “recount[ing] the history” of the “family,” and “provid[ing] advice.”\(^{87}\) She is a voice to the community (wherever that community may be), “serves as spokesperson,” and is always involving herself in “mediating conflicts,”\(^{88}\) even when it causes her some personal discomfort. Perry makes Madea’s form of storytelling reflective of the African

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\(^{86}\) John-Hall, 1.


\(^{88}\) Ibid.
American culture, which has experienced an absence and lapse in their own past due to misguidance and a lack of family values. What is more surprising and ironic, Madea represents the rebirth of the black church and its influence on the black family and community at large. What is ingenious about Perry’s character is that she is a woman seen in many black communities. Perry describes her as an “everywoman”:

Madea is a grandmother that was in every neighborhood back in the day. I grew up with them in my neighborhood, my mother, my aunt, the woman across the street-Viola, on the corner, LeeAnn. They all were this woman. And now she is gone. Grandmothers are much younger...She is missed; she is completely missed, so I think that is why people endear to her.\(^{89}\)

Although Perry’s character, Madea, appears in numerous movies and stage plays, this research focuses her performance in the movie *Madea Goes to Jail*\(^{90}\) since the movie centers on Madea’s life and theatrical performances. In *Madea Goes to Jail*, Madea takes her first fall from legal grace after destroying a police officer’s wife’s red corvette. Madea is sent to jail by Judge Mathis. In jail, Madea proclaims to another inmate her sovereignty as a woman: “I guess nobody told you that I’m Madea! Ma to the damn D-E-A, and you understand what I want—I get.”\(^{91}\) Madea gets what she wants, and she also helps others when they are in need. In the movie, *Madea Goes to Jail*, Madea must address the internal conflict occurring with the supporting character Candace Washington, played by Keshia Knight Pulliam. Washington desires to escape her prostitution lifestyle but does not want the help of others. Madea is Washington’s, and the rest of the community’s, saving grace. She helps Pulliam’s character find herself and come to a place of healing. Madea’s fearless

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\(^{89}\) “Tyler Perry Interview: I want Madea dead,” Youtube.com (February 19, 2009), www.youtube.com/watch?v=kR1zXP91c-Y (accessed August 21, 2009).

\(^{90}\) Tyler Perry, “Madea (Mable Simmons),” in *Madea Goes to Jail*, directed by Tyler Perry (Atlanta, GA: Lionsgate Home Entertainment), 2009.

\(^{91}\) Ibid.
action and bold statements cause other to listen, assess themselves, and make changes.

Interestingly, Madea is not perfect, nor does not strive to be. She lives her life content to be Madea. What is most notable, Perry feels Madea “says the things that we all want to say and how we want to say them and she does the things we all want to do.”

Conclusively, these actors understand the limits of the female voice and implement the utilization of the feminize voice and mask means of survival. Unknowingly adhering to the guidelines of Greenblatt, they each self-fashion and self-cancel their identities on and off the stage. What is unique is that their masking is that it reveals social issues that affect their own communities and society at large. They each are on a comedic journey to right the wrongs that prevent them from obtain manhood and that continues to keep their communities in bondage.

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CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION OF FUTURE RESEARCH

He’s an ordinary guy at best
Til he puts on a wig and a dress
It gives him strength, it gives him power
He’s both the man and the woman of the hour
He’s get style, and he’s got fashion
When fighting crime he looks absolutely smashin’

He’s captain cross dresser
The foe of evil and hate
He’s captain cross dresser
And believe it or not... He’s straight!

-Captain Cross Dresser Theme Song Lyrics, 2009

Selected black actors have chosen to adorn themselves with feminine trappings in order to combat the social and controversial issues that affect the black community because misrepresentation of the black man’s character and prevailing negative stereotypes have both served as opposition to the black man’s freedom of expression. For “conscious or unconscious white racism is everywhere, infecting all the areas of national life,”¹ and these actors have made the decision that “white racism will no longer exercise its insidious control over [their] work.”² Despite the opposition they face, these black performers have found a new avenue in which to be heard. As authors of Cross Dressing, Sex and Gender Vern and Bonnie Bullough suggest, when one’s gender does not supply the social freedom needed or when a unique circumstance

² Ibid.
demands the behavior of the other, a person simply assumes some of the characteristics from the other gender.\(^3\) Accepting the Bulloughs’ concept as true, one sees that these black male actors have chosen to take on the semblance of the female vessel for various reasons: (1) There is a continual attack against black male identity and the black male freedom of speech; (2) The black female is afforded more freedom of expression because of the role she has played historically in black and white America; and as stated in chapter four (3) “women are allotted more vocal freedom in their ritualistic play of humor because a regression of speech would cost African American women respect in their racial community.”\(^4\) This research contends that these select black male actors have worn the mask of femininity to survive the vicissitudes of the American stage and to combat social and controversial issues facing the black community. It must be understood that the issues that these actors experience, as well as the black community at large, are not blatant racism or discrimination. Their experience differs greatly from the actions of white America that a person may have seen or studied in past decades. This new racism is subtle, yet still severe enough to dehumanize an individual. Hoyt Fuller tells us that

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[t]he essential point here is not the presence of overt hostility; it is the absence of clarity of vision. The glass through which black life is viewed by white America is, inescapably (it is a matter of extent), befogged by the hot breath of history. True ‘objectivity’ where race is concerned is as rare as a necklace of Hope diamonds.\(^5\)
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What is obvious for the plight identity is that there is still opposition hindering black voice, black beauty, and financial stability of the race. Actions must be taken to change the way

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\(^4\) Reference to Hazel Carby’s argument in *History and Memory in African Culture*.

\(^5\) Fuller, 1811-2.
one is seen and heard in America. This research hopes to explain some of the steps being
taken in the entertainment world.

By exploring Paul Dunbar’s concept of the mask, the objective was to unmask the
similarities between the mask in which Dunbar speaks and the masks worn by Flip Wilson,
Eddie Murphy, Martin Lawrence, and Terry Perry while they are performing while cross-
dressing. The research elaborates on why these actors feel compelled to mask their
identities and what is the significance in choosing the feminized mask. The key reason
behind this negative perception of black men in America centers on the media. The media
continues to scrutinize the black man; and because of this scrutiny, some black male actors,
consciously or unconsciously, are forced to address the complicated nature of their
existence through comedy and costume. Fuller states that “after centuries of being told, in
a million different ways, that they were not beautiful, and that whiteness of skin,
straightness of hair, and aquilineness of features constituted the only measure of beauty,
black people have revolted.”6 What is remarkable is that at the same time combating the
degrading of black women, these actors reveal the beauty of these females. Their rebellion
also leads to self-discovery. Fuller believes that Black Americans

are rediscovering their heritage and their history, seeing it with newly
focused eyes, struck with the wonder of that strength which has enabled
them to endure and, in spirit, to defeat the power of prolonged and
calculated oppression.7

These actors have developed the lenses in which they are viewing the world. And not only
do they appear to be challenging the notion of black manhood, the limitation of freedom of
speech, and the role of black women in the plight for a plight for an unconstrained

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6 Ibid., 1813.
7 Ibid.
existence, they are also tackling crucial matters that affect society as a whole. These actors address issues of sexuality, classism, obesity, and the role of the black family in America. They set the stage for social progress in America and provoke new interest in the issues regarding black female and male relationships, troubles in the black family unit, and issues concerning black masculinity and voice. Simultaneously, they combat the gaze of both black and white America while they self-fashion and self-cancel their identities.

Wilson, Murphy, Lawrence, and Perry address the black man’s desire to obtain manhood, which, according to this research, is directly connected to his freedom of speech. In Daniel Black’s Dismantling Black Manhood, Black maintains that the black man’s concept of manhood has been distorted with his ancestors’ former enslavement or the impact of enslavement on freed black men. Because of this haunting past, the black man continues to war internally with his feelings of being lost in America as Claude McKay describes in his poem “Outcast.”

For the dim regions whence my father came  
My spirit,bondaged by the body, longs.  
Words felt, but never heard, my lips would frame;  
My soul would sing forgotten jungle songs. 
I would go back to darkness and to peace,  
But the great western world holds me in fee,  
And I may never hope for full release  
While to its alien gods I bend my knee.  
Something in me is lost, forever lost,  
Some vital thing has gone out of my heart,  
And I must walk the way of life a ghost  
Among the son of earth, a thing apart;  
For I was born, far from my native clime,  
Under the white man’s meance, out of time.8

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For that reason, this research centers on addressing the issue of the black male as an outcast, an insider and outsider in America. What is most significant about this research is that it calls attention to this “outcast” state in the medium of entertainment. The black person’s place still shifts from between these two states: “The world of the black outsider, however much it approximates and parallels and imitates the world of the white insider, by its very nature is inheritor and generator of values and viewpoints which threatens the insiders.” For the actors speak, they present a voice that is betwixt and between both genders. Still, it is a voice that in the case of Perry’s Madea is delivering a continuous message of the value of heritage, the value of respect, and the value of identity and black unity. The voice of Lawrence’s Sheneneh is one of free enterprise and classism among blacks. Murphy’s voice as Rasputia speaks to social acceptance concerning physical weight, and Wilson’s Geraldine demands the boldness of character and strength.

As stated in the introduction, this research also adds to the discipline concerning black male identity issues, black male critique of black women, and black males subversive rebellion against society’s oppressive norms. It changes the outlook of how black males view and even perform femininity. It also adds insight to the comedic performances of these very famous aforementioned performers. Overall, this body of research hopes to destroy some misconceptions concerning black men and to speak for the aforementioned black male actors as they speak for the black community each time they are compelled to mask their identities while entertaining. For, the language of the characters assumes a role similar to Henry Louis Gates, Jr.’s notion of the speakerly texts. The characters speak to each other. The voice is almost one voice—the language one language—as each actor

9 Fuller, 1813.
demands a place of respect. Thus, if the respect is given to the black woman, it is also
given simultaneously to the black man. After all, with the mask, they are one.

And just as the actors speak, this research too becomes a speakerly text in the
conversation for black male voice and social equality. It highlights the cross-dressing
behavior of the actors and brings to light fundamental concerns involving language and the
issue of passing; for as they pass, Wilson exercises sexual freedom for woman, advocating
men’s acceptance of sexual free and liberated woman with the gyrating antics of Geraldine.
Eddie Murphy combats the new issues of obesity and black woman aggressiveness with his
character Rasputia in the movie Norbit. Martin Lawrence addresses social issues dealing
with classism and redefining what a “successful” black woman is, and Perry covers a
gamete of controversial issues that are affecting the black community, namely prostitution,
molestation, domestic violence, single parenting, interracial dating, and a gamete of
relationship and religion issues. All of the actors make their characters overcomers.
Through the actions of their characters, these actors show that black Americans are no
longer victims of society but victors with strong voices of changes and empowerment.
They project mediated message to inspire the masses of African American men to
recognize the importance of the black woman and how his identity is intrinsically linked to
hers. Finally, these actors serve as role models for those viewing and hearing their unique
form of communication.

Given all that has been earlier addressed, it is not surprising that these actors have
adopted the tradition of cross-dressing while performing. What has been shared in this
research brings clarity to why this type of performance is beneficial and necessary.
Although the analysis may improve one’s understanding of cross-dressing among black
actors, it does not exhaust the areas that can be researched. Additional research into the reasons behind black male cross-dressing is needed. Possible topics could include the following:

1. Deciphering the choices of names chosen for the characters and the role naming plays as it relates to language.
2. Investigating the rationale behind black male actors who dress as the “Other” (those who mask as white male and white female characters).
3. Looking at black women who cross-dressing to understand their rationale for participating in the tradition (An example could be Whoopie Goldberg who masked as a white male while sporting a blonde, long hair wig).

Although taxing, this research is fundamental in unmasking the challenges facing black male identity and other masculinity issues. It may also speak to the various ills that are affecting the black community. A future investigation on this topic may begin with black male cross-dressed performances in minstrel show revealing the changes that occurred in each decade of those black-faced performances. The information discovered could be used to seek a reoccurring pattern through the Harlem Renaissance, Black Arts Movement, to the present. In addition to black male actors that cross-dress in performances, a researcher may look at black female actors that also participate in the tradition. The researcher could then address any correlations in the rationale behind why the black female actors are masking juxtaposed to that black male actors.

Concluding, Daniel Black suggests that if additional studies are not conducted concerning the nature black manhood “black American men will continue to search the world for a manhood they are unable to recognize and one which, ultimately might mean their demise.”

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to adorn themselves with the outer mask of femininity. This may lead to answers of
questions concerning black male voice. Moreover, more research can continue to
investigate why a black man cannot speak as himself when addressing socially-charged and
controversial issues. For it makes one

"... marvel at this curious thing;
To make a[n] [man/actor/person] black, and bid him sing."\(^{11}\)

\(^{11}\) Countee Cullen, “Yet Do I Marvel,” in \textit{The Norton Anthology of African American Literature},
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