

"MODERNISM  
AND THE  
HARLEM  
RENAISSANCE"

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Chesnutt's effectiveness as a "modern" lay in his ability to give the trick to white expectations, securing publication for creative work that carries a deep-rooted African sound. Dunbar's strength where authentic Afro-American expressivity was concerned lay in an entirely different direction. Rather than aspiring to a mastery of form like Washington and Chesnutt, the black poet chose the *deformation of mastery* as his strategy. And in this choice, he followed the august example of that genius from Great Barrington, Dr. W. E. B. DuBois. If we turn for a moment to observations on biological "form," we can distinguish graphically between what I call the mastery of form and the strategies of DuBois and Dunbar.

The zoologist H. B. Cott writes:

A . . . factor influencing form . . . is an animal's appearance, considered in relation to the visual perception of other animals, whether of the same or different species. In the struggle for existence, two primary necessities for life are security and sustenance. If an animal is to survive, it must in one way or another obtain food and at the same time avoid being eaten. . . . The devices by means of which animals achieve these three ends are almost infinitely various. Many, themselves bewildering in their varied modes of action and application to the day-to-day needs of survival, fall into a class by themselves—in that they exert their influence upon other animals from a distance, by sound, by sight, or by scent. To such characters the term "allasthetic" has been applied.<sup>36</sup>

Though this passage sounds suspiciously like nature "red in tooth and claw," I believe one can be reassured by the example of the praying mantis as an insect whose "aesthetic" characteristics allow it to master the form of the green stalk so completely that predators—at a distance, and even close at hand—cannot distinguish its edibility. Cott elaborates:

The nature of allaesthetic characters, and the "public" in relation to which they have evolved, vary widely: on the visual side, the phenomena fall broadly into three main categories—namely, concealment, disguise, and advertisement; on the functional side, these elusive, deceptive or attractive features are variously concerned with other organisms of the habitat—whether predators or prey, mates or rivals, parents or offspring.<sup>37</sup>

Allaesthetic characteristics, in short, are biological *masks*—elusive constellations designed to enhance inclusive fitness. Adopting a shorthand, we might say in fact that the difference between the mastery of form and the deformation of mastery is that between a praying mantis, or rabbit (did you ever attempt to follow the movements of an autumn hare through sedge-brown, October woods?), and a gorilla.

The mastery of form conceals, disguises, floats like a trickster butterfly in order to sting like a bee. The deformation of mastery, by contrast, is Morris Day singing "Jungle Love," advertising, with certainty, his unabashed *badness*—which is not always conjoined with violence. *Deformation* is a go(ue)rilla action in the face of acknowledged advertisements. It produces sounds radically different from those of, say, Sade, whose almost mumbled initial exposition gives way to subdued (but scandalously signifying) lyrics in "Smooth Operator."

The deformation of mastery is fully at work in gorilla "display." Man—the master of "civilization"—enters forests and triggers a response. The display is described by Colin Groves:

The full display is extremely impressive and quite terrifying except to another gorilla. . . . [The gorilla] stands or sits on the ground, and begins to hoot. Suddenly he stops; unexpectedly he turns his head, plucks a leaf with his lips and holds it between them. . . . the hoos get faster and faster, the gorilla rises on his hindlegs. . . . Still standing erect, he runs sideways a few yards, bringing himself up short and slapping and tearing at the vegetation with great sideways sweeps of the arms. At last, as if to bring the display to a final close, he thumps the ground with the open palm of one or both hands, and drops back onto all fours.<sup>38</sup>

Such displays present the type of allaesthetic mask that Cott calls *phanerie*. Rather than concealing or disguising in the manner of the *cryptic* mask (a colorful mastery of codes), the phanerie mask is meant to advertise. It distinguishes rather than conceals. It secures territorial advantage and heightens a group's survival possibilities.

The gorilla's deformation is made possible by his superior knowledge of the landscape and the loud assertion of possession that he makes. It is, of course, the latter—the "hoots" of assurance that remain incomprehensible to intruders—that produce a notion (in the intruder's mind and vocabulary) of "deformity." An "alien" *sound* gives birth to notions of the indigenous—say, Africans, or Afro-Americans—as *deformed*.

Two things, then, can be stated about the dynamics of deformation: first, the indigenous comprehend the territory within their own vale/veil more fully than any intruder. ("The kingdom is divided into many provinces or districts, in one of the most remote and fertile of which, I was born, in the year 1745, situated in a charming fruitful *vale*, named Essaka.") Thus writes Claudah Equiano the African. And W. E. B. DuBois provides echoes in his own prefatory words to a gorilla literacy: "And, finally, need I add that I who speak here am bone of the bone and flesh of the flesh of them that

live within the Veil?").<sup>39</sup> The vale/Veil, one might assert, is for the indigenous *language* itself.

Second, the indigenous *sonid* appears monstrous and deformed *only* to the intruder. In the popular domain, the intruder's response is King Kong (or Mr. T); in literature, the trope most frequently visited by "alien" writers and their adversaries is the hooting deformed of Shakespeare's

*Tempest*.

Caliban, like a maroon in Jamaican hills or Nat Turner preparing his phaneric exit from the Great Dismal Swamp of the American South, focuses a drama of deformation that authors such as George Lamming, James Baldwin, and, of course, William Melvin Kelley have found suggestive for their own situations. What then of deformity/deformation and Caliban?

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If one claims, following a post-structuralist line, that to possess the "gift" of language is to be possessed, then one immediately situates him or herself in a domain familiar to the diaspora. *Possession* operates both in the spirit work of voodoo and in the dread slave and voodoo economics perpetuated by the West. What is involved in possession, in either case, is supplementary—the immediately mediating appearance, as spectre or shadow, of a second and secondary "self." In specifically diasporic terms, "being possessed" (as slave, but also as a BEING POSSESSED) is more than a necessary doubling or inscribed "otherness" of the *con-scripted* (those who come, as necessity, *with* writing). For in the diaspora, the possessed are governed not simply by *script* but also by productive conditions that render their entire play a *tripling*.

Caliban speaks his possession as a metacurse:

You taught me language; and my profit on't  
Is, I know how to curse. The red plague rid you  
For learning me your language.<sup>40</sup>

Caliban's utterance is "meta" because its semantics are marked by economics (implied or explicit) of *ab-scenity*—they speak *against* the scene of an intruder's tongue. Not "self" discovery, but the impossibility of feeling anything other than cursed by language is the sense of Caliban's utterance. For his self-assurance is not at issue. He has always known the forms (the morphology) of his indigenous vale,