BLACK IDENTITIES

PAUL LAURENCE DUNBAR

We Wear 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,

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

We smile, but oh 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!

LUCILLE CLIFTON

won't you celebrate with me

won't you celebrate with me
what i have shaped into
a kind of life? i had no model.
born in babylon
both nonwhite and woman
what did i see to be except myself?
i made it up
here on this bridge between
starshine and clay,
my one hand holding tight
my other hand; come celebrate
with me that everyday
something has tried to kill me
and has failed.

ALISON C. ROLLINS

Why Is We Americans

We is gator teeth hanging from the rear-
view mirror as sickle cells suckle at Big
Momma's teats. We is dragonfly
choppers hovering above Walden Pond.
We is spinal cords shedding like the skin
of a cottonmouth. We is Psalm 23 and
the pastor's chattering chicklets. We is
a good problem to have. We is throats
constricting and the grape juice
of Jesus. We is Roach and Mingus in
Birdland. We is *body electric*, eyes
watering with moonshine, glossy lips
sticky with lard. We is half brothers in
headlock, arm wrestling in the dirt.
We is Vaseline rubbed into knocked
knees and cracked elbows. We is ham
hocks making love to kidney beans. We
is Orpheus, lyre in hand, asking *do we
have a problem?* We is the backstory
of myth. We is sitting horse and crazy
bull. We is brown paper bags,
gurgled belches. We is hooded ghosts
and holy shadows roaming Mississippi
goddamned. We is downbeats and
syncopation's cousin. We is mouths
washed out with the blood of the lamb.
We is witch hazel–coated backs sucking
on peppermint wrappers. We is the
spiked antennae of a triangle-faced
praying mantis. We is barefoot
tongue-tied hogs with slit throats and
twitching bellies. We is sun tea and
brewed bitches. We is the crying
pussies that stand down when told to

man up. We is Radio Raheem and Zoot
Suit Malcolm. We is spit-slick low cuts
and fades. We is scrappy black-masked
coons and turkey-necked bullfrogs. We
is the pits of arms at stake, the clouds
frothing at the mouth. We is swimmers
naked, private parts Whitman allegedly
fondled beneath the water. We is
late lurkers and castrated tree limbs
on the Sunday before last. We is red-
veined pupils and piss-stained knickers,
slack-jawed and slumped in the
bathroom doorway. We is whiplash
and backhanded ways of settling grief.
We is clubbin' woolly mammoths
upside the head, jammin' fingers in
Darwin's white beard. We is comin'
round yonder, pigeon-toed and
bowlegged, laughin' our heads off.
We is lassoed cowboys swingin' in
the sweet summer breeze.

Essay by Walton M. Muyumba

One way for readers to understand the African American poetic tradition is as a series of lyrical improvisations on Blackness. Sometimes a mode of lament, sometimes born of celebration, call it the tragi-celebratory poetics of African American identity. Published in Dunbar's collection *Majors and Minors* (1895), "We Wear the Mask," a poem that highlights Dunbar's ability to blend vernacular and formalist impulses, is a strong example of African American tragi-celebratory poetics. Its subject is nothing less than expression itself, and the constraints on unadulterated self-representation imposed on African Americans. The opening stanza invokes masking as a practice of dissembling that is fundamental to African American identification: "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."

Dunbar's poem suggests that in order to protect themselves, physically and psychologically, African Americans must shield themselves by cynically, strategically, performing stereotypes of Black joviality and insouciance. For nineteenth-century white readers Dunbar's poem would have confirmed what they thought they already knew about African Americans. Note, however, that this poem conceals much more than it reveals. Black readers would have recognized some semblance of their own daily practices or experiences expressed with tonal and lyric complexity.

Indeed, in line 6, the speaker asks, "Why should the world be over-wise" about the tribulations of Black life, "all our tears and sighs?" The speaker's articulation of double consciousness relies on indirection—as both a poetic device and a trope of African American vernacular expression. In this poem, smiling and singing aren't exhibitions of Black life's joys and pleasures; those actions screen lived Blackness from onlookers, misdirecting them with a kind of Blackface minstrelsy.

Though the first-person plural subject employs guile and subtlety to insulate their "torn and bleeding hearts," readers

are left wondering from whence these injuries arrive or why the group must obscure their true feelings and actual selves. In fact, Dunbar's speaker neither announces that the plural subject represents Black Americans nor exposes what conditions inspire masking. While the speaker claims to communicate transparently—suggesting that one kind of Black performance cloaks some other, more sincere Blackness, or that trauma and misery define Black experience in toto ("the clay is vile / Beneath our feet, and long the mile")—rather than confronting the structures of white supremacy, say, he dwells in opacity, refuses elucidation. Blackness remains obscured, even inscrutable. The speaker closes the piece directing "the world [to] dream otherwise" while imagining that masking (or a poem describing it) expresses African American identity matter-of-factly. Given its concluding exclamation, we might read the line as a chant, celebrating simultaneously the resistance to revelation and the protections born of ingenuity and indirection.

One measure of Dunbar's importance is to trace these themes in poems by a late twentieth-century poet like Lucille Clifton and a twenty-first-century poet like Alison C. Rollins. Clifton, in "won't you celebrate with me," also imagines Blackness as an ingenious form of political resistance, but she expands Dunbar's sly defiance into brazen, exuberant confrontation. The poem's fourteen lines give the lightest impression of the sonnet form. Through its four tercets it sets up a problem (she "had no model" for living), rises to climax ("both non-white and woman . . . i made it up . . . my one hand holding tight / my other hand"), and arrives at its denouement with a closing unrhymed (broken) couplet ("something has tried to kill me / and has failed").

While offering a recipe for self-invention, Clifton's speaker announces that she has shaped her life to stave off destruction: "i made it up / here on this bridge between / starshine and clay." She claims to have birthed herself in a process that involves, we might imagine, stardust, water, red clay, a potter's wheel, and an ancient Babylonian kiln. Sitting centrally in the poem, lines 7, 8, and 9 play triply: they answer line 6 ("what did i see to be except myself?"), describe the speaker envisioning and fashioning her selfhood, and at the same time metaphorize the poet's own creative act.

On the "bridge between," the poem's pivot, the speaker crosses from death-defiance to life-creation. Dashing "starshine and clay" against each other like flintstones, the speaker ignites a lightning-like linguistic force that she uses to write herself into existence. These lines also explain the poet's free-verse experimentation: "i made it up." Clifton's fragmented, epigrammatic style is a correlative for the improvisational imperative of Black American experience, especially Black women's lives: improvising Black selfhood is not only an act of resistance against mortal danger, it's an act of joyous artistry.

One hundred and twenty-five years after Dunbar articulated Blackness as masked and a quarter-century after Clifton improvised Black selfhood from life-giving cosmic elements, Alison C. Rollins can joyfully reveal the cultural markers and political makings of African American identities. In her poem "Why Is We Americans," Rollins repeats the African American Vernacular English (AAVE) grammatical construction, "We is" to announce a series of contingently linked Black identities, the "royal," collective, and the singular simultaneously. Rollins, like her poetic forebears, imagines that in naming and celebrating a system of references associated with Black American experience, a poem's speaker enacts self-creation.

As the main riff ("We is") repeats, the poem advances and accrues new elements, each adding to the aggregate and generating the gnarly complexities of Black selfhood. Rollins's opening flourish—"We is gator teeth hanging from the rear- / view mirror as sickle cells suckle at Big / Momma's teats"—harkens back to Dunbar's grinning "we." Where Clifton imagines Blackness born of astro-chemical reaction, Rollins imagines it as the strange juxtaposition of animal incisors dangling totemically and anemic cells squeezing life's blood, sucking mother's milk.

The poem describes Blackness through its multitudinous, largely pop-cultural litany. Rollins's list defines "African American" as a fluid, shifting concept rather than a cemented identity. With each new turn, Rollins plays out a fresh metaphor for Blackness. "We / is Orpheus, lyre in hand," Rollins's speaker explains, "asking *do we / have a problem*? We is the backstory / of myth." Here, lyric poetry's mythical inventor invokes a line made famous by the rapper Ice Cube in John Singleton's *Boyz n the Hood* (1991). Blackness becomes more than myth's "back-

story": it becomes the lyric tradition's seminal note. We might also read this line as Rollins's making an announcement about her reference system and expressive style. She's like a hip-hop DJ and MC in one: Rollins "samples" sound and image to contextualize her "gangsta" lyricism. Later in the poem, glancing back to the prehistorical, Rollins imagines Blackness as a survival attitude: "We is clubbin' woolly mammoths / upside the head, jammin' fingers in / Darwin's white beard." Blackness is both primordial and evolutionary; because it is various, Blackness resists becoming an ossified, excavated, display-worthy relic.

However, as the poem draws to its ending, Rollins links her sense of abundant Blackness to a bitter Black reality: "We is comin' / round yonder, pigeon-toed and / bowlegged, laughin' our heads off. / We is lassoed cowboys swingin' in / the sweet summer breeze." In this last phrase gesturing toward Abel Meeropol's "Strange Fruit," a song Billie Holiday made famous, Rollins binds joy and pain as the ultimate components of Blackness. Complementing Dunbar's charged refusal to reveal and Clifton's ode against erasure, Rollins's poem acknowledges that any celebration of Blackness's human comedy, its compounding, ever-expanding breadth, is always "lassoed" to the tragedy of "Black bodies swinging in the southern breeze."

Discussion Questions

1. These three poems lament certain aspects of African American experience and at the same time celebrate certain forms of Black identity. What, in each poem, is being lamented? What is being celebrated?

2. Each of these poems suggests that the expression of lived experience requires certain forms of aesthetic artistry. Why might this be? Identify, for each poem, a trope (image, metaphor, etc.) or rhetorical device that represents some facet of African American identity or experience in an imaginative way. What possibilities are envisioned?

3. As with any form of self-conception, African American identity is never static and has evolved over time. Judging by these poems, how is African American identity conceived differently by later poets such as Clifton and Rollins than it had been by their nineteenth-century predecessor Paul Laurence Dunbar?

4. In "won't you celebrate with me," Lucille Clifton invites her readers to join with her as she lifts up and commemorates her own experience. In what specific ways might her African American audience be able to identify with her experience as she presents it in the poem?

5. Alison C. Rollins's poem "Why Is We Americans" consists of a long series of references to African American culture and history. Find two such references that seem unusual or unexpected when paired. What is surprising, revealing, or otherwise interesting about their juxtaposition?

Poems for further reading

Claude McKay, "The Tropics in New York"
Langston Hughes, "I, Too, Sing America"
Waring Cuney, "No Images"
Lucille Clifton, "I am accused of tending to the past"
Nikki Giovanni, "Ego Tripping (there may be a reason why)"
Rita Dove, "Hattie McDaniel Arrives at the Cocoanut Grove"
Nikky Finney, "Concerto No. 7: *Condoleezza at the Watergate*"