Review of: "Passing Strange: Radical Chic, Race, Sex, Song, and Dance in “Moanin’ Low”"

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Review of “Passing Strange: Radical Chic, Race, Sex, Song, and Dance in ’Moanin’ Low’” by Thomas F. Connolly

In this interesting article, Connolly focuses on the 1929 dance number “’Moanin’ Low” to examine the complicated identity assumptions surrounding Blackface performances, radical chic, and cultural essentialism.

Connolly notes that this performance purported to be something different from the obviously racist, nostalgic Blackface numbers made famous in such shows as “Swanee.” The “Moanin’ Low” performers, Clifton Webb and Libby Holman, worked under the “illusion that they were creating a ‘serious’ Blackface performance, rather than the conventional comic one” (5).

Though the performance, inspired by Carl Van Vechten’s *Ni**** Heaven*, was wildly successful at the time, Connolly mentions that there were still early detractors. In fact, back in 1848, well before “Moanin’ Low” played, Frederick Douglass voiced his outrage against the practice of white people performing in Blackface, and a contemporary reviewer in 1929, Eudora Garrett, saw something exploitative in white people getting a sexual thrill from watching what they considered to be a performance of “primitive” people.

Thus, Connolly takes pains to distinguish between the superficial performances of white people in Blackface that were openly comical and mocking of Black people and the widely lauded, allegedly more serious artistic performance of “Moanin’ Low.” But given that in the twenty-first century all Blackface performances seem inherently racist, Connolly perhaps spends too much time analyzing “Moanin’ Low”’s pretentions to be seen as higher art than the more obviously egregious vaudeville Blackface numbers of the time.

One of Connolly’s central points is that white people’s intense interest in the allegedly serious rather than mocking 1920s Blackface performance of “Moanin’ Low” anticipates the later white cultural phenomenon of radical chic. Connolly defines radical chic as “the social frisson gained by associating with those presumed to be ‘lower class’ or by identifying one’s self with ‘lower
class’ concerns.” Connolly makes clear that the “ostensible cloak of ‘admiration’” actually amounts to cultural appropriation: “This is the crux of radical chic. It enacts dominance, and from the 1920s on this dominance hinges on race.”

Connolly hones in on the essentialist notions of Black people that “Moanin’ Low’ promoted, quoting dance critic Danielle Robinson, who argues, “For period audiences, ‘authentic Blackness’ in jazz dancing likely signified a host of stereotypical notions - naturalness, wildness, exoticism, physicality, and sexuality.” Connolly notes how this integration and appropriation of racist, essentialist notions of Blackness permeated the work of Modernist artists, from T.S. Eliot’s appropriation of James Weldon Johnson’s dialect poetry to Picasso’s applying “features of African masks to the faces of the white prostitutes.”

Connolly’s essay gets most interesting when he analyzes the two dancers’ projections of their own identities onto the Black characters they play. Years ago, I published an article entitled “Gender Conflicts and their ‘Dark’ Projections in Coming of Age White Female Southern Novels” in which I examined *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *A Member of the Wedding*, and *Bastard out of Carolina* in terms of the white protagonists’ projections of their own gender and sexuality confusions onto victimized Black characters. Here, in “Passing Strange,” Connolly analyzes first the connection between appropriation and essentializing: “The blackface aesthetic is that which considers “blacking up” as a means of concealing identity to reveal “primal” truth.” In addition, since the established protocol was for white performers to “Black up,” Holman, Connolly argues, attempts to achieve authentic whiteness through the use of Blackface: “Immigrants from Eastern Europe were not perceived as ‘quite white’ and putting on blackface was an assumption of a ‘white’ perquisite.” The racist exploitation is indeed difficult to get one’s mind around: a performer signals “authentic” whiteness through enacting the prerogative to perform Blackness, a prerogative only white people can have. In other words, Holman makes a case for the purity of her whiteness through signaling the entitlement it takes to perform Blackness. While Holman uses her Blackface performance to convince her white audience of her authentic whiteness, Webb, for his part, uses Blackface to perform heterosexuality: “Webb, a gay man whose masculinity was liable to be questioned, saw that taking on the strut and thrust of a Harlem ‘sweetback’ was a way of authenticating his masculinity.” Using racist notions of hypersexualized Blackness to prove his own masculinity equates to Webb’s “passing for straight on stage.” Of course Toni Morrison, in her 1992 study *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination,* dissects white people’s “strategic use of black characters to define the goals and enhance the qualities of white characters” (52-53).

In terms of suggestions for the author, I think there could be a tighter organization and structure. Carl Van Vechten seems to wander in and out of the article. Connolly’s analysis of Van Vechten’s significance could be condensed and focused. Connolly could also cut some of the extensive biographical passages about Webb and Holman. Finally, in terms of sentence-level issues, there are some unclear pronoun references sprinkled throughout the text. For example, Connolly writes, “Why are certain white persons so taken with the thought of being mistaken for a Black person? Why is it reprehensible the other way around? Or is it? This is dangerous territory,” and in another example, he notes after the section heading, “Neoplatonic Sweating and Grinding?”: “Did they think they were doing otherwise? Contemporary reactions indicate this.” In an even more minor note, there are a couple of examples of comma errors, such as: “Clifton Webb and Libby Holman were initially similar in their approach to blackface, neither had any political consciousness in the 1920s.” and “Foregrounding, the unexplored centrality of race to radical chic, the mutation lies with Clifton Webb and Libby Holman taking on the function of blackface performance as a means of overcoming their otherness combined with the illusion that they were creating a “serious” Blackface performance, rather than the conventional comic one.”

“Passing Strange” is an article worth reading, especially for its insightful analysis of white performers’ use of marginalized people to symbolize their own psychic trauma.

Works Cited

Fine Laura. “Gender Conflicts and their ‘Dark’ Projections in Coming of Age White Female Southern Novels.” *The Southern Quarterly* (Summer 1998), 121-129.

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