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Black is the Night: Masking and Unmasking, Social Science Research, and What a Song Might Bring

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Kitrina Douglas^{1,2} 

Abstract

An important aspect of commissioned research is how we negotiate the distance that remains unbridged between a researcher and her participants. Arthur Frank, referencing Emmanuel Levinas asks, “Do I recognise what the other is having to hold together, to carry on at all, and his or her fear of life coming apart.” He then asks us to consider what role, or what part “the other” casts us in, in the unfolding drama of their life. I like the language Frank and Levinas use as they move into the realm of performance, where we can be cast in a role, and perhaps adopt a mask to work through these types of issues.

Keywords

mask, masking, moral non fiction, performance, songs, song writing, role, emotional development, ethical development

Introduction

For several years now, this panel has provoked consideration of skulduggery and subterfuge juxtaposed with the artful musing of heroes and villains, pirates, and

¹University of West London, UK

²Leeds Beckett University, UK

Corresponding Author:

Kitrina Douglas, University of West London, Paragon House, Boston Manor Road, Brentford, Ealing W5 5RF, UK; Leeds Beckett University, School of Sport, Headingley Campus, Leeds, UK.

Email: kitrinadouglas@gmail.com

cowboys. Perhaps a “throwing down” of a gauntlet to consider the mask has provoked me to notice the stirring of waters about my feet now, and to consider how previous entanglements inform my present understanding.

In this performance, therefore, I consider three encounters with masking and unmasking. The first as a 16 year old, performing a white woman in a play about racism and interracial marriage set in the 1920s. The second encounter relates to my doctoral research studying the lives of women in high-performance sport where disclosure and concealment became more obvious and of concern to me. The third occasion draws from our most resent commissioned research with women who face challenging experiences and live in areas defined as extreme deprivation in the UK. Through these encounters, I explore movements, between embodied knowing and unknowing, between transparency, disclosure, and concealment, and between rhythms, sounds, and somatic expression that are masked and unmasked during the creation of a song.

First encounter; “And the next performer is”

Around 1976, I was called to the stage of the Guild Hall in Bath, (UK) to perform two contrasting monologues in the open drama class of the Bath Festival of Music and Dramatic Art. The first of these pieces was an extract from the 1920s play, *All Gods Chillun Got Wings* (1924) by Eugene O’Neil. In the piece, I played Ella, a white woman in an interracial marriage, who perhaps in part due to the cultural taboo of interracial marriage in the 1920s, was slowly going mad. The monologue I performed (Act Two, Scene Three) opens with Ella, knife in hand, angrily shouting at an African mask that is hung on the wall.

ELLA--I’ll give you the laugh, wait and see! (*then in a confidential tone*) He thought I was asleep! He called, Ella, Ella--but I kept my eyes shut, I pretended to snore. I fooled him good. (*She gives a little hoarse laugh.*) This is the first time he’s dared to leave me alone for months and months. I’ve been wanting to talk to you every day but this is the only chance-- (*with sudden violence--flourishing her knife*) What’re you grinning about... (O’Neil, 1924, p. 23–24)

It is for me, at the age of 16;

My first encounter with the power of the mask

My first encounter with the power of racism

My first encounter with insanity and madness, and some of its cultural roots

My first encounter playing a part I want to be distanced from, in real life.

My first encounter with embodied understandings that take root,

But I am unable to voice what has taken root

As a much younger child, my sister would enroll me as her leading lady in the plays she had written. It wasn't that I was a natural actor or showed any interest or skills in acting. It was simply that at 10 years of age, my sister's options were limited and I was a willing puppy, happy to be directed.

More importantly, she was 4 years older, at least one foot taller and very much stronger than I was, so I did as I was told. I think these plays seeded in me an enjoyment of the theatrical such that when I got to secondary school, I badgered my parents to allow me to attend drama classes (which were a paid-for addition to the curriculum). As part of the drama curriculum, we were entered into regional drama festivals. It meant time away from the daily grind of school and an opportunity to visit the beautiful Roman City of Bath Spa with my mother, where she would treat me to wonderful cakes in fancy cafés (Douglas, 2014).

It is interesting to me now that I was introduced to this play by my sister, rather than as part of the curriculum at school or by my drama teacher. My elder sister had performed *Ella* some years earlier and I had observed her rehearse for and perform it. As she learned the piece, I followed the script to ensure she knew the lines. A few years later, when asking her, "any ideas for what I might perform at the festival?", she suggested, *All Gods Chillun Got Wings*.

As a "day girl" [as we were called] at a boarding school for girls, the "girls" in my class came from all over the world. This was an unusual (at the time) racial and cultural mix of young women from Africa and Asia, as well as from the UK. Looking back, I wonder how race and racism became so masked that the topic was not something we talked about? Neither was space given to it within the curriculum. I wonder how racial tensions were masked within and between us? Why were there no questions about skin, color, racism, or privilege (and we "girls" were all privileged in many ways). Nor were we asked to ponder human rights abuses in our different countries of birth. What a missed opportunity. It meant we didn't question dominant narratives about stigma and discrimination, poverty, or silencing. In contrast, this play [even while I didn't well understand it at the time] provided a fulcrum against which I would be levered in my thinking. It laid down something in the sedimentary layers of my moral consciousness and it stirred something up.

It was no small thing for me at the time to win this class. Doing so provided a further opportunity to perform publicly, at a gala event at the main theatre in Bath. And thus, for the piece to do further work in me. I have few memories of performing, or for that matter learning the piece or the rehearsals. I have no memory about the types of conversations and questions my drama teacher would have most likely used to develop how *Ella* was portrayed in my version. Nevertheless, I know rehearsals happened, I know I learned and performed the piece, and as I won the class, then the body that performed it, my body, presumably gave a convincing portrayal. Yet, while I consciously remember little, a somatic trace is there, and was stirred by the invitation to contribute to a panel on "masks, masking, and masquerade". What was it about this piece that has risen to the surface now, that cried out to be noticed, that said, *don't you forget me, or the work I've been doing*.

Oscar Wilde, once said; “give a man a mask and he’ll show you his face”. That is, masking the face makes it possible to show a self that may otherwise be difficult or impossible to show or to know. All Gods Chillun Got Wings, and playing the role of Ella, I believe, gave me a mask through which I was able to notice things, in myself, the self that was beginning to understand a moral universe and my response to it. Part of this ‘noticing’ included an awareness of how my body responded when called on to voice what was written in the script. Things that would be, in any other context, considered abusive, racist, and abhorrent. In fact, in the speaking of these words, my understanding, (that of a white privileged 16-year-old female in a private school for girls), was transformed and movements occurred. During the performance, the tension in my body and the challenge of voicing racism, was hidden by the mask of the role, and it is these that the sedimentary layer of my history has not forgotten. The three words that follow “what are you grinning at” in the script are: “... you dirty N”.

And still,
 my body holds the memory of that N word.
 I don’t want to write it,
 I don’t want to voice it,
 but in my head, I hear it.
 I cannot cut the resonance out of my body
 It speaks back now
 In waves returning to the shore
 What you grinning at you dirty...
 I hear it spoken
 I hear the sounds
 My internal council rehearses different positions
 from where it might be spoken,
 as well as the consequences.
 And in the process, I am sensitised to other abuses
 Other isms
 Other events, I don’t want to write
 I don’t want to voice
 Whose resonance, I don’t want to hold in my body

Second Encounter: “You’re not the girl you think you are, no, no”¹

Twenty-four years later, I’m doing my doctoral research and researching the experiences of women in professional sport. I’m an insider and a colleague and/or friend to the 8 women invited to participate. I may have explained to my participants what my role was, but how, when they looked at me, could they see anything other than the golfer they competed against, the woman they walked the fairways of the world with, side by

side, shot by shot, year after year, tournament after tournament? These women had seen how “an” identity, a “Kitrina” was created in reports written by the world’s media about me, and how the media’s version masked other potential types of identity that could have been reported. While I hadn’t been aware (as a player), these were the types of issues my research sought to explore, to unmask. In the media’s version of Kitrina, I was a “tough competitor” “marching to titles” who would “mow down the opposition”. Yet, in that version, the person who wasn’t so tough, who organized the fellowship meetings, and was a vulnerable and caring individual, was concealed (Douglas, 2014, 2018). The media didn’t report complex characters: athletes were either winners or losers, heroes or villains, tough or weak.

I wonder, what type of mask would I have needed to wear for these women, my peers in professional sport, who could carry an understanding of identities being ambiguous, to see “the researcher”? While my participants may have understood a great deal, I feel that had I been a bandit, with ill intent, I could not have been better disguised. I was already unmasked before these women, and therefore, by doing the research in the way I was required at the time, to perform distancing, more neutrality than I was comfortable with, and an othering that put distance between my participants and I, a mask of deceit was created.

I wonder when the mask fell; was my face seen in all its shame? Shame on me.

*

I try to recalibrate my moral compass, and doing so sensitizes me to notice more recent movements, when masking and unmasking occurs during research encounters. I wonder, perhaps if adopting a mask is a necessary step in the unmasking of truths, in the garnering of new insights, and deeper understandings. Perhaps there is an interplay between what and how we are, and how we become disguised, that creates transparency? Perhaps it is a dance, that recognizes the *now you see me, now you don’t, peekaboo* nature of sharing, especially when the stories shared with us are taboo. In the role I stepped into when playing Ella, I appear, I am there physically, and I also disappear. Ella’s life is not my own, her experiences are not my experiences, her words are not my words. I put on the mask when speaking words that stick in the mouth, or that resist being formed into words.

*

[TEXT] JOANNE: Kitrina, please check your e mails, I need to see you. Please don’t call. I can’t speak but need to meet you as soon as possible

I get a text from Joanne, near the end of my doctoral research. I’ve been interviewing her for 3 years. I’ve already written her chapter, and read it back to her but there was a story she hadn’t shared, a story she couldn’t tell, until now. We meet. I sit with her for 6 hours, watching tears, hearing silence, and seeing tissues decompose; what sense could I make from so few words? But the reality is burdensome, and heavy. I know what has happened, I am in no doubt.

Frank (2004, p. 141) referencing Levinas asks, “Do I recognise what the other is having to hold together, to carry on at all, and his or her fear of life coming apart.” He then asks us to consider what role, or what part “the other” casts us in, in the unfolding drama of their life. I like the language Frank and Levinas use as they move into the realm of performance, where we can be cast in a role, and perhaps adopt a mask in working through how to respond. Frank continues, “What part does he or she fear I will play, and what part does she or he hope I might play?” Reading this admonition, I wonder what role Joanne (pseudonym) cast me in and what she hoped for when she decided to try to talk about being raped, and before that when she was a child, being sexually assaulted and never having spoken about it, before she shared this with me. And I wonder, what role I cast myself in, when I decided to write about rape? And why I wanted to reduce the risk of committing “symbolic violence” (Frank, 2004, p. 116) by speaking with an authority that derives from expertise (doctor, nurse, psychologist, teacher, therapist, or researcher). Expertise that makes it possible to suggest one is acting “in a client’s best interest”. The risk of getting it wrong, of course, can immobilize us.

Doing nothing would have been much easier, yet my body compels me forward to write. The encounter, the witnessing of Joanne’s story, called on me to move beyond where I feel comfortable and safe. Her story moves me beyond my life experiences, to write a story about rape (taking place in a typical sport event). Doing so provokes intense engagement with the imaginative possibilities of horror. Once written, I am compelled to share the story (Douglas & Carless, 2009), and to speak it. Once again words stick in my mouth.

When I read it to students, I witness the power of the story being released. I witnessed their shock, discomfort, and through the dialogue that followed observed the male students, initially masked by masculinity, describing themselves as being moved, from disbelief to belief, from neutrality to advocacy. Sport students weren’t expecting a high-performance athlete, a multiple winner on the course, to be able to be manipulated, coerced, raped, and mocked off the course. They expected rape in Hollywood, but not in sport. Before the story, they believed that if a news headline carried a story about a male rugby player or cricketer being accused of rape, they didn’t believe it to be true and believed that the [female] victim must have been complicit. I witnessed, following a twenty-minute story, transformation. Nonetheless, for me, every telling is a very unpleasant experience, to read/present/animate.

Arthur Frank labels these types of stories “moral nonfiction” (Frank, 2004, p. 77), for the way they make demands. They make demands on the writer and story teller, calling on me, “do not leave me alone”. When heard in the lecture, they make demands on the students, provoking the beginning of other dialogues outside of the classroom and lecture hall, laying down an uncomfortable sedimentary layer, perhaps, to be accessed only years later.

Third encounter: “Black was the night”

The song writer draws from the well. Can this ‘act’ be putting on a mask?

Alone with my guitar, I pick a run of four strings and play them over and over, they are slow, 1 2 3 4, 1 2 3 4, mellow, in a minor register, the first string is a lower note, the second third and fourth ring higher, I write the words, “Black was the night”, and then write,

You put on that mask
And opened your arms
So warm and so comforting
Who could resist,
Long was the night
Tight was the hold
Sharp were the teeth
That tore my flesh

David Carless and I are interviewing women who, for this particular funded project, live in the highest percentile indices of deprivation in the UK (Douglas & Carless, 2021). We decide to make a short film about the life experiences of one of our participants (Douglas, 2022). In doing so, I am challenged and provoked by the theme of this panel, and movement between being hidden, a need to hide, hidden in plain sight, hiding truth, and exposing evil. Why do we hide, as a matter of course, our participants, and give them a pseudonym as we desperately hope to show their lives as real and authentic? So much masking and unmasking.

Streams,
cascading internal dialogue,
provoked by the mask
even as I begin here,
I am uncertain of the direction,
My thoughts
turn this way and that,
a forceful thrust,
while I am not sure
I am brought, this time
to Brydie,

Brydie was 16 when she was groomed, the term we use to describe exploitation of young women for sex. A process where one individual or group consciously, and with intent, mask their motives for being friendly, kind, generous, and loving towards another individual. The aim, is to establish a relationship where the victim will be so

invested in the relationship that their normal boundaries will be fractured. Successful grooming results in a victim being trapped in shame and vulnerability.

One of the things that makes grooming so abhorrent relates to the way the perpetrator lies in wait, hidden in plain sight, by a mask of deceit—in Brydie’s case, a child without the type of guardianship that most time evades such stalkings. In fact, it doesn’t take much: a dad who was absent and unwell, being exposed to bullying, taunting and name calling at school, retreating to self-harm, and to experience anxiety and depression. A 16 year old in need of someone to take notice, to listen, someone to show love—that’s all.

When the man who groomed Brydie said “If you want to be with me, you have to sleep with my friend”, did Brydie adopt a mask to enable her to survive the experience? She said to me that it felt like her body was not her own. Her mother had been trying to contact her, but Brydie’s mobile phone had been switched off. The next day, when her mother was eventually able to reach her by phone and ask where she was, Brydie said, “I can’t talk now, I have to get home”. Just like Joanne in my doctoral research, Brydie couldn’t talk about it.

I pick up the guitar again - it calls to me. My fingers return to pick the run of four strings,
they create a place, a borderland that is neither Brydie nor me.

Black was the night
Dark was the sea
Deep is the well
where you left me

In this place the sound creates a mood, and I am in the well with Brydie, but also not.

I am moved back, yet again, to my first encounter with the mask and performing Ella. I know these emotions are anchored still in my body. I know the issues now are not black and white, but they are abuses of power, and they are injustices.

I consider *what mask might I need to wear* to “be what this suffering, vulnerable person needs me to be” (Frank, 2004, p. 141) and what response might I offer now? Institutional ethics offered her anonymity, is that it? Is it ethical just to hide people, and to write a report for the funder? What are the alternatives?

I raise these issues because this is what the “mask” calls me to consider, not because I have a firm answer. I know Brydie and I have different roles, but I also know the role Brydie cast me in was to be an envoy. She told me her main aim in disclosing her grooming and talking about her life was in the hope that it would be a warning to other young women, to perhaps reduce the risk of others going through the same experience, the same trauma that she had. She offered me the story for a purpose. So, I return again to what Frank calls the moral moment, and what should be my response. This is not, now, part of the commissioned research or what the funder is interested in.

As a song writer, it's been interesting to hear how some songwriters (Steve Earle and Bono for example) describe moving from an autoethnographic position where a song is based and created from personal experiences, to the position where they move into character, take up a mask, and write the song from the position of the character. When I think about Brydie and "Black was the night," I am not moving into character, I am not becoming her and I am not imagining myself in that role, but I do feel I am moving and the movement brings into focus our distance and otherness. Writing about this type of "space" Frank, citing Bakhtin (Frank, 2004, p. 104) notes,

The others suffering as co-experienced by me is in principle different... from the other's suffering as he experiences it ... the distance remains unbridged. But there can develop between us ... a completely new ontic formation, that I alone actualise inwardly, from my unique place outside another's inner life. Thus, there can be 'co-experienced' suffering that is not the same as either person experiences ...but exists as a new formation that is available as a space of consolation between self and other.

For me, the song (or even the beginning of it before it has become) provides this ontic (Greek - for that which is) this space of consolation. Additionally, because a song is sung, it has a dimension that is also accessible to others—it becomes a bridge. It is, as David Carless writes (2022, p. 2) uncharted "territory" but a territory nonetheless. It is real, has a factual existence, and that which couldn't be spoken can now be voiced. It is outside the body, yet embodied. The significance here is that it offers a way to move beyond "wordless agony", from being locked in, and unheard to a territory of solidarity with others who seek a safer, more just society.

Cover me now
The shame and the guilt
Give me a mask
of beauty
throw me a line
give me some hope
show me a sign, that
there is another day

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ORCID iD

Kitrina Douglas  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1481-9642>

Note

1. I am borrowing the title here from a song written by New Zealand singer/songwriter Neil Finn which I find hugely resonating as I consider my identity and self. While I may see my life as different from the character in the song it still provides a tool for self reflection and consideration.

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Author Biography

Kitrina Douglas: I am a video/ethnographer, storyteller, musician, and narrative scholar whose research spans the arts, humanities and social sciences. Along with David Carless I have carried out research for a variety of organisation including Department of Health, Addiction Recovery Agency, Royal British Legion, Women's Sports Foundation, UK Sport, local authority and NHS Primary Mental Health Care Trusts. These research projects have provoked us to find ways to communicate our research outside of traditional academic reporting channels therefore we publish our research as films, documentaries, and musical theatre, as well as through peer reviewed publications, magazine articles, on-line publications and books.