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MASKING AND UNMASKING: CONSTRUCTIONS OF IDENTITY IN PAUL LAURENCE DUNBAR'S *WE WEAR THE MASK* AND MWILA MWILA'S *WHAT IF I TOOK OFF MY MASK*

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Abstract: Living in society presents challenges for individuals navigating the complexities of self-understanding and interpersonal relations. The metaphor of the mask emerges as a powerful tool of communication, embodying dual functions of concealment and revelation. While it shields one's privacy, protects and preserves anonymity, the mask helps construct a multifaceted identities between the true and vulnerable self and its public well-presented version. Paul L. Dunbar's "We Wear the Mask" (1895), portrays the mask as a survival strategy that shields Blacks from the oppression of America. In Mwila Mwila's "What If I Took off my Mask", it questions present-day African struggles against imposed identities while advocating for authenticity. Using Afrocentricity as a theoretical framework, this paper seeks to explore ways in which Dunbar's and Mwila's metaphor of mask functions as a strategy of survival and resistance in African American and contemporary African poetry, and analyze how the metaphor of unmasking redefines the notions of selfhood, concealment and authenticity in the construction of identity.
Keywords: Mask, concealment, unmasking, selfhood, resistance

MASQUER ET DÉMASQUER: CONSTRUCTION DE L'IDENTITÉ DANS « WE WERA THE MASK » DE PAUL LAURENCE DUNBAR ET « WHAT IF I TOOK OFF MY MASK» DE MWILA MWILA

Résumé : Vivre en société pose des défis aux individus qui doivent composer avec les complexités de la compréhension de soi et des relations interpersonnelles. La métaphore du masque apparaît comme un puissant outil de communication, incarnant une double fonction de dissimulation et de révélation. Tout en protégeant la vie privée, et en préservant l'anonymat, le masque aide à construire des identités multiples entre le moi profond vulnérable et sa version publique soigneusement présentée. Dans son poème « We Wear the Mask » (1895), Paul L. Dunbar dépeint le masque comme une stratégie de survie qui protège les Noirs contre l'oppression américaine. Dans « What If I Took off my Mask» (2022), un poème de Mwila Mwila, il questionne les luttes africaines actuelles contre les identités imposées tout en prônant l'authenticité. En s'appuyant sur l'Afrocentricité comme cadre théorique, cet article vise à explorer la manière dont la métaphore du masque telle que proposée par Dunbar et Mwila, fonctionne comme une stratégie de survie et de résistance dans la poésie afro-américaine et africaine contemporaine, et à analyser comment la métaphore du dévoilement redéfinit les concepts d'individualité, de dissimulation et d'authenticité dans la construction de l'identité.

Mots-clés : Masque, dissimulation, dévoilement, individualité, résistance

Introduction

Living in society may be a challenge for individuals. If understanding oneself is not an easy task, what about understanding the other. That is why effective communication is needed for the self and the other to get along. At times, the other seems nice. But most of the time, the other becomes a threat. In this case the self seeks for shield to protect and preserve one's life. A mask could be an appropriate tool. A mask caries different meaning and interpretations. "Despite their essential familiarity, however, masks remain something of an enigma" (Pollock, 1995:581). Among many others, the mask has functions such as: privacy and anonymity, psychological persona (social mask), concealment of emotions, "false self" and safety (protection and camouflage). The mask creates two distinct identities, the true self with no filter, and the masked self, the private self and the persona or the social self, the vulnerable self and the shielded one. So, mask is intrinsically related to identity. "The general relationship between masks and this sense of identity or person-hood has long been recognized; the mask is normally considered a technique for transforming identity…" (Bouttiaux, 2009:582). Concerning the persona role of the mask, Anne-Marie Bouttiaux explains that "the word *persona* itself is used in many languages (including English) to evoke the attitudes we must embody to live in society" (p. 62). Thus, the mask is a tool of communication and a filter between the self and the other or society. The mask is a message, even though ambiguous. "This juxtaposition between what is being said and what is *really* being said stands as the trademark of a black literary tradition" (Black, 2005:401).

This duality of self-identity is vividly portrayed in "We Wear the Mask" by Paul Dunbar (1895) and "What If I Took off my Mask" by Mwila Mwila (2022), where the mask serves as a metaphor. Dunbar's poem explores how African Americans put on a metaphorical mask to survive systemic racism in post-Reconstruction America. Then, "The Ku Klux Klan was powerful; voting was forbidden to Blacks; Jim Crow laws were stringent – and the only way to exist in peace seemed to be the way of Booker T. Washington" (Cain, 1978: 37). The violence White America had deployed in those days urged Black hidden ways or Washington's way to convey their messages. Yet many critics "with few exceptions, have been unable to see beneath the humorous mask to the profound, bitter irony in Dunbar's work" (Candela, p. 1976:62). Mwila's poem, on the other side, deals with contemporary African society, where the mask metaphor reflects struggles with imposed identities and the desire for authenticity.

So, in what ways does Dunbar's and Mwila's metaphor of the mask function as a strategy of survival and resistance in African American and African contemporary poetry, and how does unmasking redefine the concepts of selfhood, concealment, and authenticity in the construction of identity within their respective socio-historical contexts?

In this perspective, this paper hypothesizes that Dunbar's "We Wear the Mask" constructs identity through concealment as a strategy of survival, and that Mwila's "What if I Took off my Mask" uses authenticity as a strategy of resistance by redefining the metaphor of unmasking. It also holds it that these two poems taken together constitute a trans-historical continuity in the mask's role as a metaphor for negotiating identity across African American and African literary traditions.

To meet this end, this paper uses Afrocentricity which is "a frame of reference wherein phenomena are viewed from the perspective of the African person. The Afrocentric

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approach seeks in every situation the appropriate centrality of the African person" (Asante, 1987:171).

1. The Historical and Cultural Contexts

1.1 The Hostility of the Environment: Why the Mask?

The hostility of the American environment toward Blacks has made their living conditions so challenging. Marlese Durr (2016) observes that "we stand in the twenty-first century with similar dreams, fears, and struggles: some issues of justice appear to be unsolvable, but for others, the glimmer of the hope for inclusion and social harmony have dawned over the horizon" (p. 151). Since slavery, most African people in the U.S. have been moving from dismay to disillusionments, never to find rest anywhere in this hostile environment. The scholar explains that "The veils of ignorance and self-congratulation have been rent as the nation witnesses how little black lives matter in shooting after shooting, denial of voting rights, growing economic inequality, repudiation of differing life partner choices, and sexual assault" (p. 152). So, the mask has become their strategy for survival.

This game of masking "is a sport that black writer played long before Dunbar" (Black, 2005, p. 394). Prior to the black writer, "the slave preacher was probably the first trickster figure in African American literature, for he was forbidden to use the Bible in insurrectionist terms, yet he often did so as naïve captors listened on approvingly" (p. 392). And according to Joanne Gabbin (2017), Dunbar "came into manhood during one of the gloomiest periods in African American history. In 1883 the US Supreme Court declared the 1875 Civil Rights Act unconstitutional and later legalized Jim Crow segregation in the 1896 Plessy v. Ferguson case" (p. 1078). Commenting on Ida B. Wells, a contemporary of Dunbar and Du Bois, Marlese Durr (2016) notes "how white privilege emboldened lynch mobs to murder over 1,000 black men, women, and children" (p. 152). These unsolved murders and crimes against Blacks constitute a gaping wound in the American social fabric. This wound is not the one "that can be healed or closed with a few stitches, a Band-Aid and a little salve. The unequal distribution of freedom and money and land and dignity in the South has to be addressed with radical surgery" (Barber, 2015, 1: 55). This justified longing for true justice and the impossibility to see it exercise a permanent pressure on Blacks. They have to keep the "N" in check. "To keep your "N" (Negro) in check is to hide emotions vetted and honed through of a set of historical race-based expectations (never render your opinion or thoughts, speak when spoken to, always smile and agree with whites, etc.)" (Durr, 2016, p. 152).

Under such violent conditions, Blacks "had no choice but to master the art of masking if they were to forge a place for black writers in the American literary tradition" (Black, 2005, p. 389). This is why "In 1895, Paul Laurence Dunbar published his poetic magnum opus, "We Wear the Mask" (p. 387), "using the greatest weapon that he had, the power of the word, did take his people in his arms" (Gabbin, 2017, p. 1078) to voice their pains and sorrow in a covert way. Nevertheless, one legitimate question remains topical: "What, then, does America need to do for Black communities to be free from wearing the mask?" (Eaves, 2016, p. 26).

1.2 A Distorted and Tormented Culture

As far as Mwila Mwila's poem is concerned, it is crucial to provide its cultural context. Initially Africans wear masks to connect the physical world to the spiritual realms. They hold deep significant cultural meanings and are often used across the continent in rituals like initiations, rite of passage, festivals, funerals and ceremonies (African Mythology, 2025; Paulski Art, n.d.). They represent the ancestors, deities and spirits in ceremonies. They are also used in storytelling and can be viewed as tools of communication. Mwila's metaphorical use of the mask comes from this rich African cultural background and heritage. His poem "What If I Took off my Mask" reinterprets the meaning of the mask in a modern African and personal context.
The poet goes far beyond the mere ritual concealment aspect of the mask. Mwila's mask is a symbol of imposed identities (social and personal), emotional suppression, and social indifference. The poem's title, asking whether the mask should be removed, mirrors a contemporary struggle for authenticity and self-definition in so-called independent African countries (societies) that continue to contend with globalization, self-destruction colonial legacies, alienation, and cultural appropriation.

2. The Mask : A Symbol of Survival and Resistance

In a hostile environment where the dominant culture (white) is recalcitrant to truth and has refused to acknowledge the wrongs they did, why would African Americans expose their lives? So, they put on the mask. "Westerners say, for example, that the eyes are the window on the soul, that seeing is believing; look someone in the eyes to gauge their honesty or true worth" (Pollock, 1995, p. 585). In such cultures, just like the American culture, "'seeing' is equated with 'understanding.' The minimal Western mask works, not by concealing the face, but by concealing the eyes." We might note that in Western cultures it is typically a costume that displays transformed identity, not the mask" (p. 585). This is exactly what the speakers in the poems under study refer to, showing the world a false identity.

2.1 Wearing the Mask

Telling a story from an Afrocentric perspective is exactly what Laurence Paul Dunbar did in "We War the Mask". It is about stop being the object of study of other people, and act as a subject capable of reflecting on one's place and role in the world. It is an important point to highlight that Afrocentricity advocates for Blacks to be the main characters in their own narrative instead of continuing to be minor and undesirable characters in other people's narratives, mainly the Western narrative. The central message of Paul Laurence Dunbar's poem is that oppressed people (Blacks) hide their true suffering behind a forced grin as a survival strategy in a hostile environment. In this regard, Dunbar's mask reveals what Du Bois (1903) coined "Double Consciousness. "As Dunbar ingeniously captures the ubiquitous racial patterns of masking, dissimulation, and double consciousness in "We Wear the Mask" (Gabbin, 2017, p. 1076), Daniel P. Black explains that "The common hermeneutic applied to this poem suggests that black Americans, either forcefully or voluntarily, live a double existence which obfuscates their identity" (p. 387).

Concealment opens the first of the three stanzas of the poem. "We wear the mask that grins and lies," (line 1), not only exposes the mask to the world but emphasizes the false facial

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movements it does, “grins”. The mask is a face upon the true face. The concealment is reinforced on line 2 where, “It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes”. The speaker also highlights the heavy price demanded to keep the mask in its place, “This debt we pay to human guile” (line 3). In addition, the mask requires immense internal strength and tremendous emotional labor. Though it overweighs the Black individuals, the mask protects them from the “guile” of America. It hides their “torn and bleeding hearts” (line 4). For social necessity, where Blacks have to interact with whites, they have to exercise their “mouth with myriad subtleties” (line 5). Black Americans constantly had to wear the mask to navigate the dark and deep waters of the Jim Crow era. To survive in these icy waters of white racism, they had to appear ‘happy’, humble and submissive, the Booker T. Washington’s way.

Moreover, this first stanza underscores the duality of a Black’s life, contrasting public joyful appearance with private pain. These lines also reveal the isolation of Blacks as America refuses to acknowledge and seeks to understand the suffering and the struggle of Blacks. Still, the stanza demonstrates the huge resilience of the speaker and his/her people. It magnifies their ability to endure while maintaining a façade. In the second stanza, the speaker takes an Afrocentric stance, which asserts the centrality of his/her people and denies this right to the world, and America. “Why should the world be over-wise,/ In counting all our tears and sighs" (lines 6-7). This stanza, though the shortest, is emotionally charged. The rhetorical question here is meant to make a point, that of deliberately refusing the oppressor to have free access to the true self of the speaker and his/her people. This question underlines the protection of the dignity and privacy of the speaker’s community. It also demonstrates the choice the speaker’s community has to monitor their own suffering and their own narrative. This choice is clearly seen in the word “world”, which refers to the oppressor, white America “with myriad subtleties” (line 5).

Through the line “Why should the world be over-wise” (line 6), the speaker claims equality in terms of human intelligence and denies the oppressor the assumption of being more intelligent. The speaker also shows resistance to scrutiny. “Over-wise” suggests an undeserved wisdom that must not be linked to the oppressor. If the oppressor were wise, they would seek to solve the issue of social and economic injustice in which they put the black community. This rhetorical question justifies the raison d’être of the mask as a survival strategy. Here, the speaker enshrines selective visibility by showing the world the image he or she decides to share. And by doing so, the speaker denies the oppressor the pleasure of contemplating the scope of the damage caused. This denial is reinforced by the two last lines of the stanza: “Nay, let them only see us, while/ We wear the mask” (lines 8-9). In stanza 3, the longest, the speaker lifts up high above mankind to present his/her plea to Christ, the Creator of all human lives. Here, the speaker lays bare the true image of the self, hidden behind 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” (lines 10-13). Here, the speaker is saying a solemn prayer pleading for understanding and eventual salvation. Joanne Gabbin (2017) observes that “In many significant ways Dunbar's poetry is that "prayer that he sends from his heart's deep core"” (p. 1077). She expounds that ‘’Much of the poetry of Paul Laurence Dunbar reveals the intimate intercessions of a tormented poet, figuratively "taking up the cross"” (p. 1075). In this perspective, one can understand that the speaker reveals the pains and sorrow of the poet. Even though the speaker

opens up to Christ at the start of the third and last stanza through a spiritual agony revealing his/her true face, the last two lines of the poem recalls the relentless necessity of donning the mask: "But let the world dream otherwise,/We wear the mask!" (lines 14-15).

To convey his central theme of hidden suffering and resilience in the face of oppression, Paul Laurence Dunbar uses powerful literary techniques among which metaphor, symbolism, irony, repetition, and religious allusion. It is equally important to mention the use of techniques such as poetic form, tone, and tenses.

First, the "mask" itself is a central metaphor that shows the false face and identity Black people adopt to conceal pain and sorrow. As such, the mask is the dominant metaphor rampant all over the poem. It represents the façade the speaker's community puts on to hide their emotions and struggles. It indicates forced cheerfulness and composure in an American society that refuses to acknowledge their profound sufferings. Besides, the mask symbolizes social, imposed silence and the suppression of authentic identity. It reflects the hostility of the American society in the 19th, and even, the 20th centuries when Blacks had to show outer smiling faces to survive systemic racism. As for as irony, it resides in the contrast between the outward appearance (grinning, smiling, and singing) and the inner painful reality (torn and bleeding hearts, tears and sighs, cries, and tortured souls). This makes the poem a sharp criticism of the American society's preference for illusion and false appearance over truth, exposing her hypocrisy by willingly choosing to ignore the meaningless and senseless sufferings imposed on the speaker's community, Black people.

In addition, despite the use of an ironic tone, there are other manifestations of tone in the poem, ranging from somber and painful, defiant and resistant, bitter and sarcastic to resigned, yet resilient. The speaker's somber and painful tone portrays a profound and concealed suffering. Imageries like "torn and bleeding hearts" (line 4) and "tortured souls" (line 11) uncover the heavy cost of maintaining the smiling mask. Regardless of the pain of Blacks and the cynicism of the American society, the speaker's tone remains unyielding, and even defiant. This is a quiet defiance, where the speaker holds onto the mask as a strategy of survival and control in a cruel American society. The speaker's tone is also bitter and sarcastic. The lines "Why should the world be over-wise, / In counting all our tears and sighs?" (lines 6-7) clearly exhibit the speaker's deep frustration in the face of a cynical world (America) who chooses to ignore their pain. Furthermore, as the reader goes through the last lines of the poem, they feel a sense of weariness and fatigue of the speaker. Yet, that fatigue is dominated by an unspoken resilience that highlights the speaker's pride of holding onto the mask. All these techniques are held together by a poetic form, the rondeau, which is a medieval structured French poetic form consisting of 13 to 15 lines divided into three stanzas, a quintet (5 lines), a quatrain (4 lines) and sestet (6 lines) with only two rhymes and strict refrain. "We Wear the Mask" also follows the rhyme scheme AABBA, AABR, and AABBAR. The strictness and the constraints of this type of poem is in itself a metaphor to how Blacks were restricted by American societal oppressive environment, which forced the speaker and their community to don the mask to survive.

In the same vein, the poem's permanent use of the present tense serves multiple purposes. First, it emphasizes the ongoing aspect of Black sufferings. Not only does it serve this goal, but it also underscores the possibility of the continuation of such sufferings. The present tense also suggests that the ongoing cruel realities do not end when the poem itself ends. Though

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it stresses the permanent character of Black suffering, the simple present also reinforces the notion of Black resistance, "We Wear the mask".

2.2 Taking off the Mask

According to scholars Daniel Poirion and Caroline Weber (1999), "culture imposes a social mask on us: on a daily basis, we turn a false face to the world, in an effort to reassure, or to impress" (p. 13). This social imposition of the mask is the gist of the poem entitled "What I Took off my Mask" written by the less known Zambian poet Mwila Mwila. The poem revolves around the themes of authenticity, self-awareness, and resilience in the face of daily life's struggles. Not only does it deplore the mask, but also examines the idea of looking beneath the surface of external appearance, beyond their mask, as to recognize their inner strength, their true value while acknowledging their sufferings and struggles. In the same perspective, the poem also explores the tension that lingers between the smiling façade people show to the world and the truth of the reality they experience, that is, the sadness they conceal, asking whether others would accept and support them if they expose their true struggles. The opening stanza "What if I took off my mask/ would you love it still/ to you see the face that hides/ behind it" (lines 1-4) is a strong inquiry addressing the issues of hypocrisy and readiness of society to face and welcome the speaker's unmask face. The "mask" in this context symbolizes the false face people wear to hide their sufferings. The speaker wants to know whether love and acceptance would remain if his/her mask were removed. The reader can sense the speaker's fear and vulnerability to expose their true identity. This is he/she gives more precision in stanza 2, "what if I showed you the real me/ would you stand to comfort me/ or would you just stand there/ and only stare" (lines 5-8). This fear of rejection highlights the speaker's doubt about how people would react after they saw the real, broken self. In the third and fourth stanzas, the speaker voices a profound plea for compassion, understanding, empathy, and emotional support. When the poet writes "what if I I gave u my emotions/ to feel how I feel,/ would you stretch out your hand/ and help me heal?" (lines 9-12), he exposes the fragility and the vulnerability of the speaker and the thirst for moral and emotional support. The speaker also dreads the inaction and the judgment of society once they see the real, broken self. The speaker invites society to be in his/her shoes so "to see through my eyes/ to visualize what I see/ and your ears to hear what I hear" (lines 14-16) to feel, understand and measure the scope of the challenges he/she faces.

In the two last stanzas of this free verse poem, the speaker eventually reveals the truth that is hidden behind the "mask", "because behind this smiling mask/ is a sad face/ and swollen eyes/ flooded with tears" (lines 19-22). The speaker once again questions and dares society for their hypocrisy, judgment, rejection, and abandonment. And when the poet says, "behind this mask/ is a face nobody wishes to see/ a person nobody wishes to be/ and the cries nobody wishes to hear" (lines 23-26), he is simply underlining the profound discomfort society has always tried to avoid and hide. Thus, society itself dons a mask that would prevent it from seeing the true faces behind the smiling masks, for it has no soothing balm for such wounds and pains.

In the last two lines, the poet's use of rhetorical question, "tell me, if I showed you the real me/ would you still be here?" (lines 27-28), advises and almost forces the readers to respond with compassion rather than indifference when faced with someone's truth. Overall, the speaker's narrative is everyone's else story. Each and every one of us has a wound a mask is

covering. The speaker has demonstrated a tremendous courage and resilience in bringing forth their deepest fear. Furthermore, Mwila Mwila uses many literary devices in "What If I Took off my Mask" to deepen its emotional impact: metaphor, imagery, rhetorical question, repetition, direct address, and tone and rhythm. Of course the central and dominant metaphor is the mask. It symbolizes the false appearance and the façade people wear to conceal pain, sorrow, and sadness. The mask also represents the silent but weighing social expectations of permanent strength and everlasting cheerfulness. Yet, these expectations strongly contrast with the crude reality of sadness hidden behind the mask.

Mwila Mwila's literary artistry in this poem is also demonstrated through the vividness of imagery to create a sense of confusion, embarrassment, which in turn calls for empathy. The lines "a sad face/ and swollen eyes/ flooded with tears" (lines 20-22) evoke the rawness and cruelty of suffering. This sensory detail makes the concealed pain much more awful, causing the reader to empathize with the speaker in his/her vulnerability. In the same vein, "a face nobody wishes to see/ a person nobody wishes to be/ and the cries nobody wishes to hear" (lines 23-26), bring a feeling of social judgment and public rejection of the speaker. The poet also blends repetition, direct address and rhetorical question to highlight the speaker's self-doubt, uncertainty and fear of rejection. The poem repeatedly asks "What if I …" and "Would you still …?" These questions create rhythm of doubt, uncertainty and longing pulling the reader in the speaker's internal conflict. The repetition, the reccuring structure of the rhetorical questions also emphasizes and mirrors the cyclical nature of this self-doubt and the constant embarrassing question whether authenticity will be accepted. In addition, the combination of direct address and rhetorical question also challenges the audience directly, forcing self-reflection about how they would respond to someone's truth. By directly addressing "you", the reader, becomes eminently intimate and personal. This breaks the barrier between poet and reader, making the plea for empathy immediate, urgent and universal. Contrast, tone and rhythm are not the least of technique deployed by poet to convey hidden sadness, loneliness, fear of rejection and authenticity. The use of contrast stresses the theme of duality in human experience between the outer façade and the inner ruthless truth. The juxtaposition of the "smiling mask" and the "sad face and swollen eyes flooded with tears" emphasizes the moving gap between sparkling appearance and crude reality. Duality is also felt through the questioning tone oscillating between hope and despair. The overall rhythm generated by repetition, rhetorical question, and short lines (sentences) reflect the emotional turbulence of somebody wrestling with vulnerability. Overall, these techniques together make the poem an extremely powerful one in its exploration of authenticity, vulnerability, fear of rejection, and the basic human need for understanding and compassion.

3. Voice, Agency and Identity Formation

3.1 The "We" versus the "I"

The African American poet Paul Laurence Dunbar's "We Wear the Mask" and the Zambian poet Mwila Mwila's "What If I Took off my Mask" are two poems dealing with the same issue of self vs. the other, vulnerability, dignity, and survival. "We Wear the Mask" focuses on the first person plural "We" highlighting the mask as shared experience and common survival strategy in a hostile and systemic racial environment, emphasizing not only solidarity but also

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anonymity, where individual voices merged into a communal strategy of endurance. According to Daniel P. Black (2005), "Most readers agree that the "we" of the poem is black folk and that the mask is an inevitability of black survival in a racist American milieu" (p. 387). On the other hand, "What If I Took off my Mask" employs the first person singular "I" to foreground personal experience and introspection. This suggests, without debunking the collective "We" strategy, individuality and personal experience, self-definition, and personal liberation are vital. The mask is viewed as a barrier to authenticity that should be questioned and removed if need be. Thus, for the "We" to stand firm and unshakable, the "I" has to be true and strong. From an Afrocentric perspective, the collective "We" mirrors a diasporic necessity of unity (Pan-Africanism) in a hostile environment where racism, segregation, discrimination, violence, and erasure are daily realities. The mask constitutes a protective shield and deceitful social performance that allows the community, the "We", to endure and survive. Likewise, Mwila's "I" vibrates with an Afrocentric emphasis on centering African identity, truthfulness and agency. This is an act of self-assertion which combats imposed Eurocentric invisibility, and rehabilitates an African-centered subjectivity.

3.2 Resisting Erasure, Self-definition and Agency

In "We Wear the Mask", resistance is subtle but encoded in the very act of donning the mask. The speaker acknowledges collective sufferings. Though "… the "mask" has been lifted for the reader in this poem" (Keeling, 1993, pp.24-25), the speaker insists on dignity, refusing to expose their collective pain to a hostile white American gaze. In Mwila's poem, resistance is explicit. The speaker's desire to remove the mask strongly confronts the risk of vulnerability in asserting authenticity. This is not just a mere survival strategy, but agency, the ability to define oneself, rather than being defined by external (Western) forces. This agency is constrained in "We Wear the Mask". The mask is both a survival strategy but a heavy burden as well. It protects but also silences, causing the individual voice to fuse into collective endurance. In Mwila's poem, agency is openly reclaimed. Questioning the presence of the mask challenges imposed identities. The speaker vehemently presses for the right to self-definition, which underlines the Afrocentricity's call to put African voices and experiences at the center of their own narrative of identity definition and formation. Together these two poems trace a trajectory from survival to identity reclaiming, from collective endurance to individual agency, and from hidden pain to visible authenticity. Overall, while Dunbar's collective "we" reflects historical necessity of communal strategy in a hostile environment, Mwila's "I" embodies a contemporary Afrocentric insistence on personal voice and identity through authenticity. Although, both poems resist erasure, Mwila's poem goes a bit further. It transmutes the mask from a survival symbol to a sanctuary of liberation.

Conclusion

As to conclude, Afrocentricity reframes the symbol and metaphor of the mask by tracing its shifting meaning across time and geography, across American history and colonized and independent Africa. Both poems serve as a continuum of African and diasporic identity. In "We Wear the Mask", the mask is portrayed as a collective survival strategy in systemic oppression, a necessary concealment of pain and truth in a hostile environment. Many decades later, Mwila

reimagines the mask not as a tool of imposed silence but as a vessel for reclaiming authentic voice, rooted in African pride and self-definition. He reclaims agency by dismantling the mask to assert authentic selfhood. As a continuum, these poems illustrate the mask evolving from a symbol of endurance under oppression into one of liberation and self-assertion. What was once imposed as a barrier has become re-appropriated as an identity and dignity marker, and cultural strength. Together, they demonstrate how Afrocentricity transforms the mask from imposed concealment to empowered reclamation of identity. In a broader sense, Afrocentricity transforms the mask from an emblem of suppression into a powerful metaphor of cultural affirmation. It also insists that African identity is not hidden but celebrated, not silenced but spoken, and ultimately, not oppressed but liberated.

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