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Paulette Richards

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Always Busy Somewhere: Cooper Crafts an Entrée for the Other

By Paulette Richards

Abstract: African American ventriloquist John W. Cooper was born around 1871 to parents who had been enslaved. By age thirteen he was forced to fend for himself; thus he received very little formal education. Cooper nevertheless mastered the language and visual signifiers of genteel society and deployed them as a means of resisting stereotypical representations of Blackness and accessing social networks that were normally off limits to Blacks in the Jim Crow era.

Although Cooper toured for a time with Richards and Pringle’s Famous Georgia Minstrels, he performed as a ventriloquist in the olio section of the show and did not appear in blackface. Subsequently, he broke into the white vaudeville circuit. His most successful act, “Fun in a Barbershop,” used cutting-edge technology that enabled him to animate six figures while playing a barber—a servant role acceptable to white audiences. Yet Cooper gave the best lines to the Black characters in the sketch, thereby decentering the white point of view. His reviews were equally good below the Mason–Dixon line as they were in the rest of the country.

Cooper was in fact a “race man” who taught his daughter to be proud of a cultural heritage that started in Africa, not in slavery. He loaned his time and talents to many benefit performances in the Black community, and he commissioned a “beautiful brown boy” carved in his own image to serve as his animaterial alter ego. By throwing voice into this figure, Cooper began the process of reuniting sound and image in figural representations of Black experience.

This essay applies Fred Moten’s (2003) concept of animateriality—the assertion of intrinsic human dignity in the performance of Black experience—to explore Cooper’s strategies of self-representation by examining his cartes de visite, handbills, correspondence, and studio portraits along with the language he used to describe himself. Cooper’s success in getting audiences to accept the agency of a Black figure enabled them to more readily recognize the humanity and agency of a Black man.

Keywords: puppet, representation, race and ethnicity, ventriloquism, vaudeville, performance studies
On December 10, 1933, the Knights of Magic held a Testimonial Dinner and Entertainment in Honor of Frank Ducrot and Jean Irving at Rosoff’s, a restaurant of “national reputation” with dining rooms available for special functions located on West 43rd Street in the heart of Times Square. Amidst the magicians assembled around the banquet table stood a lone Black man. He was not a waiter but a guest. Jou Chin (2014) notes that though they seldom refused Blacks service outright, white restaurants discouraged the patronage of Black diners in a multitude of ways, including seating in undesirable locations, slow service, adulterated food, and inflated bills. John W. Cooper’s motto, however, was “There’s nothing in this world for a minute, Where the black man is not in it.” Thus, he appears third from the end on the right-hand side in a photo commemorating the occasion.

Born around 1871 to parents who had been enslaved, Cooper was orphaned and forced to leave school at an early age (Liff 1999). He nevertheless mastered the language and visual signifiers of genteel society and deployed them as a means of resisting stereotypical representations of Blackness and accessing social networks normally off limits to Blacks in the Jim Crow era. This essay explores Cooper’s strategies of self-representation by examining his cartes de visite, handbills, correspondence, and studio portraits along with the language he used to describe himself. Cooper’s success in getting audiences to accept the agency of a Black figure enabled them to more readily recognize the humanity and agency of a Black man.

**Bubbling over with Songs and Stories**

As a youth, Cooper spent four years touring New England, Canada, and the Mid-Atlantic states with the Southern Jubilee Singers. During this time, he began developing his skills as a ventriloquist. The White Rats strike of 1901 gave him the opportunity to break into mainstream vaudeville since theater managers were willing to hire Black performers in place of striking white acts (Logan and Winston 1982, 129). In May 1901, he accepted a forty-five-week engagement with Rusco & Holland’s *Big Minstrel Festival*. Cooper subsequently joined Richards and Pringle’s Georgia Minstrels, appearing in the “olio” or variety section of the show (“Promotional 2”). Cooper frequently billed himself as “Bubbling over with songs and stories,” so it is not surprising that words became the cornerstone of his self-promotion strategies.

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1. Richard Dickenson found records indicating Cooper was born in 1871, not 1873 or 1874 as he usually claimed. See “Genealogical Information.”
Representing Alterity through Puppetry and Performing Objects

Cooper adopted the tagline “A Negro is in it” after the 1901 assassination of President William McKinley. A Black man named James Parker was the first to tackle the assassin. Evangelist Lena Doolin Mason commemorated Parker’s bravery and loyalty to the nation in a poem, “A Negro in It,” using the opportunity to exhort:

White man, stop lynching and burning
This black race, trying to thin it,
For if you go to heaven or hell
You will find some Negroes in it.

Mason’s poem gave Cooper the self-assurance to assume the right to show up anywhere his talent took him.

A June 1, 1902, letter from the Daily and Weekly Mirror in Escanaba, Michigan, replies to Cooper, saying they don’t have any more papers of the date he requested. Cooper collected his notices in a scrapbook. He then used these blurbs from different papers around the country to create a press sheet that he would send along with his card or handbills when he wrote query letters. From the beginning, his promotional materials emphasized class and refinement, describing his act as “strictly high-class and refined in every particular,” “The Cleanest and most wholesome program on earth,” and “Sure to please everybody” (“Promotional”).

After he married, Cooper developed a variety act with his wife, Etta Freeman, known as Chubbie. A flyer with three photographs promoted “The Great Coopers.” One image shows Cooper with his dummy, Sam; a second shows a design he has made by tearing paper. The third photo in the center shows him standing next to Chubbie, who is seated at the piano. The copy extols The Great Coopers, saying “For pleasing, refined and astonishing novelties they cannot be equaled.” Another flyer asserts that the Great Coopers “[a]re offered as real artists—they amuse, entertain and mystify,” and elaborates on their skills:

Mr. Cooper tells stories in dialect, tears beautiful designs from paper and does freehand drawing. Not to hear Mr. Cooper and his mischievous [sic] boy “Sam” is to miss one of the greatest treats in the amusement world. He is an artist of natural talent and gained his high standing after years of success before the public. Mrs. Cooper, while blindfolded, will tell the numbers placed on the blackboard, the kind of watch you carry, also the exact time of the same and many other wonderful feats. (“The Great Coopers”)

By 1928, Chubbie had passed away and Cooper re-married. His new wife, Juliana St. Bernard, stayed home with their daughter, Joan, while Cooper toured. A 1953 retrospective of his career published in the ventriloquist’s magazine Oracle terms Cooper “The Polite Ventriloquist.” Though Cooper had used this title as early as 1925 when he was so-listed in the program for a Town Hall
“Americanization Night,” his successors in the trade would break with Cooper’s respectability politics (“Promotional 3”). For example, Richard Sanfield, who began performing with a figure named Willie in the late 1960s, gained notoriety by recording “blue” material on party records such as *Nasty and Naughty*.

While he was careful to reassure audiences that his material was polite and refined, Cooper was not shy about touting his skills, styling himself “the triple voiced marvel,” and claiming around 1909 to be the “World’s Only Colored Ventriloquist” (“Promotional 1”). This claim was not strictly true, since Johnny Woods received notice for an act in which his dummy Little Henry became intoxicated and sang the blues on stage as early as 1910 (Abbott and Seroff 2008, 60), and Frank Rogers’ career was almost exactly contemporaneous with Cooper’s since he was actively performing with a figure named Rastus from 1901 to 1935 (“Frank Rogers” 2013). Cooper nevertheless considered himself to be “The black Napoleon of ventriloquism.” The fact that he was only five feet tall made the moniker all the more apt (“1946/47 calendar”).

Cooper was also willing to put his money where his mouth was by advertising in industry publications. In 1933, he took a quarter page in *Who’s Who in Entertainment*; the copy describes his act as: “A mirth provoking pair, John and his dummy Sam. A clever repartee portraying ventriloquism at its best. Grown ups, as well as children find this colored artist intensely amusing” (“Promotional 1”). Cooper is the only artist of color listed, so it is telling that he had the funds to pay the fee, was willing to invest in advertising to the people who used this publication to book acts, and was allowed to place an ad—although it was relegated to the bottom-right corner of the back page.

Cooper continued to apply superlatives to himself even as vaudeville faded away. He toured the country with the radio program the *Major Bowes Original Amateur Hour* under the alias Hezekiah Jones, but still claimed to be “N.Y.C. Greatest Ventriloquist Act” in a variety show presented at the P & F Corbin Club annual banquet in 1941 (“Promotional 2”). During WWII, Cooper found work performing at veterans’ hospitals and appearing in USO camp shows across the country. These gigs proved so lucrative that in 1944, his wife Julie persuaded him to purchase a duplex at 726 Halsey Street in Brooklyn for $4,450, arguing that there was such a great demand for places to rent that they would be able to get good tenants to help them carry the note (“Letter from Juliana Cooper” 1944). Cooper’s pocket diary records his paydays from the USO and the payments he made on the mortgage (“Appointment Calendars”). By 1952, when he was featured on a
program at the Sam Harris Knights of Pythias Lodge No. 207 as a “headliner of the Ed Sullivan Show,” the orphaned youth who once worked as an exercise boy at Sheeps Bay Race Track had certainly proved himself a conqueror (“Promotional 3”).

**Always Busy Somewhere**

Cooper was under the management of George W. Lattimore, a Brooklyn-based African American attorney best known as the manager of Will Marion Cook’s Southern Syncopated Orchestra (Rye 2009). Yet Cooper did not rely on Lattimore to ensure that he was “always busy somewhere.” Jim Crow segregation not only limited African Americans’ access to jobs reserved for whites, it also hampered their ability to build the kind of social capital that yields information about and referrals for employment opportunities. Cooper circumvented these disadvantages with a number of strategies.

First of all, Cooper maintained membership in several professional organizations. In addition to the Knights of Magic, he was a member of the Colored Vaudeville Benevolent Association, which George Walker had founded to support colored performers who were excluded from joining the White Rats Actors Union. Nevertheless, Cooper was also a member of the White Rats Actors Union of America Colored Branch No. 15 (“Personal Papers”). The CVBA encountered stiff opposition from white theater owners and producers, so by 1908 Walker had turned his attention to another organization known as the Frogs, which functioned more as a social club and charitable enterprise for African American professionals, including doctors and lawyers along with actors (Sotiropoulos 2009, 197). Cooper subsequently joined the Negro Actors Guild, founded in 1936, and he became a life member of the International Brotherhood of Ventriloquists, which formed out of the International Brotherhood of Magicians in 1940.

A second strategy that served Cooper well was his willingness to do benefit shows wherever he traveled. He would perform for churches, the YMCA, and even insane asylums. In 1906, he solicited a letter attesting to the quality of his performance from the Pueblo, Colorado Insane Asylum (“Letter to Pueblo”). Cooper developed this strategy very early in his career: A May 31, 1899, letter from the YMCA in Ontario, Canada, recommends Cooper to “any Church or Society which would like a refined entertainment” (“May 31, 1899 Letter”). He secured similar letters of recommendation from the Denver YMCA and the pastor of the St. John A.M.E. Church in Pueblo, Colorado in 1906. These letters helped him get bookings in private parties and exclusive clubs.
Cooper did not wait to be invited. He would send queries to social clubs asking if they needed entertainers for their events. For example, a 1928 letter from a judge who was an officer of the Madison Club in Brooklyn gives a clue of how Cooper secured engagements of this type. The letter responds to Cooper’s query about performing for the club. A newspaper clipping about an event that a social club was holding for a prominent member provides another clue about how Cooper identified such opportunities. It is unclear whether Cooper clipped the notice because he was already booked to perform on the program or whether he was a regular reader of the society pages, who would then angle to get himself on the program when he found out about such events. Either way, it is clear that he deliberately targeted this market.

Indeed, Cooper appeared on programs in private social clubs of all stripes—Jewish, Catholic, elite WASPS, and also colored society in Harlem. Cooper did not travel in Europe, but he performed for organizations representing a variety of different ethnic communities. He was on the program for the “Concert et Bal sous les auspices du ‘Lafayette Friends Club, Inc.’ le 21 April 1928.” The program is printed in French, but Cooper is listed as the fifth of six performers on the program as “Famous American Ventriloquist.” In 1929, he appeared on the program for an event that is billed in Cyrillic letters, likely for a Greek or Russian immigrant community (“1929 Program”).

Once he got his foot in the door, Cooper was skilled at turning professional associations into personal friendships. His relationships with magicians were especially fruitful in opening his horizons to more cosmopolitan audiences. Founded in 1922, one aim of the International Brotherhood of Magicians was “to promote harmony among those interested in magic” (White n.d.). In 1932, Cooper performed for the 35 Anniversary Turkey Dinner and Entertainment given by the Bohnenviertel Association, Inc., in Elizabeth, New Jersey (“35 Anniversary”). Bohnenviertel was originally a neighborhood in Stuttgart, so, presumably, this was a German-American organization. Magician Max Thiel took up the second half of the program—Thiel may have helped Cooper get this gig. Another case where connections with a magician likely helped Cooper book a job was the 1933 Annual Entertainment and Dance hosted by the Holy Name Society of Our Lady of Refuge Church at 196th Street and Briggs Avenue. The program lists “John, Cooper and Sam In a Novel Offering.” The act following Cooper was “Jarrow, Vaudeville’s Cleverest Mysterfier” (“1933 Annual”).
By circumventing the rigid social segregation imposed by the Jim Crow system, Cooper was able to induce whites to judge him by the content of his character rather than the color of his skin. Thus, in a warm missive dated 1938, Barry Gray of the Lansing Elks Lodge sent Cooper a joke to squeeze into his act—a bit between the Professor and Sam. Yet the Elks, like many fraternal organizations of the day, was a segregated organization. In 1897, B.F. Howard and J. Riggs had sought to establish a chapter of the Benevolent and Protective Order of Elks in Cincinnati, Ohio, but were refused because they were African Americans. Riggs, however, had obtained a copy of the BPOE ritual and, determining that it had not been copyrighted, applied for and received the copyright himself. Riggs and Howard then used the ritual to establish the Improved Benevolent and Protective Order of Elks of the World the following year (O’Donnell 2004). The BPOE did not open its membership to African Americans and other minorities until 1972, but Gray encouraged Cooper, writing “You are indeed ‘clever,’ and ‘color’ should not interfere with ‘real talent,’ and I don’t think it will these days.”
References


John W. Cooper collection, Sc MG 743, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Books Division, The New York Public Library.


“Testimonial Dinner and Entertainment in Honor of Frank Ducrot and Jean Irving.” 1902.


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About the Author

Paulette Richards is a puppet artist and independent researcher. She holds a PhD in French Civilization from the University of Virginia and has taught at Georgetown University and Georgia Tech. She survived a ten-month stint in Senegal as a 2013/2014 Fulbright Scholar without contracting any tropical diseases, but sometime during her service as an artist in residence at the Institut français de Saint Louis, the puppet bug bit her hard. After returning to Atlanta, she became a docent in the Worlds of Puppetry Museum at the Center for Puppetry Arts. She co-curated the Living Objects: African American Puppetry exhibit that ran at the University of Connecticut’s Ballard Institute and Museum of Puppetry from October 2018 to April 2019 with Dr. John Bell and also co-edited the anthology of essays from the Living Objects Symposium. Her book Object Performance in the Black Atlantic is forthcoming from Routledge in 2022.