

Public Masks, Politics, and Cultural History

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Beyond the pleasures and provocations of its argument, James H. Johnson's *Venice Incognito* invites readers—and writers—to reconsider issues of form, method, evidence, and theme in the practice of cultural history.

Johnson's book is a book. *Venice Incognito* doesn't resemble the collection-of-essays that now frequently passes for a monograph; and in their finished form, his individual chapters bear little resemblance to the preparatory essays he published in *Eighteenth-Century Studies* and the *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*. Johnson's argument unfolds over twenty-one brief chapters and in nearly fifty illustrations. Only one of those chapters, a genealogy for literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the carnivalesque, stretches to more than ten pages. These short chapters do not lend themselves to easy summary or extraction. You can get the style of the argument from the parts, but not the argument itself.

Like a city, the book can be entered in many places. Indeed, the book is more spatial than chronological in the attention it pays to masking. Though this strategy may formally resemble his prizewinning first book from 1995, *Listening in Paris*, the feeling is quite different.¹ There he wrote that he was aware of “two souls” (“Macaulay and Foucault?”) in his method, and noted the accommodation he had tried to reach between narration and analysis: “if narration alone can paint the details of experience in vivid colors,” he noted, “it is insufficient as a rhetorical mode to illuminate the structures of experience.” Citing the anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, he described the historian’s choice “between history ‘which teaches us more and explains less, and history which explains more and teaches less’.” (6). In his first book, Johnson felt he had resisted the choice and had done a little of each. Now Johnson has accomplished something different, in part because the previous analysis of masking has been (as Lévi-Strauss might say) long on explanation and short on teaching.

Johnson’s method in his new book asks us to disconnect a material object (the mask) from the theoretical practices to which we think it was put, replacing those abstract notions with concrete examples and bringing into view different practices with a different set of meanings. Here again we have a different kind of book than his first. In *Listening in Paris* Johnson began with a “Why?” question: “Why did French audiences become silent?” (1). Cultural history is often accused of being uninterested in causality and agency (favoring passive sentences like this one), but Johnson asked a causal question and his answer was cultural history at its best. He demonstrated a “fundamental change in listening, one whose elements included everything from the physical features of the hall to the musical qualities of the works. These elements slowly pacified musical experience from the Old Regime to romanticism, a remarkable feature of which was growing silence” (1-2). That first book put Johnson squarely in the vanguard of the new history of the senses. In *Venice Incognito* Johnson instead asks a “What?” question: “I wanted to know what masks tell us about the people who wear them” (ix). That’s not a causal ques-

¹ James H. Johnson, *Listening in Paris: A Cultural History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).

tion: rather, it's an appeal to inventory and pluralism. And it enters into a thickly populated literature that already presumes the answer—the “we moderns” who think we know what masks mean and how they must certainly (in such a hierarchical society as eighteenth-century Venice) have acted as “a salutaryunsettler, equalizing, challenging, permitting the forbidden” (42). When Johnson is interested in causality in this new book he is interested in how “we moderns” came to think that the mask did those things—what, exactly, is the line from the eighteenth century to Bakhtin and then to literary scholar Stephen Greenblatt, historian Natalie Zemon Davis, and philosopher Charles Taylor? (Peter Burke in his review in the *Journal of Modern History* says Johnson’s three questions are who, where, and why, but these strike me as subsidiary questions for Johnson.²)

As Johnson shows, how we answer the “what” question depends on how we evaluate the evidence of contemporary explanations. Johnson routinely disconnects object, practice, and inherited (but mistaken) meanings by attending especially to what foreign travelers in Venice recorded, reflecting both on what they saw and what they made of what they saw. This is important, for he shows that what foreigners concluded in their eyewitness accounts of masking was partial, misunderstood, or just plain wrong. And he is masterful in pointing out how similar the mistakes contemporaries made are to the ones later theorizers and historians have made. In this, too, he departs from the model of his first book. There, he often invoked eighteenth-century travelers’ accounts (of the Paris Opera, for instance) for the evidentiary light they threw on what interested him most: tracing out the cultural history of listening, writing the history of a perception. So in that first book the foreigner was a stand-in for the historian—the person puzzling over a new object to understand. But in *Venice Incognito* outsiders are veritable stand-ins for us, with all our mistaken notions about older objects and practices. “To think of the mask of Venice as a defender of rank rather than a tool for disguise runs counter to a powerful line of interpretation stretching from the eighteenth century to our own time” (112), he writes in a passage at the very center of his book.

Venice Incognito is a book of cultural history that is equally a political history. In his earlier work, Johnson connected culture and politics less explicitly, more obliquely: *Listening in Paris* traces the rise of aesthetic absorption, of profound musical engagement, of communion in the music hall. He set that rise against the political events of the day (with the central cluster of chapters, including “Musical Experience and Jacobin Ideology,” containing the most conspicuously drawn connections). But politics remains in that book a backdrop for a cultural phenomenon. Now politics has become a central category of analysis: “The practice [of wearing masks in public] grew from a culture in which secrecy was prized and self-revelation not always prudent. It carried traces of political arrangement that combined exclusive patrician rule with an unchanging social hierarchy. Just as courtly settings elsewhere shaped an identifying etiquette to guide relations, Venetian republicanism produced its own patterns of dress and behavior to smooth transactions in the public sphere. For commerce among unequals, the mask became an essential article” (xii). But as Johnson also notes (again at the center of his book) “the principal purpose of masks for most Venetians was not disguise. Their motives lay more often in ritualized reserve than in concealment, and the collective effect was on balance conservative, not deceptive, disruptive, or lewd. The everyday use of the mask was a response to

² Peter Burke, review of James Johnson, *Venice Incognito: Masks in the Serene Republic* in the *Journal of Modern History* 84:3 (September 2012), 750-752.

changes in how and when diverse members of this stratified society came together in public” (112). Some readers—such as Peter Burke—will note a shift in Johnson’s engagement from the ear to the eye in his shift from listening in Paris to masking in Venice. That shift is appreciable, but Johnson’s running theme over his career transcends particular locations and the history of particular senses. Instead, it concerns how people behave with one another when they come together in public. As he demonstrates beautifully in this new book, that is as much a political question as a cultural one.