

A polemicist's view: what we know about the tradition of blackface dancing

Warning

I am not neutral. Since I last blacked my face in about 1990 I have seen the practice as wrong in principle in the twenty-first century and damaging to the wider Morris world. I am disappointed with the JMO position only in that I would have preferred a principled stance: however I welcome it unreservedly as recognising present day culture and in protecting the interests of the vast majority of dancers.

A second warning: I judge it helpful to our understanding in this article to use "the N word" in exploring the past.

The defence of blackface

I have heard many times the arguments for blacking the face to dance: that it isn't meant to caricature or mock black people, that it is an old tradition, that it derives from cadging customs or other socially unrespectable activities where the disguise of soot or burnt cork was desirable, that it echoes the faces of working men after a day in the pits or foundry, or as a chimney sweep.

I am very dubious about arguments from Tradition. We recognise wife-beating, child labour, bear baiting and many others are traditions not acceptable in the modern world. And one convincing argument for a definition of traditional is that nothing after the coming of the railways in the 1840s is traditional, as after that the innocence of local traditions was disturbed by knowledge of what the rest of the world did. (However I am also convinced by the definition that what has been done three times is thus traditional...). But let's look at the evidence on the rest of this...

A few facts...

It is indeed true that there is evidence from the 1450s onward of the blackening of faces with soot or charcoal as a means to evade identification: in the Kent and Essex enclosure riots of 1450–51, men wearing blackface cross-dressed as 'Queen of the Fairies'. In 1723 it became a capital offence under the "Black Act" to appear "in disguise, either by mask or by blackened face". Closer to our world, there is some evidence that in previous centuries Morris was linked to blackface: the owner of the Betley Window (1621 representation of Morris) said in 1788 "we are authorised ... to call some of the representations on my window, Morris Dancers, though I am uncertain whether it exhibits one Moorish personage, as none of them have black or tawny faces..." .

In more recent times, the link between blacking the face and racist caricature of black people starts to be seen – especially in what we now see as folk traditions. The annual winter solstice celebration in Padstow was until

recently called 'Darkie Day', claimed to have begun after Cornish locals witnessed slaves dancing for joy on the deck of a grounded slave ship. (There is no historical record of any slave ship running aground in the area, and even if it did – which it didn't - it is highly unlikely the slavers would undo the chains of Africans in the hold to dance merrily on the deck.) It is celebrated with comic Afro-wigs and black face paint, and up to the 1980s local schools were still teaching children a tune called 'Little Nigger.'

In Rossendale in Lancashire, the local press records "niggering" from the 1880s to the 1930s: gangs of young boys with blackened faces roaming the streets at Eastertide, performing popular songs and playing mouth organs, tambourines, and bones, or whatever musical instruments they could find. Some wore striped trousers and straw hats, but for most boys blackening the face was sufficient to identify themselves as "niggers", singing songs such as "Redwing," "Oh Susannah," and "There Was A Little Nigger" – all well-known from professional minstrel shows. There are many similar examples: Joe Brannigan's "band of darkies" executed a character dance at a Rose Queen Festival in 1888; the Florida Coon Dancers of Crewe in Cheshire (Crewe Chronicle) "coon" dancers were described near Stafford in the early 1900s, and a "band of niggers" performed at a May Queen Festival near Manchester in 1890. Juvenile "nigger" troupes, commonly termed 'Peace-egggers' are described in the Bacup Times every year in the late 1880s and early 1890s as "parading the streets with blackened faces singing their quaint songs and playing their musical instruments of tambourine, triangle, etc...who sang the old time songs and chorus of 'du da, du da, day'."

Minstrel shows were one of the most universal and long-lasting forms of nineteenth century entertainment, spreading from the slave-owning south of the US to every corner of Victorian Britain. Their impact was enormous: in 1930 the first talking film starred Al Jolson in "The Jazz Singer" – a blacked-up white person caricaturing a black person. Eugene Stratton, a white American born 1861 and died 1918, was one of the most famous performers on the British stage in blackface as 'The Dandy Coloured Coon'. This year there were called for Thanet Council to remove a statue to "Uncle Mack" who ran really popular blackface minstrel shows in late nineteenth/early twentieth century Broadstairs and Herne Bay.

One more – apparently unrelated – fact: American academic Irene Silverblatt has shown that seventeenth century Spain – Europe's first modern empire – divided the world into white (coloniser), brown (colonised) and black (slave).

What I think

I believe what we do is coloured by the culture within which we live – as true for the past as for us. That is the crucial reason why what was acceptable in the past is no longer acceptable in a changed culture.

I believe that Imperial values – white as superior, black as slave – started with the Stuart conquest of the Americas and the slave trade. I believe that the height of imperial sentiment in the nineteenth century, and the spread of popular entertainment from slave-owning America to potentially every village hall in the mid nineteenth century (those railways again) created the main way many British people encountered black people from the 1840s till the end of the Black and White Minstrel Show on BBC in 1978: singing, dancing, joky, lazy, buffoonish, and “happy-go-lucky”. I believe those self-consciously preserving the old traditions – people intensely aware that the dance customs of their parents and grandparents were now very old-fashioned – approached them through their own understanding, formed by the culture around them (look at the number of Cotswold tunes derived from Victorian popular tunes) and interpreted blackface through the caricatures of the minstrel show. I believe Border Morris adopted popular songs and tunes more than most: the melodies, words, and musical instruments of the minstrels were combined with an existing tradition of annual street dancing (“Not for Joe,” is a minstrel song that mentions “niggers” and the Wild West).

I believe the evidence suggests that a key change – between smeared soot or other form of disguise, and full-face deep black make-up suggesting stereotypes of black people – came in the last two hundred years or so. (It is worth saying the racist term “nigger” occurs only in the same period.) I believe a custom of blacking for disguise was seen, by those whose surrounding culture was the popular entertainment of minstrel shows, through those stereotypes, as the only image they had of blackface. I believe that the “it’s not meant to be racist” defence confuses early customs (the exotic associations of the “noble Moor” of Othello from times when most English people had never seen or thought much about black people) with the nineteenth century associations and prejudices arising from the slave-trade and assumptions that American slaves were sub-human. I believe that, whatever the origins, the more recent accretions of blackface folk traditions have very deep overlays of racism.

And I believe we need to acknowledge that what we have inherited is coloured by the racism of the past, and to seek to lose these elements (as we have changed so much else in what we have inherited). We need above all to avoid being dragged by blackface into lining up with far-right hate-mongers. When culture has shifted so that even Facebook has banned photos of blackface we change too so that Morris is seen to be a welcoming place for people of all ethnicities – and thus adapts for the future world.

Tony Forster – August 2020

Further reading

The Victorian Web web pages – Cultural Assimilation - Derek B. Scott

<http://www.victorianweb.org/mt/dbscott/4.html>

Heresies and Colonial Geopolitics - Irene Silverblatt

https://romanicreview.journals.cdrs.columbia.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/16/2016/06/Silverblatt_103_1-2.pdf

Blacking Up': English Folk Traditions and Changing Perceptions about Black People in England - Patricia Bater

http://etheses.whiterose.ac.uk/4181/1/MPhil_upload.pdf (link is external)

Wikipedia – assorted and subsequent links eg https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Border_Morris

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Minstrel_show

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Black_Act_1723

Assorted press references to blackface dancing - eg

<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/aug/12/origin-morris-dancing-blackening-up-irrelevant>

<https://www.kentlive.news/news/kent-news/disturbing-story-behind-uncle-macks-4224290>

Morris Federation Face Paint FAQ web page <https://www.morrisfed.org.uk/resources/face-paint-faq/>

[these articles from the Runnymede Trust](#) a leading independent race equality think tank.

Tess Buckland's paper "[Black Faces, Garlands, and Coconuts: Exotic Dances on Street and Stage](#)" (1990) *[need to register]*

Peter Bearon's paper "[Coconut Dances in Lancashire, Mallorca, Provence and on the Nineteenth-century Stage](#)" (2017)