

Michael Jackson and the Blackface Mask, by Harriet J. Manning, Farnham: Ashgate, 2013, £60.00 (hardback), ISBN 9780419455103

The core of Manning's scholarly work sets Jackson's music and dance in the context of blackface minstrelsy, a genre with roots that reach back almost two hundred years into American performance culture. While W. T. Lhamon, Jr. wrote on this theme while Jackson was still alive, Manning includes the final years and covers both his music and relevant aspects of his life. Although she also shows how *Turnaround* by the boy band Westlife and some of Eminem's numbers reproduced motifs drawn from minstrelsy, these musicians do not seem steeped in the tradition but rather to have used Jackson as their principal source, looking to gain commercial advantage by mimicking or alluding to his artistry.

Manning frames her analysis of Jackson in a review of late twentieth-century disputes over the cultural and social contexts that gave rise to blackface minstrelsy. Although historical evidence is not totally lacking (there survive, for instance, illustrated song sheets from the 1830s and 1840s), its origins were so diverse that students of this popular music form have been able to advance very different accounts of its performance styles and ideology. Some of Manning's predecessors claimed that minstrelsy was predominantly based in whites' racial anxieties aroused by the vast number of black slaves arriving in America. Others argued that it was mainly class- rather than race-based. Yet others believed that the imagination of Dan Emmett, leader of the Virginia Minstrels in the 1840s, endowed him retrospectively with the stature of a kind of auteur as the genre's central creative force.

That said, it appears beyond doubt that the main energy driving the popularity of the genre in the second half of the nineteenth century was the reaffirmation of racial contempt. White performers blacked up to sing and dance numbers that derided the male slave for supposed coarseness, stupidity and savagery. The white audience on the contrary was positioned as civilised and restrained. Notwithstanding this, beneath the surface 'the mask served a variety of purposes and needs on social, political and racial levels.' For example, in the context of burlesque (often a feature of minstrelsy), the mask became after the Civil War a cover for a charade performed by some of those few black entertainers who succeeded in gaining a place on the stage. They deployed it as a means covertly to satirise and undermine the form. As in some menacing ancient fairy tale, the mask (precisely because it concealed while it

revealed) demonstrated the power its black wearers could exercise with black audiences to reverse older meanings. Conversely, the hostile power that the mask reaped from white audiences might reverse the flow of energy with (as Manning says) mutilating impact on the performer's personality. This, she argues, would become a determining factor shaping Jackson's fate.

When blackface minstrelsy became a highly popular and profitable theatrical form in the 1840s, it evolved distinct practices. In effect it developed its own lexicon incorporating not only lyrics but also music, movement, gesture and the mask itself – burnt cork offset by grossly exaggerated scarlet lips and staring eyes. The dominant syntax linking that lexicon into expressive form caricatured Jim Crow, the stereotype of the southern plantation slave. The lyrics he sang created a parodic Uncle Tom dialect, echoes of which could plainly be heard in Hollywood's black servant characters in the 1950s. Choreography centred on rapid steps, shuffles and slides, bodily looseness, open-leg postures and pronounced heel to toe movements. Such actions embodied in the performance of blackface minstrel seemed to white audiences to connote the sexual vulgarity and excess of the slave. There was a marked contrast between this and the aesthetic precision and supposed moral propriety of European dance styles that formed part of white heritage.

Blackface minstrelsy foregrounded two contrasting caricatures, the contented slave and the stupid black dandy, to encourage the belief that slaves were happy on the plantation but hopeless outside it. Manning argues that these caricatures served the ideological function of reconciling the fact of slavery with its negation of the rights of Americans to enjoy upward mobility through their own efforts. Here too the main current that white audiences openly acknowledged was disdain for slaves; but minstrelsy also played on an incompletely acknowledged shadow, the racial and sexual dread of slaves felt by white communities. In addition, some of Manning's sources (for example, Lhamon and Lott), move no less deeply into arenas of the repressed and claim that the secret projection of white sexual fantasies formed a wayward undercurrent of desire which endowed blacks with fleeting moments of erotic power in the performance arena. Dread and desire make murderous bedfellows.

Manning shows how minstrelsy resonates in a number of Jackson's performances and does so aesthetically and ideologically. Her work on the complete video of 'Black or White' (1991) considers its two parts, the first of which features high energy, optimistic song and dance that concludes in exultant celebration of humanity's shared characteristics. A gorgeous sequence comprising thirteen close shots of black, Asian, white, male and female faces morph seamlessly one into another embodying the joyful lyrics: 'If you want to be my brother, it don't matter if you're black or white!'

In the postlude, complete contrast. Neither instrumental music nor song is heard. A lithe panther pads away from the studio's bright lights at the end of the sequence just mentioned. The animal moves into the night, enters a shadowy city backstreet where trash befouls the wind, and metamorphoses into Jackson. His performance in this postlude (his masturbatory lustfulness, unpredictability, yells and growls, and enraged trashing of an abandoned vehicle) builds, as Manning details it, on the brutal caricatures that white minstrels had projected onto black men. She finds particularly significant Jackson's appropriation of minstrelsy's dance movements to express this anger. The angularity of his body, the knees-wide stance, the heel-toe pointing and the precision of a tap routine so intense that his feet can scarcely be seen to move – all these and other postures she identifies as having their origins in blackface routines. Jackson's appropriation is of course no homage but a reversal of purpose as he acts out the psychological underside that shadows every frustrated attempt to extirpate racism. Then, the dance ending, he walks out of the street and transforms back into the panther.

At the time of the video's release most commentators ignored the postlude's political connotations, but Jackson's anti-racist outrage is not readily mistaken, augmented as it is by the dominant metaphor of the star as Black Panther. Indeed, the animal's powerful growl reminds us that race-based anger lies latent but ready to burst onto American streets, as periodically (and in St Louis at the time of writing) it does.

As an archetypal figure, a hero may serve his community in ways that they do not wholly understand and this may partially explain the failure of commentators of the day to look beyond Jackson's alleged 'indulgence of gratuitous violence and implied masturbatory sex'. The opportunity for journalists to share and gratuitously augment

another popular form of indulgence – namely outrage at supposed indecency – appears to have been too tempting for many of them to resist. The shadow throws a long communal shadow.

While the image of a star often imbricates the collective and the personal (unmistakably so in Jackson's case), for this reviewer there is another side to his display of power. One element of his performances that endows them with painful authenticity is the way they conceal psychological injury in plain sight. Here his glove-cum-wrist splint (one of his many trade marks) reminds us that the hero-warrior often suffers injury in his quest. That has a socio-cultural dimension when a hero acts symbolically for his people; but it can also become inextricably personal. The topic becomes inescapable for Manning when considering *Ghosts*, the forty-minute film which the singer produced in 1997.

Manning begins her analysis with Dale Cockrell's account of a recognised form of slave revelry which had origins in seventeenth-century days of misrule. It preceded nineteenth-century black minstrelsy in the New World and reached North Carolina and West Virginia via slaves shipped from the West Indies. There it evolved into an inversion of Jim Crow practices. On certain days, slaves whitened their faces with flour and followed their leader, John Canoe, a figure often kitted out to mock grandiose European mannerisms. He led headed such troupes of musicians, dancers and actors in calling at the homes of the white community and acting rowdily. Unless they felt unwelcome Canoe and his boisterous followers were merely playfully offensive. However, if not properly recompensed for their performances with food, drink or cash, they could turn frightening. This so-called inversion ritual bears on *Ghosts* no less forcibly than blackface minstrelsy.

The video's storyline centres on a clash between two principal figures. The small-town mayor of Normal Valley (a bigoted white man) leads a group of townspeople through the night to Someplace Else, the ghostly Xanadu of a magician (Michael Jackson) whose alleged weirdness alarms the townsfolk. Ignoring the assurances of their children that he never harms anyone, the adults march with flaming torches apparently meaning to burn him out Klu-Klux Klan style. However, their bravado is quickly extinguished when the magician, rebutting the mayor's charges that he is a

freak, locks them into his mansion and confronts them with ghostly incarnations of the increasingly demonic fantasies they have projected on him: ‘Are you the ghost of jealousy?’ After metamorphosing through a succession of grotesque masks, Jackson renders himself horrific when (to cite just one example), thanks to computer generated imagery, he pulls his lower jaw down to mid chest while his eyes sear out of his skull like golf balls. He rips his face off and summons a troupe of zombies costumed like decaying *commedia* artists. Accompanying ‘2Bad’, these ghostly dancers revisit the kind of angular steps and crotch-grabbing gestures described earlier, increasing in frenzy until, to the delight of the kids and exceeding the wildness of either Jim Crow or John Canoe, they march up walls and pillars to lurch crazily across the ceilings. The mayhem increases with ‘Is It Scary?’ Jackson, now a skeleton, sings and dances with no less precision than when clad in flesh, then metamorphoses back into himself before leaping down the mayor’s throat. From within, the singer forces the overweight man to dance a grotesque parody of his own routine – the white bigot overwhelmed by black culture which he cannot embody with accuracy or passion. Jackson’s arm bursts out of the mayor’s chest and shines a mirror that reveals to the man himself the ugliness of his monstrous face: ‘Who’s scary now? Who’s the freak now?’

Ghosts does not end when Jackson confronts the mayor with his ever-corrupting face. Streaming out from the latter’s body, he challenges the mayor to banish him. The pompous fool wants retribution for his humiliation, so the magician obligingly stages his own total destruction. Jackson has, of course, exercised power over the pusillanimous townspeople throughout, and his self-sacrifice is another trick. Bursting back into life unharmed, he sardonically exposes the terrified adults’ hypocrisy by inquiring if they enjoyed the show. With clattering teeth, they pretend obsequiously that they did.

The plotline is rounded out when mischievously loveable kids playfully give Jackson a fright and he concedes (a coy, over-sweet note) that he may have been a bit scared. But the film continues for five more minutes. In this postlude, Jackson passes hours in make up transforming layer by layer into four of the characters we have just been watching, the dominant one being the mayor.

As we have seen, masked performance was an indispensable part of blackface minstrelsy and, integral to Manning's account of the heritage Jackson drew from the genre, she gives particular attention to his own ever-changing mask. She reports that the autopsy performed after his death confirmed that he suffered from vitiligo, a long-term condition that causes pale white patches to develop on the skin due to lack of melanin (*NHS Choices*, Vitiligo). Jackson had spoken about it but was not always given due credence, not least, one suspects, because actual (as opposed to performed) physical imperfection is an attribute fans seldom welcome since it slights the magical aura of the star. In addition to this irreversible affliction, Jackson and his surgeons worked hard to create his whiteface mask – incorporating a narrowed nose, pointed and cleft chin and more prominent cheekbones. Indeed self-change was possibly, as Manning avers, the major preoccupation of Jackson's off-stage life. Inevitably his high profile facial reshaping made it impossible to separate the public persona from the private individual. The mask seized its wearer. Recalling that Jackson never denied his blackness, Manning endorses Steve Perry (p. 84) and Jean Baudrillard (p. 21-2) who believe that the singer altered his appearance to symbolise the advent of a new breed of beings beyond racial division. Just conceivably, framing himself as dedicated to a heroic programme of anti-racism inscribed on his own body may have exerted on his fans a powerful affect-laden attraction which outreached intellectual analysis. Stars are not infrequently vested in the quasi-religious function of myth-making, so Jackson may have emerged for some fans as a kind of self-sacrificing demi-god. More plausibly, however, he may himself have been swept up in an inflation – an invasion from the cultural unconscious of fans' archetypal contents.

If that is true, it is (as Manning recognises) a partial truth. When culturally steeped archetypal images emerge and take hold of consciousness, a counterbalancing image may grow no less vigorously. That, in the present writer's opinion, was the case with Jackson the hero. By 1997 he had long manifested the characteristics of the *puer aeternus*. His simpering speech, the honeyed sentimentality of his claims to love everybody and (in a double sense) his questionable recourse in Neverland to childhood, can all be read as characteristics of this archetypal figure, namely the eternal youth, the beautiful boy who never grows up but shadows the hero. However, the *puer* can have an archetypal counterweight in the *senex*, angrily present in *Ghosts* as the magician's mayoral opponent. Samuels *et al* describe the negative aspects of

the *senex* in terms which nicely characterise the bigot – excessively conservative, authoritarian and lacking in imagination (p. 137). Just as old age follows youth, so archetypally the negative *senex* may succeed the *puer*. Reading the conflict between the two principal characters thus, Jackson's *puer* transforms temporarily into the *senex* but then must battle hard to hold onto his preferred *puer* persona and banish the vicious old man from his magic castle. However, this moment of triumph is short-lived. In the postlude, the masks – most horrifically the mayor's flaccid chops and bulbous turkey neck – smother the beautiful face which, confusion worse confounded, is itself a mask. Meanwhile the oft-repeated lyric 'Don't understand it...' confesses Jackson's baffled attempts to bring to consciousness complexes (those ghosts) that he cannot control.

Manning sees Jackson's attempt to conceal his black self (and this reviewer would add his *senex*) as having been pushed back to the point where, mutilated and repressed, it could eventually no longer be called back. Fittingly, her final chapter varies the analytical rigour of its predecessors, most of which were written before the star's death. In tones suited to threnody she salutes Jackson's achievements, musical legacy and tragically conflicted personality. The valediction is all the more authentic thanks to her lightly coded confession of the emotional cost involved in writing in depth about so extraordinarily compelling an artist.

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