

On the Whiteness of Morris An Illumination of Canadian Folklore

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As a folklorist studying English Canadian Morris dancing, I participated as a dancer and team member with Forest City Morris of London, Ontario, for over two years. During that time, I observed Morris at first hand, and analysed it in terms of gender and class concerns (see Greenhill 1994). Yet though white handkerchiefs, white clothes, and indeed white people predominate in North American Morris, my realisation of its whiteness came late.

My blindness to the manifest racialisation of socio-cultural forms like Morris has been shared by folklore theory, and by many folklorists. Though sensitivity to issues of gender (e.g. Radner 1993) and class (e.g. Rosenberg 1988) has been pulled into our recent analyses (not without considerable resistance, I might add), race/ethnicity blindness has been routine.

Canadian folklorists have tended to look at racialisation only when it pertained to people of colour. For example, when Michael Taft in discussion usefully raised the "problem" of a Chinese champion Highland Scottish dancer from Saskatoon, he attended to implicit assumptions about the whiteness of that practice. Racism, similarly, has only rarely been considered, as in my examination of Ben Johnson jokes (Greenhill 1993), or Neil Rosenberg's work on black country musicians in the Maritimes (1988 and 1994). And although Canadian folklorists have studied "ethnic groups," they have considered race and ethnicity

exclusively in terms of non-white, non-English groups (see also Greenhill 1992 on a parallel American example).

I am emphatically *not* advocating that we adopt an "ethnic group like any other ethnic group" approach to white, English-speaking, middle-class Canadian cultures. Instead, I suggest that Canadian folklorists who are white, English-speaking, and middle-class must recognise that we live in a society of white supremacy and white privilege. We must also consider how our academic discourse has contributed to the establishment of white as colourless and non-racialised, and ethnicity as a describable property of the non-relational Other. We have assumed the position of the mainstream, and constructed that mainstream as a reified and essentially de-politicised entity (see Doucette 1993). In essence, many of us have symbolically or literally read Bakhtin's (1984) evocation of the importance of the carnivalesque, but stripped it of its political implications.

Let me give you an example of how sensitivity to whiteness can inform scholarship. John Mayberry and Jamie Beaton, of the Toronto Morris Men, composed the following song to be sung at Morris gatherings. While the text may not reflect the personal views of its composers—and Jamie differs strongly with my reading of his text—its acceptance and popularity at Morris gatherings indicates that the views it presents are by no means bizarre:

Good friends gather round and I'll sadly relate
The misfortunes that Morris has suffered of late.
These gimmicks and dances in styles newly grown
Have diminished a dance that once stood on its own.

(*Chorus*) Oh, what has become of the simple half-rounds?
The foot-up, the whole hey that old Cecil wrote down?
For bells, sticks and hankies and a pint of good beer
Were once reckoned enough to bring pleasure and cheer.

Oh where are the dances we all used to know?
When a team would do Trunkles to start off a show?
Then the Rose, and crown it with Idbury Hill
Not the Ox Dance, Mr. Softie and Jamaica Farewell. (*Chorus*)

There'll soon come a day when they'll dance to the tune
Of Jumping Jack Flash played on bones and bassoon,
Six cowboys on tricycles roaring around,
Numbers two, four and six being whirled upside-down. (*Chorus*)

But the worst of it all's what they've done to the Ales
Where the flash made-up show dance is the rule that prevails
And the drinking and singing, carousing all night
Give way to concern that the baby's all right. (*Chorus*)

So all you good people, come raise up your glass.
Let us hope that these bold innovations will pass.
Here's health to the Morris, of all dances the best.
Those who find it too hard can sink to Northwest. (*Chorus*)

This text parodies a nostalgic song about pubs by Ian Robb of the Ottawa mixed Northwest team, *Hog's Back*. (Northwest Morris in North America and Britain is predominantly female. Performed in clogs and groups of eight with a leader, it looks quite different from Cotswold Morris, which is executed by teams of six, usually men, brandishing sticks or white hankies.) Beaton and Mayberry's song discusses deviations from "traditional" revival Morris, such as the novelty dance "Mr. Softee," non-traditional paraphernalia, the bassoon player—whom I immediately identified on hearing the song as the African-Canadian man who plays that instrument and dances on one Toronto team—and new styles. It comments on the transformation of Morris from those days within living memory, when it was for some a simple, all-white male-bonding experience, to one in which women are involved, babies are men's responsibility too, and there are racial interlopers.

Some folklorists have argued that folklore is *gesunkenes kulturgut*; elite culture appropriated by the common people (Dundes 1969). In contrast, Morris was collected from the working class and appropriated in the early twentieth century by the middle class as fodder for romantic nationalism, and as a buttress for colonial difference and power. In the music and dance they collected, Cecil Sharp and his fellow scholars perceived fundamentally, incontrovertibly English sources from which they could build a national culture.

Their success in linking Morris with English culture is indicated by a Forest City member's comment that "it seemed to be so much a very natural part of English life" (Janet, 90-8). Morris as practiced by Forest City—and elsewhere in the province and country—implicates what is *English*, and what that might mean. It's no coincidence to Morris Englishness that one explanation of the practice's origin—though it is one not often discussed by the generally liberal Forest City members—calls it a survival of "Moorish" dances, appropriated from "exotic" non-white peoples (as discussed, for example, in Buckland 1990). Note that Sharp explicitly denied theories which locate Morris origins in the practices of subaltern peoples when he wrote in 1919:

We can accept the received derivation without binding ourselves to deduce therefrom proof of Moorish origin. Morris-dancers sometimes, and in the past perhaps very frequently, blackened their faces. This would at the present day lead to the dance being called a "nigger dance." To our forefathers, for whom the typical black man was the Moor, not the nigger, the natural equivalent would have been a "Moorish" or "Morris" dance.... The highest authorities reject the Moorish hypothesis, and see in the Morris the survival of some primitive religious ceremonial (Sharp 1974, 10).

Sharp's racist, sexist, authoritarian comments suggest that it is by no means accidental that whiteness plays such a central role in Morris costume, that the vast majority of Morris people are white, or that some Morris dances—"Border Morris"—and some other traditional English dances were and are done in blackface, although I've never seen them so performed in Canada.

The attraction of Morris for urban Ontarians like the members of Forest City cannot be totally unrelated to that region's inhabitants' difficulty in determining their own culture, their need to discover and/or to invent one which they might find suitable, and for some, their ambivalence towards their actual English roots. For some members, Morris is part of learning about English culture in Canada, not commonly perceived in terms of a strong, unified, or even recognisable content. One woman said:

I'm interested in tradition in general from different places, British tradition more so because it's something that I've always been exposed to, having been born in Canada and lived in Canada. I'm not of any British, Irish, or Scottish descent.... And what's nice, you can see all kinds of different ethnic backgrounds doing this one thing. OK, it's mainly a British tradition, but people have a right to choose what tradition they would do, no matter what ethnic background they come from (Rebecca, 90-6).

Ironically, for most of the time I worked with them, Forest City had only one British-accented immigrant team member, who was Anglo-Irish. She commented: "I do think of myself as British, let's put it that way, rather than English" (Janet, 90-9). Outside the interview context, no one ever discussed Morris as an expression of personal ethnic culture. Yet race/ethnicity is evident in the fact that the North American elite of dancers are British men. It is invaluable to a Morris dancer to be born in Britain—even more so to have an obvious English accent—whether or not s/he came from a community where Morris was performed, or even did Morris in England. Being English cannot make up for poor dancing ability, but all other things being equal, a good English-accented dancer would be considered a better dancer than an equally skilled North American-accented dancer. An English-accented non-white dancer would, however, be anomalous, though English-accented expatriates are not. One Toronto team, for example, has a white, English-accented, elite member who immigrated to Canada from Hong Kong. English culture is thus personalised and privileged in Morris.

Morris unfolds and is acted out in such a way as to make this ideology implicit. Symbolically clean and pure, the quintessential dancer wears white clothing and waves white handkerchiefs which should never be soiled. If dan-

cing results in dirt, it must be removed behind the scenes; each new dancing day or event brings dancers in clean white clothing brandishing clean white handkerchiefs. The centrality of the trope of whiteness means the few people of colour—like the bassoon player—who join Morris teams uncomfortably mark for dancers and audiences alike the difficulty of imagining a straightforward location for African-Canadian, aboriginal, or oriental Morris dancers. Morris mythology locates it in a time before subaltern, colonised peoples began to relocate from their places of origin to imperial countries. The manifest disinterest/reluctance of people of colour to participate in Morris now may refer to its profound irrelevance to their own socio-cultural values and/or to the obvious necessity of interrogating by their mere presence the whiteness of the practice (see bell hooks 1992).

That related English practices, like those of the Bacup Coconut Dancers, are performed in blackface (see Buckland 1990) only underscores the colonial complicity of Morris, particularly for non-English, non-white audiences. Blackface is often explained away as a representation of miners' blackened visages, not of the faces of black people, yet the everyday black faces of miners, and the play black faces of dancers have radically different symbolic potential.

But in addition, it seems unlikely that North American audiences, who encounter Morris at dance-outs at local shopping centres, pubs, and so on, far from geographical associations with coal miners, would see in blackface dances anything other than a white peoples' representation of black culture. Unfamiliar with the localised and historicised explanations of Morris tradition used by dancers, audiences might historically contextualise blackface in terms of entertainment forms such as vaudeville and view it in light of the overtly or covertly racist ideas associated with these practices. Or they might locate it in a slightly more up-to-date scenario of riots and gangs.

I have never seen a Canadian team perform a dance in blackface; it is too uncomfortable a reminder of difference for this country's liberal sensibilities. I did see an all male American team, at a Minneapolis Ale—a gathering of teams—perform a violent, unruly dance in blackface. In addition to more markedly dance-like behaviour, they charged around the room, banging their cudgels on the floor and brandishing them in the faces of their all white audience who had come for an afternoon tour of a local microbrewery. I can't find it purely coincidental that they did not choose to do this particular dance at the events where other Morris dancers were the only audience. While Morris folks might have understood the dance in terms of Morris' industrial history, for the uninitiated at the brewery, it must have looked like a mimicry of a race riot.

Periodically, as in this case, the everyday intrudes into the performance time Morris dancers like to see as quite set apart, different, liminoid. Tolerance for carnivalesque expressions of ethnicity—even English ethnicity—outside strictly regulated boundaries is limited. I have seen Morris dancers "ignored" by passersby on the street who walked directly through a dancing set as if it were not there. At one Toronto Ale, dancers were ejected from the Eaton Centre; at an Ottawa Ale, they were told on the sidewalk and corner outdoor space at Place Laurier that they would be tolerated this time, but next time they must get a permit.

Paradoxically, even the expression of white ethnicity must be regulated and controlled; it is appropriate to the set-apart, special time of ethnic celebration and festival, but should not intrude into the domains of business, commerce, and government. These domains must control the carnivalesque—such practices as Morris—in order to consolidate their power and maintain the hegemony of the serious. The cops and security guards seem far more cognisant than the dancers themselves of the possible political implications of their practice.

There are numerous examples of wild contestative forms appropriated for tame uses (see Buckland 1991), or of state attempts to assert control over, and to regulate, traditional practice (see Story 1969). Much literature suggests that the carnivalesque can be used in social protest (e.g. Davis 1971, 1973, 1978; Hobsbawm 1959; Lawrence 1987; Rude 1952); it can, in itself, be social protest. Few Morris dancers seem to understand their own behaviour as disorderly or contestative; their arguments against being kicked out of shopping malls refer to their practice's benign nature, as well as to their own citizenship rights. I don't suggest that Ukrainian dancers could perform without a permit on city streets. However, they would know they needed one; they would restrict and regulate their own activities.

An "English" carnivalesque tradition has a particularly great subversive potential, because it explicitly links what should not be linked—play, ethnicity, and power. For example, though the "fool" character in Morris is often a ragged-coated, proto-Elizabethan stereotype, s/he is as often a normally-dressed complicit dancer who, at a dance out, initially performs non-membership in the group, ignorance of Morris, and so on, yet displays considerable virtuosity. The "Other" explicitly, consciously constructed in Canadian Morris is not racialised, but located in terms of the serious everyday. The dissident quality of play in a working context is considerable. Thus, though Morris is currently an exclusive, white, privileged practice, it retains a contestative quality. Illuminating Morris shows its potential to subvert hegemony, not just to reproduce it.

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*I deliberately employ tropes of light and white in order to explore their racist implications. This is a topic on which I wish I'd spent more intellectual time in the Morris section of my recently published *Ethnicity in the Mainstream: Three Studies of English Canadian Culture in Ontario*. This paper was first presented in June, 1994 at the meetings of the Folklore Studies Association of Canada/Association canadienne d'ethnologie et de folklore in Calgary, Alberta, in the panel "Undisciplining Canadian Folklore."*

We had many good friends in that country, too. Grandma Flatan used to come over to our place quite often. She and Mrs. Wereley were good friends. When I would come in from the field, quite often she would be there. She would jump up and grab me and say, "Wereley, we have to have a dance." We would swing around a few times, and then she would have a hearty laugh and cry, "Wereley, we can dance yet." She would call our home her second home.

Morgan Wereley, Pioneer Round-Up (Hythe, Alberta)

We were from Ontario and my-oh-my we thought the ways of the west were rough and rowdy, nobody in their beds early Saturday resting up for the Sabbath. The first dance we attended was in the Happy Valley School.

Jessie Shail, Pioneer Round-Up (Hythe, Alberta)

Away back around 1916, when we first moved here, my brother Kelly had felt the need to learn music, so he made himself a violin from native spruce, and on this he learned to play. Soon Bruce learned, too. They pooled their money, which they got from threshing, and got a one year's course on a real violin. They learned by themselves to play notes and with our Uncle Charlie Silverthorne they played for dances.

Unattributed, Pioneer Round-Up (Hythe, Alberta)