Marching, Minstrelsy, Masquerade: Parading White Loyalist Masculinity as ‘Blackness’

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Considering the spectacle of a young ‘Blood and Thunder’ band marching in ‘blackface’, during the 2001 Twelfth of July Orange Order March in Belfast, as well as Sara Greavu’s artwork All Souls (2003), which features the identity blurring masquerades of Halloween revelry in Derry, this chapter explores how racial constructions practised today are built on established categories and stereotypes interwoven in the popular cultural life of Ireland for centuries. The spectacle of the marchers is a crude reminder that politico-cultural identities variously coexist with racial consciousness, and intimates the instabilities of white masculinity, here enacted in an assumption of Ulster loyalism, whilst All Souls exposes the visual practices of ‘race’ that underwrite identity politics.

In his study of racial attitudes in Northern Ireland, Robbie McVeigh argues that notions of their whiteness underpin both blocs of white Irish, nationalist, republican, and white British, unionist, loyalist. He notes that in 1912, Willoughby de Broke contended that ‘every white man in the British Empire’ would rally behind Ulster Unionists, whilst later, T.J. Campbell, asserting a claim to the privileges of whiteness, objected to Northern Irish Catholics being ‘the only community of white ones’ without parliamentary representation. Much more recently, in 2004, Tommy McTeague, formerly of the Social Democratic and Labour Party, twice complained that councillors were being ‘treated like niggers’ by the government. Refusing to apologize, McTeague hoped that ‘coloured people will realize it [his remark] is not a slur on them’ but, rather, a comment on the treatment of councillors. Whilst by no means restricted to Northern Ireland, Northern Irish culture continuously circulates stereotypical symbols and metaphors of ‘race’, providing forms of difference against and through which whiteness can be dialectically constructed and arranged. And, while white remains the authenticating category of
oppositional humanism in Northern Ireland as well as elsewhere in post-enlightenment societies, uncritical postcolonial analogies can use 'black' as an appropriable category by white subjects who wish to claim the position of 'most oppressed'. Yet although it is constantly reproduced and ubiquitously represented, whiteness for the most part goes unremarked as a racialized position, which is crucial to its normative operation in terms of the privileges associated with being a settled white man, or white woman, in Ireland’s (North and South) white-centred contexts. In an instance where it might seem to be subverted in stereotypical cross-racial masquerade, whiteness is re-secured as a mythically 'natural' state, as the band in 'blackface' show.

Marching identities

A home video recorded by Maria Azambuja, a spectator at the 2001 Twelfth of July Orange Order March in Belfast, shows what is by now the familiar concatenation of Orangemen and marching bands parading down the Lisburn Road on the return journey to the city centre. The majority are men, as the Orange Order is an exclusively male organization, although women and girls parade in mixed and all-women marching bands. This lap of the march commemorates the triumphal return of King William III from the battlefields of the Boyne in 1690, having routed the English Catholic, King James II, and reaffirms the historic establishment of the Protestant Ascendancy. That morning, the marchers would have paraded from their different districts and converged in front of the City Hall. Then, they formed the main procession through South Belfast to the field in Edenderry outside the city where respite from marching in the summer heat is found in picnics and socializing, which eclipse the speeches and thanksgiving service. The footage of their return from the field shows that while most are ceremonially turned out, a cluster of marching bands bring up the rear in fancy dress, an unofficial custom sometimes observed by bands for the return march. The most startling of these sport dreadlock wigs and 'blackface' make-up to render a charged minstrelsy, thus loosely interpreting the clause in their contract with the Grand Lodge, which stipulates dignified dress. The group marching in their wake wear pastiche ‘Native American’ headdress; the next band have opted for Afro wigs, which another teams with grass skirts. Like all stereotypical forms, the fancy dress fixes difference. The Afro and Dreadlocks are radical and politicized black hairstyles, created in the United States and Caribbean as responses to the racist degradation of black people’s hair. The Afro articulated Black Pride, and Dreadlocks declare