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Middle Eight

Three moments of (mis)placed identity performance

TOM ASTLEY
Newcastle University
E-mail: thomas.astley@newcastle.ac.uk

When I began work on these short, fragmentary moments of identity (mis)appropriation, they seemed a little more benign. They lived in three separate word documents as slightly awkward, slightly humorous, vignettes where a call to placed identity construction either missed the mark or made the mark a little too specific for the audience to appreciate. However, in light of some of the distressingly essentialised notions of placed identity – especially *national* identity – and the concomitant need to 'choose' the geographical scale to which one grounds one's identity that has recently unfolded in a British context, perhaps these moments take on a little more serious, and pertinent, tone.

Each of these moments confuses the different 'layers' of place-based identity – regional, national and global – that we might be familiar with on a conceptual basis. They represent collective identity as multifaceted and multifarious, perhaps even as a constellation of separate, more specifically 'local' identities. They reveal national, and even continental, identity as an uneasy patchwork. Nevertheless, in their symbolic representations – in the hats, the costumes, the dialects and song – that connects each vignette is a recognition that these geographical layers of identity – local, national, continental – still matter, still connect performer to audience, still need to be asserted and claimed. Identity is still placed.

Identity- and place-based identity affiliations tend to operate in a series of concentric circles, where one 'locates' oneself at different geographical 'levels' in a given moment, depending on audience, context, intention, performance, etc. So, one might 'be from' a particular street or post code, or from a particular neighbourhood, or from a city, or from a county, or nation, or collection of nations, or continent at any given moment. Whilst one might be 'from' all of these identity places simultaneously, one might emphasise, or perform, one of these places more specifically in a given context. What each of these moments exemplifies, perhaps, is the kinds of cognitive dissonances that can occur, in music and performance, when audience and performer are operating from within different rings of these concentric circles: that is, when the performance is either too broad – too 'world' – or too narrow – too 'local'.

The following short essay recounts three brief moments, remembrances of performances where a sense of placed identity was offered, and yet didn't quite 'land' with its audience. Each maps some of the paradoxical problems with, and necessity

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for, convenient synecdochical symbols which performers reach for as an identity shorthand. That is not to say that each of these moments represents something false or, to use that most derogatory words in popular music, inauthentic. Rather, they illuminate the construction of identity that is always at work (or play?) in performances. Left unanalysed, these performative gestures *assume*, and lay a foundation that is somewhat taken for granted. In these three moments, when the foundation begins to crack, this tacit construction is laid somewhat bare, and allows for some of this identity work to be examined.

Moment one: Bowes Museum, Co. Durham – July 2012

It was a cold day of drizzle and charcoal skies, of which there are many in this corner of the north-east of England. It is the kind of weather that might make any celebration of Mexican culture ring a little hollow. However, this event, housed in the Bowes Museum in County Durham, a purpose-built art gallery in the style of an opulent French municipal building, incongruous, though beautifully so, with its surroundings in the soggy bucolic Teesdale countryside, made the suspension of disbelief all the more tricky.

The music performances, which had tacked themselves onto the already-curated exhibition of Mexican art being displayed at the home, promised a 'Mexican fiesta' as part of a larger cornucopia of events that formed the region's annual 'Latin festival'. The festival itself, although diverse and ambitious, and well supported by the region's local and international inhabitants, has a tendency, as with many such festivals, to present something of a confusing combination, where geographies, nationalities, cultures and identities are thrown together into a single, and singular, space labelled 'Latin'. Again, this is an effect felt in numerous local festivals, not just those celebrating 'Latin' culture, and lack of funding and a relatively small pool of local musicians to draw from compound these problems. Indeed, it is perhaps a broader concern of the always-problematic construction 'world music'.

In the entrance hall, flowing like water through the space between an oversized glass display cabinet and the wide staircase, the first band was setting up. The event was due to take place on the steps outside the museum, the organisers hoping (against hope) that the north-east would summon heady summer weather to accompany the resplendent music. It did not, and as a last-minute concession, the band were tucked into a corner, which the members inhabited with the practised ease of professional musicians accustomed to bookings that hadn't taken into account the spatial requirements for making music.

Although there may have been a doubt as to how the six-piece group would arrange themselves physically, as they busied themselves with the final stage of preparation – donning their matching costumes – there was no doubt as to the nationality being evoked, being celebrated, being *played*.

The band adjusted their matching crisp white shirts and tight black waistcoats, topped off with almost comically broad sombreros. They pretended to adjust one another's buttons, laughing in an inward-looking circle before the outward performance began. They whistled and hooted and called through a set of songs instantly recognisable as 'Mexican' to the ebbing and flowing audience drifting through the hallway. The sound boomed out and muddied itself against the acoustically unforgiving marble columns, not built to house such musical identities. 'Cielito lindo',

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'La Cucaracha', even 'La Bamba' got an airing, each given a jovial lilt, each accompanied by a slightly uneasy cowbell and congas percussion section.

The set continued with its flowing audience clapping a 4/4 rhythm sporadically, applauding generously, continuing on to see the exhibition. And the band finished, bowed and made their way to the back of the 'stage' where the instrument cases were providing a backdrop to their performance. They congregated, busily packing away instruments, assessing the gig as they did with high-fives and hugs, returning to the inner-circle.

Yet there was another band playing after them, and the changeover was a quick one. With the same conversation still ongoing, with the audience still milling through the marbled hallway, the band removed their sombreros and, dipping into a black flight case among the instrument bags, each pulled out a poncho and a woollen chullo hat – and the second band were ready. This band, replete with pan pipes and charangos (although the same uneasy congas, cowbell, whistle and chimes), played through a similarly immediate set of songs – 'El Condor Pasa' and so on. Although nationality might not be quite the correct word for this second performative iteration of identity, itself an amalgamation (something approaching 'Andean' might perhaps describe it), and though it was not advertised at all as part of the event, although it bore no relation to the exhibition (but then, what relation did 'La Bamba' bear?), nonetheless, it was a similar performance of an identity that relied on these sort of symbolic shorthands for its impact.

They were the same musicians, but a different band;[1] a different identity, a different nationality, but nestled familiarly under that same umbrella – Latin. They wore a different set of clothes, or more precisely, wore different hats, different symbols – exchanging one symbol for another. In this change, they became a different performance. For whose benefit? Did the audience need this visual queue, or did the musicians need it to remind them 'where they were from'? Neither musicians nor audience seemed perturbed by the change, because, within this delineated space of the Latin festival, they still belonged. Precisely *different*, but somehow, obviously, *the same as they were before.*

Moment two: St James Park, Newcastle Upon Tyne – February 2013

It is eight months later, and I am reminded of this symbolic identity-changing ceremony, when the sentimentally cherished, but objectively inept, love of my live, Newcastle United Football Club, decide to play host to a 'French day'. The objective was to celebrate and welcome an influx of Francophone players to the club, bought in the January transfer window to bolster the team. Ostensibly billed as a way to make those transferred players 'feel at home', the collection of gestures – certainly more familiar to the cultural language of the football stadium than to any aspect of the everyday, real or imagined, played out in France – served the (arguably more important) role of re-enthusing the perennially demoralised supporters.

[1] A third, and no less essentialised or unexpected, iteration of Latin nationality was performed by this same group later in the same event, as they led the audience in a Salsa dancing class. Quite what national symbols were incorporated in this performance is left unclear here, as this writer suffers from a morbid aversion to audience participation and had relocated to a quieter, and safer, distance by the time the dancing began.

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There was something of an added clamour in the crowd as, in unseasonal sunshine, the fans filed into the stadium. Many supporters wore the half-French-national-team-half-Newcastle-United replica shirt hastily designed, and dubbed '*Le Toon*', by retro football shirt company TOFFS. Many other well-intentioned fans had come in 'French dress' (mostly, but by no means all, children). Horizontally striped t-shirts with strings of onions draped around their necks, tricolour face paint and false moustaches symbolised their adoptive nationality. In front of me, the celebrated super fan Pete Toogood had replaced his usual black and white face paint with a full head of red, white and blue.

The tannoy announced the familiar 'the teams are in the tunnel', and the players jogged, applauding the terraces, onto the pitch. The starting XI for NUFC included four French players and two French-speaking African players.[2] They were greeted by the crowd in the smaller East Stand holding aloft cards to form a somewhat patchy *tricolore* and the strains of 'La Marseillaise' boomed out over the ground, followed by a truly confusing bilingual rendition of Geordie favourite 'The Blaydon Races'[3] sung by an operatic tenor, who bounded across the turf gesticulating to the crowd. The Francophile atmosphere was dampened somewhat three minutes into the game as Southampton's own French player Morgan Schneiderlin scored, but picked up again as NUFC's French players responded to the crowd's cheers. At half time, as fans queued for French onion soup from the kiosks, listless can-can dancers kicked their height in the centre circle and two men with painted-on moustaches, berets and aforementioned *Le Toon* football shirts, fired t-shirt canons into an ambivalent crowd. The sounds of Jean-Michel Jarre's 'Oxygene Part 4' floated down the tunnel to accompany the team talks.

Quite what this handful of French players made of this representation of 'their' culture, 'their' nationality is uncertain. Would they even recognise the symbols that were orchestrated to make them feel at home? What would Moussa Sissoko – a man in his early twenties, born in the suburbs of Paris to Malian parents, hands upturned in a silent prayer before the game – make of strings of onions and a beret as symbols of his nationality? What would Mapou Yanga-Mbiwa make of can-can dancers? What would Senegalese Papiss Cissé and Ivorian Cheik Tiote make of the Marseillaise as a welcoming tune?

Moment three: ACM São Paulo, Brazil – April 2003

As I looked around the exhibition of Mexican art in the Bowes Museum, I tried to think what 'my equivalent' would be. What would be the equivalent nation-hopping scenario in reverse? The musicians still playing downstairs each needed to perform a sense of that shifting identity through these symbolic gestures, to be understood – authenticated even, although the word may not sit right here, given the situation, the festival and the audience present – as 'Mexican' (which none of the musicians, to my knowledge, were) or 'Latin American'.

[2] Three French players were also substitutes on 'French day'. For an exhaustive, and humorous, account of the match and celebrations, see: http://www.nufc.com/html/2012-13html/2013-02-24southampton-h.html. Photos from NUFC's official website can be found here: http://www.nufc.co.uk/page/News/Gallery/0,,10278~3088946,00.html

[3] 'The Blaydon Races', originally a musical hall song, has become an unofficial terrace anthem for the club's fans, and can be heard as a chant at all NUFC games.

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I was enjoying the fleeting half-thoughts of moving from Morris dancing outfits to lederhosen in some imaginary Mexican festival of European culture, or from Beatles mop-tops to cowboy hats in a celebration of English speaking culture, when I had a sort of musical Proustian rush, coming cringing into my memory with a sharp, barbed clarity.

As a callow 'gapper' charged with teaching English language to groups of kind-hearted but slightly dubious students in São Paulo's largest YMCA facility, I took on the challenge of reaching past the Beatles and the Rolling Stones, past the immensely popular Iron Maiden and into something I considered 'authentic' as part of my teaching materials. At a hastily organised event that aimed to 'celebrate British culture' (to memory, coinciding with St George's Day, a date I and fellow gappers had to look up), I volunteered to perform and teach the Geordie folk song 'The Lambton Worm' to the assembled crowd. With a practised accent, an earnest acapella, I had wanted to give something authentic, but ended up with something meaningless, even to myself. Encouraging faces, enduring the fourth and fifth verses, wondering how many there could possibly be, smiled confused at the indecipherability of the refrain '*wisht lad, haad yer gobs*' each time it came round. Admitting defeat, I took the self-censoring decision to cut out the repeated choruses in response, both audience and performer willing an end. The enthusiastic applause made the performance worse, and I retreated to the 'marmite table' (made possible by the care package sent to my roommate and fellow 'gapper'), where São Paulo's youth very determinedly, and unanimously, came down on the 'hate it' side of the fence.

Was my earnest performance of 'The Lambton Worm' – a song that means a great deal to me, and is undoubtedly a part of a 'placed identity', a failure because it was 'too British'? Or because it wasn't British enough? Or because those trite, but perhaps necessary, symbols of national identity didn't connect at all with the audience? Because there was no hat, no hook, no symbol to anchor the performance, tacitly, in its 'home', it floated and failed? Or because the symbols that made sense of it – accent perhaps most notable – are not the same as the symbols that make sense of British culture in Brazil?

Conclusion

In the Bowes Museum, on a drizzle-soaked afternoon, these costume changes stood for a kind of nationality change – a short trip from an imagined Mexico to somewhere vaguely Andean to somewhere vaguely Cuban. Perhaps most problematic in this presentation – given by 'hispanic' musicians to a predominantly white audience – was the process of self-othering inherent in the hat changes: the reduction of one's culture – even a condensation of a host of national, regional, individual cultures – into a single, synecdochical symbol, a hat, a poncho, pan pipes.

The issue here, then, with the 'world music festival', or the celebration of something so broad as 'Hispanic' culture is that it inevitably condenses down something multifarious and complex into something singular and, necessarily, essentialised whereby it can be, and is, represented by such shorthand symbols, where changing a hat is sufficient. Or else it presents disconnected cultural identities as part of some comprehensible whole precisely through their otherness. So, precisely because the 'culture' being celebrated is so broad, so hard to work into a connected constellation, the recourse to such overt shorthands is made all the more necessary to give audiences an anchor.

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And so, as these musicians quite clearly knew, this was far from a presentation of their culture, but rather a presentation of what the audience *thought* 'their culture' was. A primary-colours portrait that could be grasped immediately by the meandering audience, made sense of immediately (and so discarded just as quickly). In the knowing looks between the musicians, the faux-delirious hoots and cackles accompanying 'La cucaracha', there was a recognition of the deliberate focussing on shorthand symbols of nationality – made so overt as to be almost comical – to fulfil a professional requirement. If there is a consideration around the 'authenticity' of this performance, then it is perhaps one which should focus not on national identity, but rather professional identity. These musicians acted authentically as pragmatic professionals. They performed as authentic musicians. They turned up, played what was expected, turned their hand to at least three (mariachi, Andean folk, salsa) quite profoundly disconnected musics and identities, and presented them as part of the same connected 'hispanic' identity space. They are not to be criticised for this, but rather the concept and construction of the event to which they were responding needs to be examined. After all, they didn't choose the theme of the event.

What these moments of identity performance present is the importance of, and problems with, these symbols of national identity. In representation of 'our' cultural identity, these symbols often exist outside the realm of the conscious. They are habit. So overt as to be invisible, almost – shorthand that we each take for granted, hazily defined, but clear enough. Often, the shorthand symbols cultures construct of 'other' nations are far from grounded in a cultural reality. Indeed, when these shorthand symbols are played to people as a representation of 'their culture', they are almost incomprehensible. In these moments where they either miss the mark, or are taken out, they reveal the constructive process of identity at work. They show perhaps the artifice (which is not the same as inauthenticity, or meaninglessness) of these performative gestures and symbols.

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