

MICHAEL JACKSON—‘BILLIE JEAN’

SOUNDS AND ENCOUNTERS

I carried out fieldwork on legal jurisdiction between 2009 and 2011 in the Rio Seco area of El Alto, Bolivia. I lived with a local family, going into the centre of the city to carry out ethnographic fieldwork in the Defensoria del Pueblo (a human rights office). I also often travelled to the family’s natal village at weekends to participate in agricultural labour or political meetings. When I took the minibus to the market in town I would hear the meandering beats of *cumbia* over the radio, the emcee seeming to call out the zones of the city as the minibus rattled through them (“*Chakaltaya!*”). The market itself, La Ceja (literally: the eyebrow) was a sonic heterotopia. Transistor radios seemed to call to one another as much as the market traders did. The mash-up of coastal and highland rhythms mirrored the ‘vertical economy’ of produce which was piled in abundance on the market stalls—citrus fruits from the lowlands, tubers, grains and vegetables from the high plains. As I walked through the Ceja I caught the smell of frying pork *chicharron* or boiling cow’s head soup. I caught sight of an open wagon full of headless, skinned llamas being carefully dragged by one man with a cart. On the street of the butchers, traders seemed to emerge from within an enormous pile of flesh; I crowded with others around flickering screens to watch the latest imports (often wrestling) from among the piles of DVDs. The marketplace was a sensorium of visual, aural and olfactory bounty, bringing produce, products and people together from near and far. The fruits of what Tassi (2010) calls the ‘postulate of abundance’ filled the senses; abundant sounds, smells,

visions; I caught the sense that everything here seemed to be abundantly piled high. The market was an arena for sensorial consumption as well as quotidian purchases.

MUSICAL STAGINGS

I suggest that one form of governmentality in the ‘pluricultural’ state of Bolivia is that of spectacular aesthetic dramatizations of political messages in collective gatherings such as the marketplace. This might take the form of political speeches delivered from stages accompanied by traditional music or the symbols of indigeneity, or even by less formal dramatizations of the recent or distant past (for example, through wrestling bouts performed by indigenous women). These stagings are not spontaneous (these ritualised forms of mediation are often oriented towards particular ends such as the birth of a political party or the marking of a calendrical moment) and rely on a degree of distance from their source material or performative form. Thus, cosmopolitan forms are ideal for ‘re’ presenting stories about the past that resonate in the present both because formal distancing allows this effect to be achieved, and because the postmodern co-temporality of the remix, collage or mashup allows spectators to emplace themselves within the drama as it unfolds. This creative ambiguity is part of an emergent indigenous modernity. By indigenous modernity, I mean the emplacement of indigenous symbols or claims within cosmopolitan cultural forms such as Hip Hop, Heavy Metal, or wrestling.

By a staging, I mean a public event which is in some way bifurcated between performers

and spectators in which a narrative is dramatized through aesthetics or performance. I encountered 'staged' music on many occasions. During the celebrations on Plaza Murillo to mark the passing of the new constitution by plebiscite, I moved through the diverse crowd as they converged before a stage where the musicians, in a powerful political spectacle of indigenous music and symbology, were blowing a soaring melody through *zamponyas* (an instrument for which the terms 'rousing' and 'stirring' may as well have been invented) and were strumming the strings of their *charangos* as though the wings of some great bird were fluttering. The square itself was dominated by women bearing the black and blue banners of the MAS party hand sown with their regions of origin such as Ingavi or Chuquisaca, with the square's usual inhabitants finding themselves for once on the margins. The coincidence of celebratory music and symbol as well as the reclamation of what is still often referred to as the 'Square of the Spanish' generated an effervescent atmosphere of political community.

I also found such soundscapes to be woven through everyday encounters, especially when bands and dancers from the fraternities practiced for the coming fiestas. While I was writing an email in an internet café open to the street, the groups would announce their appearance with the sudden, sweeping drama of the blast of a sousaphone riff or a tuba and trumpet blast, the dance fraternity rounding a corner with clashing cymbals and their flashing, reflective costumes catching the sunlight, causing everyone in the café to leave their computers and pour onto the street to watch the dancers and musicians pass by. Through quotidian encounters like this the promise of the carnival is kept alive throughout the year.

The first time I attended a rural fiesta the whole district came together in a three-day

performance of ritualised dancing and drinking by which the villages were integrated as a whole, as an *ayllu*: as a group bound together through their relationship to the land. The village band circulated throughout the early part of the day, moving from group to group accepting drinks, playing traditional instruments and playing the songs of their home villages. After the village bands had played from obligation, a hired band arrived to continue the party. These players were long-haired and dressed in punkish skeleton outfits and kept their distance from the festivities until it was their time to play. The emphasis turned to amplified music played on electric instruments and the rolling, circuitous rhythms of the *cumbias* played at raucous volume. They initially generated two lines of couples, each swapping over as the theme came around again. Later, the whole *ayllu* (except those who had stolen away to sleep it off) appeared to be dancing as one as the music emanated from a stage which faced up the hill from Lake Titicaca. The importance of complementarity between men and women was visible in how each couple paired off and performed the same rhythmical turn and half-turn as everyone else. I found it difficult, indeed near impossible to maintain this pattern of Spartan unity following a day's drinking, and couldn't help moving as I normally would when dancing. However, this deviation from the pattern was immediately disturbing to the other celebrants, as my movements caused an outward ripple of disturbance and I was quickly cautioned to maintain the strict pattern, rhythm and pairing. No participant could go their own way without compromising the socio-spatial integrity of the collective, expressed through co-ordinated rhythmic movement and much pouring of libations.

After the party, I reflected that music can be a way to think with, against and through

difference. Village bands play traditional songs attached to their places of origin at ritually festive times. Amplified or recorded music can offer a cosmopolitan frame to all participants (I include myself in this) through which to project ourselves outwards into wider worlds of modernity, and further to incorporate those cosmopolitan worlds within local frameworks of understanding. To be sure, there are nested localities and globalities at play here, as the hired band play a fusion of highland and coastal sounds following the highly localised bands (each village has its own dance). My argument is that as one moves from the countryside to the city, wider cosmopolitan frames enter circulation and provide templates for emulation which (often in obscure and non-instrumental ways) localise meanings and histories.

For instance, one way in which one can suture cosmopolitan frameworks with local repertoires of interaction is through mass mediation, for example, through watching foreign telenovelas or soap operas beamed from elsewhere in the continent or further afield. In the family with whom I lived, mother and daughters would gather to watch telenovelas, in particular a series set in the colonial period and full of romance. However they would spring to turn the television off as their father/husband came home. He regarded the telenovelas and programmes such as *The Simpsons* as potential moral dangers. The daughters, however, followed their own interests through Korean soap operas, which were sold on copied disks in the market, their plots of teen romance punctuated with bursts of K-Pop. This shows how consuming mass media forms interjects locally circulating understandings of (in this case) romance with globally circulating ways of seeing and enacting romance. These instances take place in the private space of the home. I now consider those moments when mass mediated forms

are appropriated in the public spaces of El Alto, a space already thick with contingent performativities, by addressing two moments where mass mediated forms are given a public staging and considering the differences between them.

DEATH IS NOT THE END

Michael Jackson passed away on 25th June 2009, not long after I had arrived in El Alto. I heard the announcement over the radio while travelling through town in a minibus. From that point, the soundtrack to my excursions to the market shifted a little. The songs of Michael Jackson began to be played on the radio, in between the *cumbias* and Latin pop hits. Snatches of ‘Got to be Startin’ Somethin’, ‘Thriller’ and ‘Black or White’ carried through the market from time to time but the song I have chosen to write about is ‘Billie Jean’. The spare pulse of the drums, close enough to a human heartbeat as makes no difference, were instantly recognisable over the radio following the announcement and carried me elsewhere, to my own discovery as a boy of Michael Jackson’s music and the cosmopolitan frames it offered me. Following his passing, it was as though the sudden ubiquity of his music had produced an uncanny resurrection. In the days that followed I encountered, quite literally, two Michael Jacksons.

SCHOOL AND CHURCH

I encountered the first Michael while looking through the minibus window. He was standing in front of one of the newish, small evangelical protestant churches set back from the road on the main avenue. A small speaker system had been set up, and a tiny figure was pirouetting across the pavement. I alighted, and saw a child, probably around the same age as Michael was

when his father first started drilling him and his brothers in song and dance routines in Gary, Indiana. A crowd had formed as the kid, resplendent in a fedora, white shirt and glove, strutted, bodypopped and moonwalked his way back and forth in front of the church to the tune of 'Billie Jean'. A pastor was working the outer edges of the crowd informally, pointing out that the services would start inside the church, but the crowd held back, seeming to have paused there for the kid and his moves—confident, precise—and yes, (at least to me) a little incongruous in the Church context.

The second encounter came on the last day of the school term, when the teachers and children formed up in the yard. There were speeches from the teachers reflecting on the year and giving encouragement for the future followed by dances from the students, culminating in the students' carnivalling the solemnity of the occasion by chasing each other with water bombs. The dances performed were a selection of the traditional dances of the *altiplano*, some performed only by girls, others by mixed couples. Then came the boys' turn. They emerged in torn shirts, their leader wearing a leather jacket and all caked in 'zombie' make up. A familiar riff kicked in and they performed the 'Thriller' dance with what had obviously been a carefully rehearsed choreography. It provided an immediate contrast to the foregoing Andean dances, and was the only dance performed only by the boys.

The young people I met and became friends with in El Alto never mentioned Michael Jackson to me. They divided evenly between self-described Hip Hop and Heavy Metal fans, largely along class lines.¹ No one spoke of him until he died. However, his death seemed to release his ambiguous potentialities, and made him available to be danced in new

contexts. While resisting any interpretation that speaks to Jackson's biography, I would simply like to contrast these two staged performances as uncanny apparitions, and to suggest that the contrasts between the two stagings and performances may be instructive in illustrating the tensions inherent in the ongoing project of re-founding the Bolivian nation on a pluri-cultural basis.

But why church and school? Where the Church was formerly a key site of national integration, now, especially with reforms such as the 'Bono Juancito Pinto' being administered through schools, whose teachers must now learn indigenous languages, the school has long replaced the Church as the paradigmatic site for the formation of the Bolivian (pluri-) national subject. In short, they are both actors in the construction of Bolivian modernity. Canessa (2000) has observed that conversion to evangelical Protestantism responds to similar dilemmas as does identification as an 'Indigenous Originary Peasant', or an 'Indian'. Rather than turning to the past as a guide to the future (and as a resource or state of being to recuperate), however—thereby re-valourising the status of indigeneity—such conversion is future-oriented and implacably hostile to Andean tradition, seeking a different (though related) access to citizenship and modernity. Conversion therefore allows a form of ethnic mobility which bypasses the mixed 'Mestizo state': a state equally rejected by indigenists and evangelicals. In front of the church, the dancer sensuously shows the fruits of conversion through his bodily mastery, although the dancer (like Michael Jackson in the original) dances quite radically alone. In the school, the boys dance collectively but as one, reminiscent of traditional Andean dance formations but refracted through the resurrected figure of Michael Jackson. I argue

that he offered both ambiguity and modernity to both performers and spectators in each space, and was therefore called upon and harnessed to divergent ends. Mark Goodale (2006: 634) has observed that,

Newly urbanized *campesino* adolescents who speak Quechua, Aymara, and Spanish—and idiosyncratic Hispano-Amerindian hybrids—are constructing new forms of cosmopolitanism that combine an emergent indigeneity with other, more global forms of inclusion, and in doing so are, in a small way, reclaiming the meanings and possibilities of Bolivia's modernity.

Perhaps the materials gathered to perform this meaningful modernity can include the temporary revivification of the king of pop. Michael's apparition demonstrates that cultural bricolage is an ongoing working through of Andean modernity and the tensions on which it is unavoidably constructed. It cannot be foretold in advance which figures can be pressed into its service. Michael Jackson may have died, but his death was the occasion for his afterlives to begin.

NOTES

- 1 Essentially, the more working class a person, the more likely they were to be a Hip Hopper, the more middle class, the likelier to be a Metaller.

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