

EMISFÉRICA

Dossier: Impostura Racial / Racial Impersonation

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Impersonation names an act of occupation—an act through which one takes possession literally or figuratively of the space of another. While impersonation is at the very heart of theatrical practice, *racial impersonation* leads us to a dense social terrain shaped by struggles over power, nation, labor, and identity. Including practices as varied as blackface, passing, and ventriloquism, racial impersonation always involves drawing, crossing, and traversing a line of racial difference. While it may sometimes blur or contest that line, more often than not such impersonation serves to mark and police the boundaries that organize sociality along the axis of race, forcefully defining who can and cannot occupy what racial positions. In this special dossier, then, we explore how practices of racial impersonation reveal the different languages, contexts, and histories in which race is and has been lived in the Americas.

In her contribution on “Whiteness,” artist and scholar Coco Fusco signals the “difficulties we have in distinguishing between racialization as a visual process, and racism as an ethical and political dilemma.” As a practice of impersonating racial “others,” blackface poses such difficulty in the extreme: in many parts of the Americas, blackface has been and remains a technique in which the production of race and of racism are so closely laminated as to be indistinguishable. Fusco reminds us that one of the defining conceits of whiteness is, precisely, the “capacity to masquerade as a racial other.” Like the nineteenth century Cuban *teatro bufo* actors described by Inés María Martiatu Terry, the act of “playing at” being a slave or being black in colonial Cuba served to secure racial hierarchies between white and black while enacting the changing status of white criollos on the eve of anticolonial war. In this context, performing blackness became a way to reaffirm a white *Cuban* identity over and above the colonizing Spaniard. Analyzing a similar gesture in Chile during the mid-nineteenth century War of the Pacific (1879–83), Ericka Beckman draws our attention to what she calls “imperial impersonation, which she defines as “the appropriation of the language and politics of Imperial elites by a peripheral nation.” Rather than reject the colonizing metropole by underscoring their (racial) difference (as happened in Cuba and many new Latin American republics), Chilean elites instead cast themselves as its successor. Their performance of imperial whiteness projected a racial geography onto the region that positioned Peruvians and Bolivians as racially “impure” peoples, while positioning Chile as the new avatar of white “civilization.”

Can there be a cross-racial performance that is not connected historically to the project of white supremacy? Heidi Feldman presents the fascinating case of white proponents of Afro-Peruvian revival who performed in blackface as way to make their own

participation in the movement more “authentic.” “Why,” asks Feldman, “if the goal of the Afro-Peruvian revival was to revalorize black culture, was blackface used?” Her reflection illustrates precisely the possible tensions between representing race and enacting racist norms. In a country where blackness has been routinely rendered invisible, perhaps when white musician Juan Criado dons his blackface he underscores the ways in which the music “belongs” to the country’s disavowed blackness. Or, perhaps, the blackface reveals critical shortcomings of the Afro-Peruvian revival itself—a failure or impossibility of considering the politics of racial representation in the process of making blackness visible. Isar Godreau, in turn, examines the alarmingly easy slide between the social behaviors of every day life and the performance of compromising racial types in Puerto Rico. Precisely because they are not marked by black make-up or burnt cork, these racial performances can masquerade as “natural” behavior, triggering a tautology in which the performance serves as evidence of the stereotype and the stereotype as the discursive support of the performance. Godreau comments that racialized typologies are “so deeply rooted in our scripted concept of blackness that they almost take on a life of their own.”

Particularly striking are the connections revealed in this dossier between racial impersonations and formations of gender and sexuality. The imagined essence, purity, or danger imputed to race is intimately tied to the politics of sexuality and reproduction, with discourses of gender necessarily attenuating discourses of race and vice versa. Noting how the term “miscegenation” emerged to replace “amalgamation” as the favored term for the mixing of races, Tavia N’yongo’s outlines how miscegenation functions as a “critical keyword in the deployment of heterosexuality.” Javier Guerrero, in turn, looks at a contemporary incident in which Venezuelan public opinion was scandalized by a Brazilian performance of a “gay” Simón Bolívar. The response by President Hugo Chávez was to deploy a racial counter-narrative to undermine the queering of “The Liberator.” Eric Lott, in turn, demonstrates how in the 1960s, Frank Sinatra used markedly black speech (“blackvoice”), and ethnically marked Italian style (“dagoface”) to secure his own (white) masculinity at precisely the moment that advancing age began to threaten its potency.

As a collection, the essays assembled here suggest that the popularity and persistence of different forms of racial impersonation extends across the Americas, and in that in particular cases, these play a constitutive role with what we are calling *racial contact zones*—sites where racial formations, and not just “races,” come into friction and conflict. One of the most evocative examples of such a collision is the controversy around the Mexican “black” comic book character “Memín Pinguín,” who appeared on a Mexican commemorative postal stamp in July 2005 date. The stamp was publicly criticized by U.S. state officials, and defended by Vicente Fox, then Mexican President. While the U.S. accused Mexico of racism, Mexican public officials and intellectuals accused the U.S. of imposing its racial norms on its neighbors to the South. As the texts by Carlos Monsiváis, Bobby Vaughn and Ben Vinson attest, each government used the other as a foil to consolidate their own political aims and image with regard to race. Through Memín, each tried to assert their own superior racial sensibility. Rarely heard were voices from Mexico, like that of anthropologist María Elisa Velásquez Gutiérrez

(whose essay was commissioned for this dossier), that offer a critique of Mexican racism while also keeping U.S. presumptions of superiority at bay.

Entirely lost in the debates was the fact that the images in question were on a series of state-issued postage stamps, expressly designed to circulate through and beyond Mexican national space. It is not only possible but likely that the stamps would appear on letters written by Mexicans to their families in the U.S., and that such letters would be delivered by postal workers, including African Americans, who shared the outrage at what they perceived to be the racist nature of the images. The stamps also offered a reminder that, despite the militarized border, the line between Mexico and the United States is becoming increasingly blurred, and that given migratory and demographic realities, we should not be surprised that their divergent histories of race may be moving towards a reckoning. This was made evident in Memín Pinguín's latest controversial appearance in July of 2008 on the shelves of a Houston, Texas, Wal-Mart. What had been a consistently popular item with a growing Mexican consumer base instead offended African American customers—particularly because the issue in question was entitled “Memín Pinguín for President,” and could be interpreted as an inflammatory send-up of Barak Obama's presidential run. Rather than a political contest between heads of state over a series of postal stamps, this incident involved fellow shoppers in a Wal-Mart—two minoritarian groups at odds in a neoliberal landscape where racial conflict was ignited and negotiated through low-cost commodities. In this case, the stamp functions as a traveling synecdoche of its racial formation, challenging us to understand the ways that race circulates within and across borders, contexts and histories.