Reorienting Blackface

New Genealogies of Racial Impersonation

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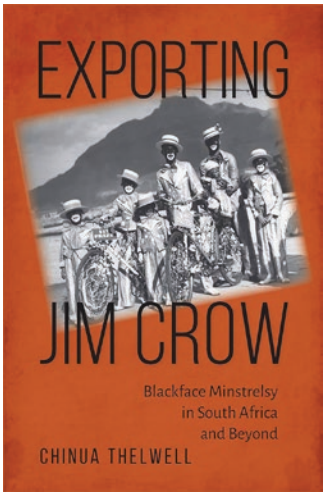
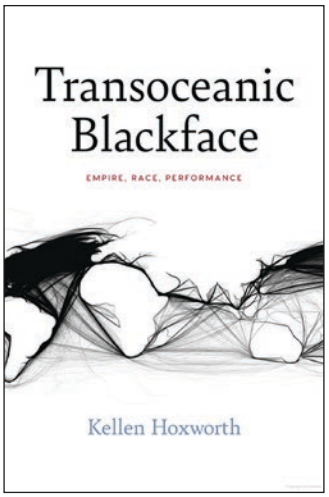
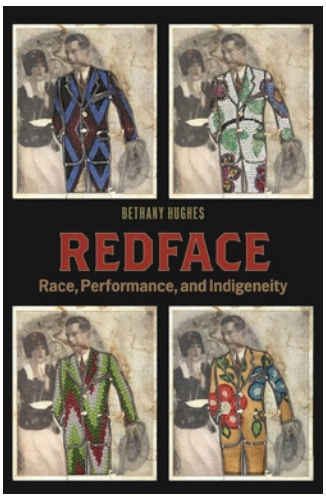


Exporting Jim Crow: Blackface Minstrelsy in South Africa and Beyond. By Chinua Thelwell. University of Massachusetts Press, 2020; 280 pp.; illustrations. $90.00 cloth, $32.95 paper, e-book available.

Transoceanic Blackface: Empire, Race, Performance. By Kellen Hoxworth. Northwestern University Press, 2024; 280 pp.; illustrations. $100.00 cloth, $36.00 paper, e-book available.





Redface: Race, Performance, and Indigeneity. By Bethany Hughes. New York University Press, 2024; 280 pp.; illustrations. $89.00 cloth, $30.00 paper, e-book available.

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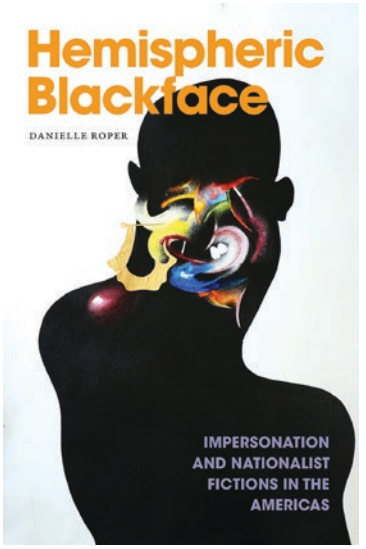

Hemispheric Blackface: Impersonation and Nationalist Fictions in the Americas. By Danielle Roper. Duke University Press, 2025; 256 pp.; illustrations. $102.95 cloth, $26.95 paper, e-book available.

In February 2025, Oscar-nominated actor Fernanda Torres issued an apology for resurfaced footage of her wearing blackface in a 2008 comedy sketch on the Brazilian television show *Fantástico*. Torres explained in her apology that, at the time of the aforementioned performance, "awareness of the racist history and symbolism of blackface hadn't yet entered the mainstream public consciousness in Brazil," but that, "thanks to better cultural understanding," it is "very clear now that in our country *and everywhere* that blackface is never acceptable" (Seth 2025; emphasis added).

By the time this review essay is published, there may have been another actor, politician, or media personality running similar lines, because the blackface apology, or a public apology delivered to disavow past acts of racial impersonation, is its own kind of 21st-century performance. These performances have a setting—they take place in the present but refer to the not-so-distant past; they have a script—a confession of earlier ignorance and an assertion of better understanding now; and they conclude with a disappearing act—that is, these apologies quickly fade into all of those that have come before. Torres's piles up with those of Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau for wearing blackface, *Real Housewives of Atlanta* television personality Kenya Moore for wearing a "stage Indian" headdress, *RuPaul's Drag Race Down Under*'s contestants' apologies for blackface and a racist "Golliwog" tattoo, and Talking Heads' David Byrne's apology for past acts of both brownface and blackface—these being just a somewhat random aggregate (Aurthur 2021; BBC 2019; Boseley 2021; Horton 2020).

In their repetition, contemporary blackface apologies underscore the endurance of racial impersonation in the present (or, that is, always lurking in moments just *behind* the present), as well as the global dimensions of blackface.[1] As recent examples from Brazil, Belgium, Australia, Israel, and across the United States and Canada relate, racial impersonation is an enduring form of costuming and comedy into which performers of many different identities—not all white—have been invited to step. And, while the conditions of blackface and other forms of racial impersonation shift within different local contexts, the vivid character of these racial performances broadcasts recognizable racial hierarchies across cultures and borders. It appears, in their repetition, that people across the globe still find reason to participate in these broadcasts, and that there remains an audience to receive them, despite the potential for political censure.

The four works discussed here help situate the global breadth and ongoing life of racial impersonation in the contemporary moment, historicizing repertoires of blackface and redface, and theorizing the politics of white supremacy, nation, and empire that these acts stage and restage. Together, these authors trace the theatre and performance routes that sent blackface and redface repertoires into popular circulation across the 19th century and draw attention to the material conditions of colonization, slavery, and industrialization that ran behind performances of racial impersonation.

1. The issue in which this review essay is published (*TDR* 70:1 [T269]) includes a special section on "Blackface Geographies," guest edited by Kellen Hoxworth and Douglas A. Jones. —Ed.

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Yet, while Chinua Thelwell, Kellen Hoxworth, Bethany Hughes, and Danielle Roper collectively highlight the role of racial impersonation in the making and maintenance of global white supremacy and empire, they offer different frames for thinking through what performatively constitutes the act of blackface or redface, where these performances originate, and, importantly, what they do for those who step into them and *to* those whose identities have been made captive by them.

Chinua Thelwell's *Exporting Jim Crow* constructs a five-wave story of blackface minstrelsy's global dissemination, locating its inauguration in the 1836 performances of US American performer, Thomas Dartmouth (T.D.) Rice, in London; the second wave in the touring of popular US, British, and Australian minstrel troupes across the globe between the 1850s and 1880s; the third in the turn-of-the-20th-century's incorporation of minstrelsy into vaudeville cultural forms; and the fourth in cinema and television's re-mediation of blackface across the 20th century. Thelwell's fifth wave might be better characterized as a turn—exemplified in what he refers to as recent "self-critical" and "self-conscious" reimaginings of blackface, such as those at the center of Spike Lee's *Bamboozled* (2000) and Liliana Angulo's *Mambo Negrita* (2006). While Thelwell follows these movements globally, he situates the United States and South Africa as two key nodes for his argument and discussion of what he deems "burnt cork nationalism," or, the production of "noncitizen" blackness through minstrelsy's repertoires of "patriotic humor" (3). For Thelwell, "burnt cork nationalism" performatively installs black people in the position of "alien" within "white racial state[s]" irrespective of black peoples' anterior positions—of Indigeneity or captivity—within a given national history (3). This argument comes together most vividly in the archive of his second chapter, where he describes the theatrical staging of US plantation scenes by touring minstrel troupes in 1860s Cape Town and their role in providing "frameworks for imagining an obedient black labor force that might one day be like that of the antebellum United States" (55). Yet, at the same time that Thelwell establishes the minstrel stage as a moveable set of US American ideology, his terms of "alien," "citizen," "export," and "import" fit somewhat squarely around the colonial flows of culture that his archive gives way to—as in the singing of "God Save the Queen" by minstrel performers in 1860s Cape Town, or the integration of colonial display acts of African people within Steele-Leslie-Taylor's Christy's Minstrel shows in 1865 (66, 42). As these examples index, the "set" of the minstrel stage did not travel wholesale, but was constantly being *reset* as part of a project of whiteness that exceeded—and did not necessarily depend upon—national boundaries, citizenship, or belonging.

Thelwell's fifth chapter, "Brown-on-Black Masquerade," about early 20th-century "Kaapse Klopse," or "Coon Carnival," productively steps outside the boundaries of his central framework, exploring how "colored" South Africans made use of African American minstrel traditions to produce forms of masquerade that at times subverted, rather than merely reiterated, apartheid racial lines. Yet where Thelwell addresses ambiguities in the racial and class politics of minstrelsy in South Africa, he argues against ambivalent and recuperative readings of blackface minstrelsy's US American origins, explicitly rejecting a body of recent scholarship that has posited the potential for interracial populism in 1830s US American blackface (17). Where scholars such as W.T. Lhamon have looked to T.D. Rice as a "champion for working-class people" (Thelwell's phrase), Thelwell reminds readers, in his first chapter, "Foundations," of Rice's explicit proslavery rhetoric (18). For Thelwell, the relationship between "Jim Crow" the minstrel character, and Jim Crow, the system of segregation in the US, was and are metonymic, not merely associative.

Kellen Hoxworth's *Transoceanic Blackface* challenges the origins-and-export model put forth by Thelwell, arguing instead for situating blackface as arising *within* transoceanic and "multidirectional circulations," rather than moving from one national center and tradition out toward various colonial peripheries (195). For Hoxworth, "blackface minstrelsy was not crafted in the bounded national context of the United States and then shipped elsewhere" (8). It was instead "a core element in the transoceanic performance culture of the Anglophone empire," and part of its metaphorical "furniture," that is, a structure of domination that could be arranged, "refashioned, and refurbished to satisfy the imperial needs of particular subjects, namely, to support and comfort white subjects of the empire and those who identified with or aligned themselves with whiteness" (8, 19). Hoxworth's chapters,

rather than moving in waves, move across, and slightly beyond, the 19th century through its varied blackface circuits. In Hoxworth's telling, T.D. Rice appears less as a designated blackface founder, and more as an emblematic agent of blackface's global empire, moving both the money of minstrelsy and its repertoires between the US, Great Britain, South Africa, Australia, and New Zealand.

As Hoxworth notes, not only did blackface travel on global circuits, but it was reshaped and rearticulated in—and by—the racial terms that were taking shape across 19th-century colonial geographies. The anecdote that opens the book—about an 1881 comic pantomime in Singapore, where South Asian performers of the Parsee Victoria Company donned yellowface to perform an anti-Chinese adaptation of the play *The Quack Doctor*, which lampooned black *actor* Ira Aldridge—underscores the flexibility of minstrelsy on the move across the British Empire, and sometimes beyond it (120). Hoxworth's fourth chapter, "Othello Travestied," explicates this flexibility further, tracking burlesque performances where Shakespeare's Othello came to serve as a racially ambiguous and oft-orientalized figure for the condemnation of various racial "amalgamations" across the British Empire (130). Hoxworth ultimately concludes that the history of blackface—understood through its transoceanic routes and reformulations—reveals not only the "transnationality of whiteness," but also the use of performance to conscript "colonized peoples into the racial discourses of the Anglophone empire," and sometimes across empires, at places where the British, Spanish, Portuguese, and French colonial worlds met (204–05, 120). For Hoxworth, both the US Americanness of minstrelsy and its antiblackness have only ever been *part* of the story.

Bethany Hughes's *Redface* shifts focus toward a different facet of the story. While Hughes largely refocuses attention on the US, she puts redface on the map besides blackface as an equally pernicious form of racial impersonation and caricature, and one of equal consequence for white supremacy's formation. Hughes argues that "redface is a collaborative, curatorial process by which audiences and artists construct a legible Indian body onstage—a stage Indian," whose "complex configuration of embodied markers, dramaturgical techniques, and claims of authenticity" work "beyond the stage to racialize Indigenous peoples and reduce the political potency of Indigenous sovereignty" (3). As Hughes demonstrates, redface is rooted deeply in the early US American past, and continues in many forms in the present—often proceeding without the (nominal) public outrage that unearthed instances of blackface produce. In chapter 1, "Feathers and Face Paint," Hughes underscores this point, describing the Boston Tea Party Museum's invitation to visitors—Hughes among them, in 2018—to don feathers in their reenactment of white colonists' acts of "playing Indian" in their rebellion against the British (26). As this example and others—such as Hughes's encounter with a Disney theme park Pocahontas actor (70)—highlight, forms of redface extend into acts of costuming and play that conscript people far beyond the stage proper. Yet Hughes also establishes a rich theatre history for the "stage Indian" in chapter 2, where she chronicles the many 18th- and 19th-century plays that delivered a clear set of exterior markers, gestures, and patterns of "Stage Indian" speech to white audiences, installing the narrow terms by which non-Indigenous people came to "read" Indians (19). Those given the power to read Indians were also able to define them, as she discusses in her third chapter on the politics of authenticity and blood quantum that shape the terms with which Indigenous people across the US, including Hughes herself, who is Choctaw, have had to negotiate their own identities. As Hughes writes, the question of "Indian authenticity is not ontological; it is epistemological," a feature of the larger epistemological problem of redface itself (162). Neither, for Hughes, can be undone simply by retiring costumes or updating terms.

Hughes draws out this point in chapter 4, which critically examines attempts to rehabilitate redface in the 1999 restaging of the Broadway musical, *Annie Get Your Gun* (originally produced in 1946). While the production changed dialog and redirected its jokes toward white racists rather than toward its "Indian" characters, the play failed to address the problem "that America still wants Native Americans to be Indians" (211). Hughes offers a "Provocation" rather than a solution to this problem. In lieu of a conclusion about redface and its fate in the present, Hughes directs readers of *Redface*

toward a history of Indigenous theatre and performance that runs alongside and sometimes through the history of redface. Actively pushing readers toward a new way of relating to, and reading, this history, Hughes intersperses pages of an essay on Indigenous theatre history, "Hinushi Inla"—which she describes as "Chahta Anumpa (Choctaw) for 'a different path'" (221n1)—in nonsequential order throughout the book. The different path, and careful attention to reading that the inclusion of this essay prompts, serves as an important reminder that to intervene in the history and present of redface or blackface—or other forms of racial impersonation—requires more than a passive acknowledgment of past wrongs, and more than "better cultural understanding." For Hughes, it requires putting down the old props of racial knowledge, and putting different kinds of knowledge in the hands both of performers and readers of race.

In *Hemispheric Blackface*, Danielle Roper offers less certainty about the old props and asks more open-ended questions about their uses within or against different racial knowledge regimes. Moving (largely) outside of the North American context and beyond the Anglophone world, Roper's study is situated in what she calls the "hemispheric fold" (4) of Latin America and the Caribbean, where varied regimes of racial hierarchy, and various forms of blackface and antiblackness often "collide and coincide with one another" (4). Roper argues that blackface is, if globally recognizable as a container of race, not always filled with the same racial content. As performed across different sites from Miami, US, to Puno, Peru, to Bogotá, Colombia, to Kingston, Jamaica, acts of what she calls "racial conjuring" shift meaning in relation to different "nationalist fictions" of "racelessness, Creole nationalism, and *mestizaje*" (2) that modulate across Latin America and the Caribbean.

Hemispheric Blackface is less historical than the aforementioned works, but Roper nevertheless delivers her own historiographic perspective, joining Hoxworth in "decenter[ing] the US" (6) as the origin of blackface or the determinant of its antiblackness. Roper understands blackface as heterogeneous not only in its origins and contexts, but also, crucially, in its politics. For Roper, "the goal of this book is not to make inherent claims that blackface is good or bad, or oppressive or liberatory" (173). Instead, each chapter triangulates how—set against different Latin American and Caribbean national histories and fictions, performed by differently racialized actors, and played out before differently situated audiences—blackface has served as a powerful, sometimes unpredictable, site for the negotiation of power and race.

Antiblackness wins in many of these negotiations.

Roper's first chapter, on danza de caporales performances in Peru, articulates both the unsurprising antiblackness of blackface and the more subtle, historically specific narratives coaxed through it. At the chapter's opening, Roper watches as hundreds of dancers, some of them costumed as enslaved characters in blackface and chains, others dressed as overseers, begin moving together across a stadium stage, shouting "Zambo!"—a Spanish colonial term, and loose double of the Anglo "Sambo" (26). This 2013 performance by the dance troupe Sambos Illimani is part of a wider (and ongoing) form of racial entertainment that, while making blackness hypervisible, "sustains [Peru's] racial script of black disappearance" (37), belying the country's deep history of slavery and recent national efforts to recognize Afro-Peruvians.

This chapter diagrams the complex interplay of antiblackness, blackness, Indigeneity, and Mestizo national identity in the context of Iberian empire and its aftermath. Locating the performance of blackface deep in Indigenous Andean dance history and noting contradictory expressions of reverence and ridicule toward black people by Indigenous Peruvian performers, Roper illuminates multiple vectors of racial knowledge, hierarchy, and formation. Roper neither condemns, excuses, nor resolves them, but she succeeds in making their underlying logic more visible. Roper's second chapter maps another geographically specific logic of blackface performance, in this case seen through Yeyo, a recurring blackface character featured on *Esta Noche Tu Night* (a US Spanish-language variety show) during the Obama era. Yeyo, seen through Roper's analysis, becomes a garish prism of hierarchical relationships between Cuban American elites and newer Latinx immigrants in Miami.

The first and second chapters confirm the ongoing usefulness of "doing antiblackness" (63) to the production of Latin American and Latinx identities. Chapter 3, however, on Afro-Colombian artist Liliana Angulo's *Mambo Negrita* (2006), and chapter 4, on blackface in working-class Jamaican Roots theatre, explore the critical potential of "ludic" racial conjuring (174). Detailing Angulo's photographic and performative blackface acts as "la negrita, the little black girl or little black woman" (97), Roper argues that Angulo successfully reinhabits this persistent servile stereotype, imbuing her instead with defiance, menace, and ambivalence. While not recuperative of or reparative toward la negrita, *Mambo Negrita* confronts Colombian Creole elites' mythologies of color-blindness and multiculturalism (106–07). Through Angulo's work and the "underclass" laughter (142) of Roots theatre in Jamaica, Roper affirms the ingenuity of black people to "disturb" acts of "racial conjuring not meant for their pleasure" (175)—and sometimes to even enjoy their own.

Among these four monographs, Roper's stands out for its engagement with the ongoing mutability of racial impersonation, racial conjuring, and blackface. As Roper demonstrates, contemporary acts of racial impersonation are not relics or accidental anachronisms. They are signs of white supremacy's liveness, ongoing management, and contestation right now. Together, the works of Roper, Hughes, Hoxworth, and Thelwell outfit readers with a range of conceptual tools and historical knowledge to reckon with the *right now*, demonstrating that today's recurring flares of racial impersonation are part of a deep structure, embedded far beneath the surface of burnt cork, paint, or feathers. In unearthing the historical, transnational, and hemispheric archive of racial minstrelsy, moreover, the authors underscore the insufficiency of any apology—whether confessing personal or national shame—to address the structure, epistemology, or "furniture" that racial impersonation keeps in place.

While these works cannot, either on their own or collectively, offer a truly global picture, they nevertheless offer ways for understanding how racial impersonation came to be "everywhere" in the Americas and across the globe, forged through deadly projects of racial slavery, colonialism, and capitalism, and kept alive as humorous reprieves from them. What is required to fundamentally undo the power of blackface or redface, or other acts of racial impersonation, is not then a confiscation of their trappings, or an apology to end all apologies, but something much bigger, more difficult, and yet more urgent to achieve: the resetting of global white supremacy's stage.

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