

**Fake Identities?
Impostors, ConMen, Wannabes
in North American Culture**

A Symposium
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Impostors, ConMen, and Ethnic Impersonators pretend to be someone they are not. They thrive on a fabricated identity that other people take at face value and break pacts of authenticity and sincerity that are culturally defined. Impostures, confidence games and the like therefore reflect cultural strategies of identity work, self-fashioning, and recognition. In addition, they render the parameters of a Western, modern idea of identity.

Our inquiry is situated between the force fields of American cultural studies, narratology, and biographical/figural interest. We would like to focus on North American specimens and the cultural implications related to fakery, 'frautobiography' (Egan), and imposture, which become obvious both in the making of these new identities *per se* and in cultural products and rewritings of these fake lives: Confidence man Frank Abagnale transgressed boundaries of class and profession by evoking trustworthiness; his life was fictionalized in the Hollywood bio pic *Catch me if You Can* (2002). Fake performances of Otherness also include Whites 'going native' like Grey Owl or Iron Eyes Cody, racial passing like journalist John Howard Griffin's, who darkened his skin and travelled as black man, or the fabricated gender identity of Dorothy/Billy Tipton's, who posed as a male jazz musician and was fictionalized in Jackie Kay's novel *Trumpet* (1998). Hence, examples of imposture may encompass 'real life' cases, their representation in fiction (novels, films, or other), as well as invented impostors and imagined fakery, all addressing the particulars of the Western 'authenticity pact' across genres and ages.

Contributions may address, but of course are not limited to, the following questions:

- How do fakes work?
- Which culturally specific pacts are broken in imposture?
- How is cultural value attributed to authenticity and sincerity in North America?
- How do the 'real' self and the fabricated, 'impostor self' interact?
- Why do people believe their self-fashioning to be authentic and what makes a person authentic in the eyes of others?
- Which rhetoric strategies are employed in the production and reception of imposture?

Please send your abstract and proposals by Feb 1st, 2012, to both

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