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Black for a Day: White Fantasies of Race and Empathy by
Alisha Gaines (review)

Koritha Mitchell

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Alisha Gaines. *Black for a Day: White Fantasies of Race and Empathy*. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 2017. 213pp. \$27.95.

Reviewed by Koritha Mitchell, Ohio State University

With Rachel Dolezal's making news that no one could avoid in 2015, the analysis offered in *Black for a Day* is a gift. Alisha Gaines traces the history of "racial impersonation" while demonstrating that Dolezal is part of a tradition. Gaines reveals why the tradition endures, leaving readers to pass judgment on whether it is admirable.

Gaines traces a "genealogy of temporary black individuals operating under the alibi of racial empathy." Like scholarly predecessors, she finds that "empathy is always perched precariously between gift and invasion" (8). Because American culture overemphasizes the interpersonal while ignoring the structural, racial impersonators prove willing to "walk in someone else's *skin* rather than in their shoes" (10).

Gaines's four chapters render in-depth analyses of racial impersonations that yielded published narratives aligning with the belief that Americans value "cross-racial understanding." The journey begins with Ray Sprigle, a journalist who won a Pulitzer Prize in 1938 for undercover investigative work and embarked on racial impersonation to win another. Gaines is therefore unequivocal: "the white impersonators in this genealogy are not passing; instead, they 'become black' only to exploit their temporary impersonations" (19). Sprigle's work is characterized by his purported desire to uncover racial violence but also by his refusal to risk experiencing any. His text therefore relies on what Gaines calls "Dixie Terror," which is mythical. After all, Dixie "cannot be found on a map" (22). Dixie Terror "exploits racism for its titillating marketability" (23). While emphasizing racism, Sprigle also admits that "in 4,000 miles of travel by Jim Crow train and bus and street car and by motor, I encountered not one unpleasant incident" (qtd. in Gaines 31). Gaines concludes: "Sprigle never learned what it meant to be a black man. Instead, he learned how to be a 'good nigger'" (31).

Chapter two analyzes perhaps the most famous racial impersonator, John Howard Griffin, author of *Black Like Me* (1961), which remains in print and has sold "over a million copies in fourteen languages" (66). Gaines examines the series of stories for *Sepia* magazine that describes Griffin's experiences as a Black man, the book-length follow-up, the film, and diary entries that expose what was never revealed in published writings. She thus offers a lengthened genealogy of the work, one that brims with unexpected details and insights.

For example, because the writers of the film version of *Black Like Me* had "access to Griffin's journals," the movie exposes what Griffin never admitted publicly—that he was sexually excited by the idea of his wife with his Black alter ego (75). Meanwhile, Griffin experiences unwanted sexual advances from Southern white men who take him to be Black, and Gaines's theoretical sophistication allows readers to understand the intrusions to a degree that Griffin himself may not have. Also, although Griffin's apparent capacity to be an ally to African Americans is limited, Gaines notes that "[u]nlike Sprigle, Griffin put himself in harm's way, relating the numerous consequences of his new black masculinity under the regimes of Jim Crow, including being hanged in effigy in his hometown of Mansfield, Texas, after he returned to whiteness" (81).

Gaines's understanding of how gender and sexuality intersect in lived experiences often reveals the limitations of racial impersonators' empathy for African Americans. In chapter three, readers learn that Griffin mentored the author of the

next text to be examined, Grace Halsell's *Soul Sister* (1969). Halsell read Griffin's *Black Like Me* and pursued his guidance, which he lent throughout her journey. Ultimately living for six months as a Black woman, she spent time both in Harlem, New York and in Mississippi. Griffin had been queered while being perceived as Black, which creates for readers the opportunity for a nuanced understanding of how race inflects gender and sexuality as he guides his protégé. However, Halsell's socialization into white womanhood created a lens for her experience that kept her obsessed with the danger that Black men supposedly posed as rapists. Yet, corroborating what Black women's texts have made clear since at least Harriet Jacobs's 1861 narrative *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, the attempted rape that Halsell narrates is at the hands of a middle-class white man (110-18). Halsell later published books based on her impersonations of a Navajo woman and an undocumented Mexican migrant, so she more extensively contributed to this tradition than did her mentor Griffin. "However," Gaines explains, "[Halsell's] frankness about the sexual violence experienced by black women at the hands of white men ensured that she could not meet the tastes of a white liberal readership. Consequently, Halsell disappeared from the annals of empathetic racial impersonation, even though she made a career out of walking in the shoes of many 'others'" (119-20).

Chapter four begins by summarizing the decades between the release of Halsell's *Soul Sister* in 1969 and the early 2000s, with Gaines's finding that "it is empathy, and not racial impersonation, that fell immediately from view" (121). In addition to movies that emerged in the 1970s and '80s, Gaines reminds readers of Joshua Solomon, who continued the legacies of Sprigle, Griffin, and Halsell in the 1990s. In 1994, while a student at the University of Maryland, Solomon decided to embark upon a semester-long experiment in blackness because he sympathized with the Black friends with whom he had grown up, but "secretly, inside, I'd always felt that many black people used racism as a crutch, an excuse" (qtd. in 124). Solomon lasted only a few days in darker skin, but the "experience" garnered him a *Washington Post* column and an appearance of *The Oprah Winfrey Show* (125).

The bulk of chapter four is devoted to *Black. White.*, the 2006 reality television show that aired on the cable channel FX. A white family and a Black family each agree to undergo physical transformations to switch races. In addition to makeup, they used prosthetic features and racialized hair. The physical transformations were designed to allow each family member to pass racially (133). Here as elsewhere, Gaines fascinates with details of the unexpected. One particularly striking point of analysis emerges because the son in the Black-born family submits to the physical transformation but because he is convinced that race does not matter, deems the lessons on how to perform another racial identity to be worthless. Partly as a result, he ends up outing himself as Black and his white friends belittle him with racial jokes, but he insists there is nothing upsetting about their behavior. His Black-born parents then go into crisis mode, convinced that their son's understanding of racism is far more important than the show's agenda. They become determined to enlighten him, ultimately demonstrating how "understanding racism falls on the shoulders of people of color" (146). After all, the son's "angst and rebellion does not get coded as the typical obliviousness of teenaged American boyhood, nor is he given the ignorance excuse afforded to the unfunny white boys" (146).

Black. White. highlights the American refusal to recognize individual prejudice, to say nothing of systemic racism, unless the actions are egregious and undeniable. Microaggressions are stridently ignored especially by the white-born male head of household who refuses to acknowledge the frustration articulated by his Black-born counterpart or by his wife and daughter who report painful experiences while embodying blackness. Ultimately, the chapter demonstrates—with the help of Sharon Holland's *The Erotic Life of Racism*—that "temporarily walking in another's skin does not guarantee racial knowing; in fact, it impedes it" (157).

Gaines ends with an Epilogue on Rachel Dolezal, “The Last Soul Sister.” Even if readers remember when Dolezal came on the scene because of the unavoidable news coverage, they are sure to learn more from Gaines’s careful research. Gaines demonstrates that like her forerunners in this genealogy of racial impersonation, Dolezal is a “failed white ally, using overdetermined black experiences to overshadow structural inequality” (169). But what Gaines takes from Dolezal’s insistence upon clinging to blackness—even in the face of Black women’s articulations of how her doing so is damaging—is a reminder of how Black people value blackness, even as they understand race to be a construction. Gaines insists, “Blackness, even in its vulnerability, pain, and suffering, is an identity worth performing and pursuing” (171).

For all the pitfalls Gaines traces, she maintains: “We must continue to crave an epistemology of empathy” that improves upon those currently in play by equipping ourselves “to turn empathy into systemic and necessary change” (171). By tracing precisely how decades of racial impersonation have failed, *Black for a Day* challenges readers to think harder about what empathy really looks like and should achieve. If one simply considers gender (cis and trans), sexuality, and mental and physical ability, it becomes clear that achieving empathy is a challenge worth issuing and accepting.

Nina Sun Eidsheim. *The Race of Sound: Listening, Timbre, and Vocality in African American Music*. Durham: Duke UP, 2018. 288 pp. \$25.95.

Reviewed by Brittney L. Proctor, University of California, Irvine

The recent aesthetic turn in research on Black music has proffered new ways of theorizing sound *and* its source. Nina Sun Eidsheim’s *The Race of Sound: Listening, Timbre, and Vocality in African American Music* turns to vocality to articulate the fault lines between Black sound and Black vocalizers.

The Race of Sound unfurls the ways voice and the aesthetics of voice are socially produced. In illuminating the ways listeners quantify race via sound and produce racial subjectivities via vocal timbre (meaning the color or tone of a voice; everything about the sound of voice, with the exception of pitch and duration), she disavows the idea that voice and vocal performance are natural phenomena. She also turns to performance and the cultural-historical formation of the timbral politics of difference to disentangle the relationship between race, gender, vocal technique, and timbre. For Eidsheim, comprehending voice remains central to understanding human experience. As such, she is interested in dispelling the assumed relationship between vocal timbre and vocalization (25).

The work builds upon Eidsheim’s *Sensing Sound: Singing and Listening as Vibrational Practice* (Duke UP, 2015), which theorizes sound as “materially contingent.” In *Sensing Sound*, Eidsheim argues that the naturalization of the way we measure sound, and the sonic parameters therein, shapes how we listen to voice and experience vocal performance//listening to voice. In this way, *Sensing Sound* and *The Race of Sound* are “companion volumes” that both address the contingency of sound (5). Where *The Race of Sound* differs is that it proffers a lesson in *listening* to voice.

In a quest to know more about the “thick vocal event” (as theorized in *Sensing Sound*) and, in particular, vocal timbre, Eidsheim poses that the acousmatic question “*Who Is This?*” offers insight into the instability of voice. Three postulates emerge from the acousmatic question and are taken up in the chapters of the book: