

Sonic Brownface: Representations of Mexicanness in an Era of Discontent

santaperversa

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Abstract

Image by Flickr User Thomas Hawk In the current anti-immigrant climate, the visual, sonic, and textual modes of representation are becoming battlegrounds we must consider. Arizona, Georgia, and Alabama's takes on immigration policy and eliminations of ethnic study course offerings from college and high school curricula, are signs of a climate fraught with discontent. However, these fights are not limited solely to the political sphere;

Keywords

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Image by Flickr User Thomas Hawk

In the current anti-immigrant climate, the visual, sonic, and textual modes of representation are becoming battlegrounds we must consider. Arizona, Georgia, and Alabama's [takes on immigration policy](#) and [eliminations of ethnic study course offerings](#) from college and high school curricula, are signs of a climate fraught with discontent. However, these fights are not limited solely to the political sphere; in fact, the arena of cultural production—music, literature, theater, and film—facilitates a generalized outlook on Latinidad in the United States by representing Dreamers (the generations of children who were raised in the U.S. from a young age but are not citizens), and/or the thousands of undocumented immigrants who sustain an infrastructure of cheap labor. Within these often stereotypical representations, it is frequently sound that produces the strongest sense of social, cultural, and political difference for Latino subjects.

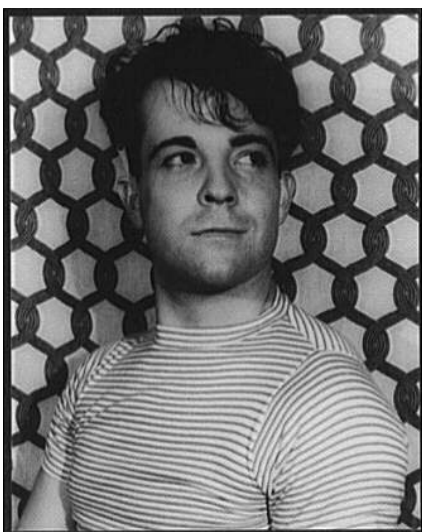
In this post, I analyze the 2006 film [Nacho Libre](#), a comedy starring Jack Black as a friar who becomes a Lucha Libre fighter, as symptomatic of what I term “sonic brownface,” an aural performativity of Mexicanness. My interest on *Nacho Libre* is to elucidate how sonic brownface manifests on the big screen, and what is at stake through these seemingly innocent (re)presentations of Mexicanness. I characterize “sonic brownface” as a “speedification” of a

Mexican accent, named after Speedy Gonzalez' infamous call "¡Ándale! ¡Ándale! ¡Arriba! ¡Arriba! ¡Epa! ¡Epa! ¡Epa!" Although comedian Jack Black intends to present a respectful portrayal of a Mexican, his speech enables my analysis of "sonic brownface" within popular culture, a sound that reproduces ideologies about an invisible majority that is also perceived as non-American: Latinos, undocumented immigrants, and dreamers.



The May 1, 2006 protest in Los Angeles, Image by Flickr user The Korean Resource Center

Voicing the Other...



*Popular silent-era leading man
Ramon Novarro (née José
Ramón Gil Samaniego) as
photographed by Carl Van
Vechten in 1935*

The last scene of the Academy Award winning film [The Artist](#) (2011), presents why the silent film Artist was against the industry's move toward the "talkie." His voice collided with the visual representation of the suave debonair cosmopolitan man—and audience expectations of what such privilege sounds like. Though French actor Jean Dujardin plays the lead character in the film *The Artist*, it must be noted that several Mexican and Latin American actors did quite well in those early years of Hollywood cinema. Their exotic looks made them desirable and allowed audiences to fantasize about the man or woman on the screen because they could not hear them speak. Moreover, their physicality allowed some actors to "pass" as white. When talkies became the norm, Latino actors began performing now familiar stereotypical characters because in the U.S., their voices were indelibly associated with their "foreignness."

In the realm of popular culture, both Disney and Warner Brothers created their own "Mexican" characters. In 1944, Disney introduced a Mexican and a Brazilian in the animated film [Three Caballeros](#). Joaquin Garay was a Mexican voice actor featured in the voice of Panchito Pistoles in the *Three Caballeros*.



<https://youtu.be/jqJPhyTeRU>

His accent and his singing sounded like someone who is Mexican speaking English, as oppose to an exaggerated Mexican accent heard later in the cartoon character of Speedy Gonzalez. Panchito Pistolas showcases a pride in being Mexican as heard in the singing of a ranchera and wearing his gun like the Mexican Revolutionaries of the 1910s. In the 1950s, Warner Brothers introduced

Speedy Gonzales to their pantheon of animated characters, coinciding with the next wave of anti-Mexican sentiment during the campaign of [Operation Wetback](#).

<https://youtu.be/RfAZKfsdzQ4>

In his essay “[Autopsy of a Rat](#),” William Nericcio posits that viewers come to recognize a series of stereotypes about Mexicans through the animated character of Speedy Gonzales. Nericcio incorporates historical references that influenced the design and creation of Gonzalez. He stipulates that this animation creates visual cues which American audiences connect as qualities of Mexicanness, “how this popular animated star comes to function in a way that reinforces politically charged, visions/versions of the ‘Mexican’ on ‘American’ soil” (212). Nericcio emphasizes the “visuo-ethnic clues” to deconstruct the Speedy Gonzales cartoon, and his definition of the stereotype helps corroborates my interest in how “sonic brownface” manifests as a “Speedification” of a Mexican accent. “Strapped for existential input as to the dynamic of Mexican subjects, we turn to stereotypes to provide us with visuo-ethnic ‘clues’ that fill in for empirical data and satisfy the lazy desire of our collective curiosity (219). Whereas Nericcio emphasizes the visual, however, I argue that sound has also held a strong purchase on the American racial imaginary in the case of Latinos. When audiences see and hear Jack Black as Nacho Libre, for example, they already recognize the accent.

Nacho Libre, sonic brownface personified

I propose the concept of “sonic brownface,” which pairs auditory with visual signs of Mexicanness as mediated in popular culture, to characterize the Mexican as a perpetual foreigner within the national imaginary. My interest in a film like *Nacho Libre* is to elucidate how audiences already recognize “Speedification,” a voicing of Mexicanness that manifests as a performance of “sonic brownface.” This conceptualization of “sonic brownface” is informed by [Jennifer Stoeve-Ackerman](#)’s work on the “sonic color-line.” In “[Splicing the Sonic Color-Line: Tony Schwartz Remixes Postwar Nueva York](#),” she posits that “sound is not merely a scientific phenomenon—vibrations passing through matter at particular frequencies—it is also a set of social relations ... the “sonic color-line” begins to theorize the mutually constitutive relationship between sound, listening, and race.” She elaborates how “aural signifiers of race are thoroughly enmeshed with the visuality of race [because] they never really lose their ultimate referent to different types of bodies” (65). In the case of “sonic brownface,” Jack Black does not need to be a Mexican actor, he just needs to sound “Mexican” to conjure a physical referent.



Still from *The Jazz Singer*

In utilizing the term “brownface,” I also reference minstrel entertainment in which blackness fetishized and simultaneously disavowed African American entertainers consequently framing racial codes onto a spectrum of racialized bodies. In his analysis of the first talkie *The Jazz Singer* (1927) “[Blackface, White Noise](#),” Michael Rogin proposes that the “protagonist adopts a black mask and ventriloquiz[es] the black, sings through his mouth” (419). Through this masking, the Jazz Singer becomes Americanized through “appropriat[ing] an imaginary blackness” (421). Even as our contemporary sensibility would call out any form of contemporary blackface performance, we have yet to identify a similar masking when it occurs with Mexican or Latino characters. I contend that the models seen in blackface entertainment have already placed familiar scenarios of seeing White or Jewish actors performing an ethnic Other. When American audiences see Jack Black as “Nacho Libre,” they do not need to see him brown his skin; it is enough to hear a “speedification” of Spanish to have us entertain his believability. When “sonic brownface” occurs, it does not Americanize the performer, rather it perpetuates the Mexican and by extension Chicanos and Latinos as always already foreigners.

In order to recognize how “sonic brownface” is performed in the comedy *Nacho Libre*, it is also necessary to understand how its sound echoes a political climate that conflates “Mexican” with “Immigrant,” thereby representing Mexicans as undocumented people who have no right to be on this side of the U.S./Mexico border, and lumps all Latinos together as “Mexican.” The film was released a month after the [nation’s largest immigrant rallies](#) on May 1, 2006, occurring throughout many cities. The timing of the film also coincided with the [first series of policy measures on immigration reform proposed by Congress](#). Whereas before the May Day marches, some members of congress discussed immigrants as criminals, after the big turnout Congress changed their tune, beginning to consider amnesty or easier paths to citizenship for undocumented immigrants, including generation Dreamers, already raised and finishing their schooling in the States. Cue Jack Black.



Image by Flickr User Thommy Browne

Speedification del Celluloid: “sonic brownface” in Nacho Libre

Nacho Libre, directed by Jared Hess (of *Napoleon Dynamite* fame) presents a comedic fictionalization of the story of [Fray Tormenta](#), a career Lucha Libre fighter who was actually Reverend Sergio Gutiérrez Benítez. The film highlights Black’s strengths as a singer and presents him in a character that is the classic underdog trying to achieve his wrestling dream. As Nacho, the cook for the orphanage, he also wishes to provide the children a better meal, at least once in a while. I will highlight a few scenes in which Black’s sonic brownface performance stands in contrast to the other Mexican cinema actors who speak English. I will conclude with a proposition as to why sonic brownface is already so familiar to us.

From the opening sequence, we see the quaint orphanage located in a small Mexican pueblo. “Sonic brownface” is introduced in the film from Black’s first words “Be grateful Juan Pablo today is especially delicious.” In the next sequence, Hess films the Father saying mass in Spanish with no translation, or subtitles. I point this out because it sets up a type of authenticity with the Mexican orphanage, and that the film brings together both American actors speaking “Es-Pan-ish” and Mexican actors speaking in English. Ana de la Reguera, “Sister Encarnación,”—a nun who arrives to teach the children—also does not perform sonic brownface. She sounds like a Mexican actress speaking English, very much like other Mexican actors preceding her in Hollywood, adding a third later of sonic representation that actually works to heighten sonic brownface’s effects.



https://youtu.be/hHWcoaM_59E

However, the sequence that most prominently presents the visual and auditory cues of sonic brownface appear in a twenty-minute segment when Nacho recruits his partner, Esquelito, and they transform into luchadores. In the midst of Nacho's transformation, he must also contend with his carnal feelings for Sister Encarnación and to instruct the boys that wrestling is not good. Black goes from Italian in "taste of glory" (19:114-16); to Cuban "take it easy" (24:03); to urban Mexican American "my life is good, *really* good. It's *fantastic*" (35:50). The sequence ends as Nacho cannot defend Sister Encarnación and blames Esqueleto for the mishap. Here sonic blackface culminates this performativity of Other with "get that corn outta my face. I looked like a fool last night. What took you so long?!" (39:54-40:29).



<https://youtu.be/1kLBjdxVKbl>

One could read this performativity of Otherness in the remix of accents as Black's self-awareness that he is voicing something not of his experience. However, that he is Jewish and a comedian implies a privileged position already granted to him through blackface performances: the

permission to co-opt ethnic and racial identities. When he inflects a Cubanese accent, audiences can recall Al Pacino in *Scarface*, an earlier articulation of “sonic brownface.” Or the urban Chicano accent as seen in *Born in East L.A.* when Cheech Marin teaches the Mexicans waiting to cross the border how to blend in with Chicanos. By the time Black performs sonic blackface, as audiences we have been cued to these auditory references, thus we do not need him to alter his physicality to match the accent. It is enough to hear it to understand the referent. The sequence reaffirms Nacho as the luchador, since we also see his persona of the fighter come to life.

Rogin’s analysis can help us understand these slippages, as well as the role of “sonic brownface” in representations of Latinos by white actors. Rogin posits how Jolson’s performance in the first talkie simultaneously killed Vaudeville entertainment and reintroduced blackface into popular media (429). It is Rogin’s conclusion that it is with the appearance of “Jack Robin” in blackface, that the Jewish individual “Jakie Robinowitz” becomes white and thereby successful, mediating this success through visual codes of blackness. Similarly, in *Nacho Libre*, sonic brownface operates as both the visual and sonic cues of Mexicanness that enable Jack Black to become the luchador who doesn’t need to live behind a mask. As the film ends, Nacho is content, becoming a hero to the orphans who no longer bemoans his lot in life. This ending is contrary to the plight of immigrants from Latin America who must leave their home in search of better economic opportunities.

By identifying sonic brownface, we can see how American audiences fetishize the sounds of the Mexican/Latin Other yet simultaneously disavow their presence by placing non-Latino actors in these roles. Through the performativity of sonic brownface, popular media and film reify codes of Mexicanness as always foreign, silencing their accents because *español* is still an unwelcomed sound. Sonic brownface can also be a useful tool by which to investigate similar auditory articulations of Latino sounds. I’m thinking here of Rita Moreno in *West Side Story* (1961)—see Priscilla Peña Ovalle’s *Sounding Out!* post “Aurally Other: Rita Moreno and the Articulation of ‘Latina-ness’” (January 2011)—George Lopez in *Beverly Hills Chihuahua* (2008), Wilmer Valderrama “Fez” in the television series *That 70s Show*, and the panoply of Latino actors in *Machete* (2010) by Richard Rodriguez. Given that media tends to recycle tropes and stereotypes, as audience members we have developed a keen awareness of these sonic markings of Otherness.

Most importantly, my intent in identifying sonic brownface concerns its re-appearance during another surge of anti-immigrant rhetoric. The rallies that occurred on May Day 2006 became synonymous with immigrant rights. The release of *Nacho Libre* shortly after these rallies unknowingly silenced immigrant Spanish speaking voices in the popular imaginary until the film *A Better Life* (2011) starring Demián Bichir, connected undocumented immigrants with an empathetic experience. The strongest counteractions, however, have not been channeled through Hollywood. With the 2012 election, another surge of immigrant rallies happened at the Democratic National Convention with UndocuBus riders arriving in time to call attention to immigrant rights (start at 8:10-11:24).



<https://youtu.be/iAvNHSmk9vl>

As seen in this video clip, undocumented immigrants, Dreamers, Latina/s, and Chicana/os committed acts of civil disobedience because their voices will not be silenced.

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