

Gentlemen Still Prefer Blondes: The Persistent Presence of Marilyn Monroe Impersonators

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A quick Google search for Marilyn Monroe impersonators in America returns over 30,000 results.¹ One might expect these impersonators to perform only at bachelor parties or men's clubs, but, surprisingly, the larger market for Marilyn Monroe impersonators includes such family events as bar mitzvahs and birthday parties, business functions (such as trade shows and corporate conventions), as well as stage shows. This iconic *sex* symbol is more than welcome in front of audiences consisting of men, women, and children. Why are so many people still fascinated with Marilyn Monroe, 45 years after her death? And what is Monroe doing at family functions and corporate events, anyway? For many audiences, Monroe truly serves as an 'object of engagement:' through impersonations, she has become an image with which modern audiences can engage. My correspondence with impersonators Jami Edwards, Jodi Fleisher, and Karen Motherway sheds interesting light on the experiences of impersonators and audiences of impersonations.² This paper sets out to explore the persistent iterations of Marilyn Monroe through impersonators, proposing that these impersonators serve to make the *body* of non-threatening sexuality *present* to contemporary audiences.

¹ A similar search for Monroe impersonators in Europe returns over 15,000 hits, and one for Monroe impersonators in Asia returns over 10,000 hits. Exploring Monroe impersonation as an international phenomenon is outside of the scope of this essay, but remains an interesting area for future study.

² All three impersonators are currently working, and all three have demonstrations of their performances available online. While this is undoubtedly a small group, many of the things they had to say are similar enough to indicate that this group is a representative sample. Edwards has spent years perfecting her craft and only impersonates Monroe. Fleisher is a professional actress with a long list of television, film, and theatre credits who has been officially approved by the Marilyn Monroe estate as a Monroe impersonator. Motherway performs as Monroe across the nation and was voted 'Marilyn Monroe's Perfect Body Double' in a Ripley's Believe-it-or-Not contest.

Diana Taylor has identified two categories for cultural memory: the archive (in the form of static documents) and the repertoire (memories enacted and made present through a body). Marilyn Monroe, as a continually reiterated iconic image, has become part of both the archive and the repertoire. Indeed, upon hearing Marilyn Monroe's name, one of a few images of her probably entered your mind: Marilyn in the white halter dress, air blowing up her skirt, as made famous by publicity for *The Seven Year Itch*, Marilyn in the skin-tight pink satin gown of *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, Marilyn singing to JFK, or nude Marilyn posed for a calendar in an image titled *Golden Dreams*. These images have become part of what Diana Taylor calls "'archival" memory:' 'documents, maps, literary texts, letters, archaeological remains, bones, videos, films, CDs, all those items supposedly resistant to change' (19). Archival images of Monroe can be returned to again and again, always certain of what they will find. Because these images are archival, those who use them to create embodied performances of Marilyn Monroe have the same file of images on which to base their representations, allowing for continual reiterations of the same images in live, contemporary bodies. Impersonator Jami Edwards confirms, '[t]he famous white halter dress and the pink "diamonds" dress are the most recognized' Marilyn Monroe dresses (email interview). By taking Marilyn Monroe out of the archive of static images and unchanging movie clips, impersonators place her in the repertoire of embodied performances. More than watching a film of this vulnerable all-American sex symbol, Marilyn Monroe impersonators make that vulnerability, sexiness, scandal, and history *present* to today's audiences.

Marilyn Monroe has become associated with just a few iconic images, safely tucked away in the archive. As an image, she 'orchestrates a gaze, a limit, and its pleasurable

transgression' (Doane 133). The transgression in Monroe's image lies in the fact that audiences feel entitled to look upon her vulnerability: her iconic image communicates what Laura Mulvey terms 'to-be-looked-at-ness' (116). This archive of images is necessary for cultural recognition of Monroe and her impersonators; Diana Taylor tells us that 'performance becomes visible, meaningful, within the context of a phantasmagoric repertoire of repeats. [...] We see only what we have been conditioned to see: that which we have seen before' (144). In order to recognize what it is we are looking at, we must have seen it before. Audiences viewing Monroe impersonations recognize within the performance an iteration of feminine vulnerability, because they have seen it reiterated in so many places, both within and beyond the cinema, since Monroe's original performances.

Of what does this available, vulnerable, desirable, non-threatening sexuality consist? Monroe, to prevent any sexual power she might have from overcoming spectators, comes, of course, with a breathy innocent voice. This innocence also implies that femininity is associated with vulnerability; Marge Piercy tells us that 'part of what men read into her and what indeed she presented was a child in a woman's body—the breathy voice that so famously embodies that vulnerability, the inability to protect herself' (104). Richard Dyer concurs: 'Besides bloneness, Monroe also had, or seemed to have, several personality traits that together sum up female desirability [...]. She looks like she's no trouble, she is vulnerable, and she appears to offer herself to the viewer, to be available' (45). Thus, while Marilyn Monroe may be a woman of many contradictions (as is evidenced by the multitude of works that have been written on her),³ she is also an easily

³ For some interesting discussions of Marilyn Monroe that don't fit the scope of this essay, see, for example, Gloria Steinem's *Marilyn* (London: Routledge, 1997) for a feminist reading of Monroe or Sarah Churchwell's *The Many Lives of Marilyn Monroe* (New York: Picador, 2004) for a discussion of the contested aspects of Monroe's life.

recognizable representative of an available, vulnerable, desirable, non-threatening female sexuality.

The case of Monroe illustrates that, for many audiences, femininity involves sanitized sexual power: the virgin and the whore, the innocent and vulnerable but available. Dyer argues that ‘the Monroe image clearly offered itself to be read in terms of (benign) naturalness’ (34). In other words, Monroe was available, because cultural values suggested that women were ‘naturally’ available and vulnerable. As a sex symbol, then, Marilyn Monroe must represent sex and sex alone. She is a sex symbol without control over the deployment of her sexuality – a sexuality that is available to anyone with access to media. Dyer asserts that Marilyn Monroe’s desirability is also tied to her whiteness. He says that ‘the typical playmate is white, and most often blonde; and of course, so is Monroe’ (44). Blonde and white are essential to Marilyn Monroe, and therefore to those who impersonate her, but blonde and white signify innocence, and therefore the male power inherent in deflowering the virgin. Postcolonial theorist Gayatri Spivak suggests that the category of ‘woman’ is already figured as so much ‘unlike (nonidentical with)’ the condition of ‘man’ that a racially ‘other’ woman would be too much for men to consider in their fantasies of safe, available women (340). Blonde and white are only appearances, but these appearances are what make Monroe an image of ‘safe’ sex; ‘Monroe’s vulnerability is [...] confirmed by aspects of her off-screen image, which could, indeed, be read as a never-ending series of testimonials to how easily, and frequently, she is hurt’ (Dyer 48). Monroe had to emphasize her vulnerability to demonstrate that any man could handle her. Dyer tells us, ‘Monroe takes the sting out of anything that her sexuality seems likely to stir up’ (46). Likewise, Kate Millett asserts that Marilyn was ‘female inferiority incorporated in female flesh:’ as a

‘bimbo,’ she was ‘so stupid, so contemptible, one is scarcely aware of the power of her carnality. It is defused, turned to plastic’ (79). Monroe’s performances of sexuality are wholesome because she doesn’t seem capable of realizing her own sexual power—and therefore poses no threat. Therein lies the factor that makes Monroe truly an *object* of engagement—her performances have always implied an aspect of commodification.

While Marilyn Monroe has come to signify the ever-available, non-threatening, ultimate femininity, it is important to remember that Monroe herself was a performance: from her hair to her voice to her walk. Monroe impersonators, then, impersonate the *performance* of Monroe rather than Monroe as a person. According to the Dallas Morning News, impersonator Jami Edwards’s ‘blond[e] ‘do [also] requires weekly peroxide applications’ (Menzer).⁴ Louise Kaplan reminds us, with a Baudrillardian⁵ twist, that Marilyn Monroe herself was always already a copy of something that didn’t really exist – she was a copy of a copy of femininity, and her impersonators are further iterations of this copying. Kaplan posits, ‘Marilyn Monroe is the cultural commodity. But where is Norma Jeane? The virtual annihilation of the abandoned and abused child who was Norma Jeane is “a prerequisite” for the manufacturing of the sex goddess who is Marilyn Monroe’ (462). Anything aberrant about Monroe’s sexuality has to be erased – as a Hollywood film star of the 1950s, aberrance didn’t fit the script (or pass the censors). As a cultural icon of the 21st century, aberrance still doesn’t fit the script of normative femininity.

How has the sex symbol aspect of Marilyn Monroe become so ingrained in the American consciousness that audiences automatically interpret her and her impersonators

⁴ Article and images available at <http://www.dallasnews.com/sharedcontent/dws/news/localnews/statefair/stories/100806dnmetmarilyn.2d46e8e.html>.

⁵ See ‘The Precession of Simulacra’ for a discussion of the copy with no original. Baudrillard theorizes that ‘signs’ of the real have now been substituted ‘for the real itself’ (254).

as purely sexual? Through a long-line of iterations of very specific images of Monroe, she has come to signify sex in all subsequent iterations, even if the performance is more about ‘singing [Monroe’s] songs and borrowing from her comedic style’ (Motherway, email interview). The sexual energy associated with the image of Marilyn Monroe becomes evident in the way her impersonators are sometimes treated by their audiences. Impersonator Jodi Fleisher has portrayed both Marilyn Monroe and Princess Fiona, an ogre from the film *Shrek*, at theme parks. She argues that ‘Marilyn gets harassed a lot in the theme park atmosphere where as Fiona is more in charge and earthy so I could be myself, and more tough. Marilyn is very vulnerable’ (email interview). Marilyn Monroe, as the normative representation of femininity, is vulnerable, while Princess Fiona, the subversive representation of femininity, can take control of the situation. Fleisher explains that, as Marilyn, she could often feel ‘lustful energy [...] crawl over [her] skin, [...] mak[ing] her feel dirty and disrespected’ (email interview). Such ‘lustful energy’ is elicited by Monroe’s image because, to many spectators, she seems to be always ‘asking for it.’ In her movies, Marilyn Monroe represents the beautiful, desirable woman who wants *you*. By representing Monroe’s available vulnerability to modern audiences, her impersonators make the object of an available Monroe present again. Even to today’s audiences, Marilyn Monroe represents the ultimate female because she is available to all males – even those who aren’t the ultimate male. Albert Mobilio reminds us: ‘If, in movies, she had dallied with men who “strut around like tigers,” as she describes them, [...] it would have spoiled the fantasy that she was attainable for all of us nervous Nellies off in our corners’ (59).

So, the image of sexuality Monroe represents is a scripted image in many senses of the word, a performance for the sake of repetition. Judith Butler has argued that

‘performativity is not a singular “act,” for it is always a reiteration of a norm or set of norms, and to the extent that it acquires an act-like status in the present, it conceals or dissimulates the conventions of which it is a repetition’ (*Bodies* 12). Impersonations of Monroe hide the fact that the Monroe of films and public appearances was an empty performance, staged for the public eye, with little semblance to an actual human life. While each individual impersonator creates her own performance of Monroe through songs, comedy, and audience interaction, their performances prove that ‘performance and performativity are braided together by virtue of iteration; the copy renders the performance authentic and allows the spectator to find in the performer “presence”’ (Phelan 10). By copying Monroe’s blonde hair, iconic dresses, and breathy voice, the impersonator’s performance seems like ‘the real thing.’ Of course, ‘the real thing’ was far from real herself – she was a dissimulation of the lives of real American women even in the 1950s. Only by virtue of reiteration of the original fabrication can these performers embody the ‘presence’ of Marilyn Monroe.

Monroe is continually present because her image is so easily scripted. It would seem as though Marilyn Monroe’s version of femininity either stems from her own inclinations to deny the aberrant, or from the studio’s desire to construct her as the ideal female. To return to Butler, ‘there is a tendency to think that sexuality is either constructed or determined; to think that if it is constructed, it is in some sense free, and if it is determined, it is in some sense fixed’ (*Gender* 94). Sexuality as represented by Marilyn Monroe complicates either notion of sexuality, whether as constructed or determined. If her sexuality was constructed, it can hardly be that Monroe was in full control of that construction herself – for her sexuality includes her abandonment and abuse, as well as her

failed marriages, but these aspects of her life are not communicated in her image. As Kaplan asserts about Monroe and her impersonators, ‘if these female, female impersonators are our sex goddesses, we must also wonder if they might not be the glaring white lies that distract us from any potentially traumatic knowledge of actual female sexuality’ (473). Rather, Monroe and her normative⁶ impersonators have to present the image of femininity expected of them to be considered actual Marilyns. Through what Butler terms ‘ritualized production,’ these performers repeat Monroe’s script of femininity and sexuality, stripped of trauma, ‘under and through constraint’ (*Gender* 95).⁷ This is the real cultural function of Marilyn Monroe impersonators: to distract from the realities of living a tough life—abuse, abortion, loneliness—and to present the sexual being only in bodily form, stripped of the complications that accompany sexuality. Marilyn Monroe represents the ideal femininity, and as such, this femininity is ultimately unattainable, even for Monroe herself. In order to fit the ideal, Monroe has been dehumanized, transformed into nothing more than a series of iterable images of femininity.

The images of Marilyn Monroe remain static, but interpretations of her have changed with changing cultural needs and values. As Taylor asserts, ‘archival memory works across distance, over time and space,’ so any investigator can go back and examine the archival images, but ‘what changes over time is [...] the meaning of the archive’ (19). Because she is such an appropriable sign, Monroe can easily step out of the archive of images into the repertoire of embodied performances. Her many impersonators bring the images of the archive to life, moving them out of the static past into the present. The

⁶ Drag performers are freer to reject the normative script, but then, they’re not performing at nearly as many corporate events or bar mitzvahs as normative Marilyns.

⁷ Certainly, drag performances of this femininity might be expected to rebel against this script, but there is a certain danger inherent in rebelling against expected scripts of femininity even for those who are more likely to fit conventional gender binaries.

images stay the same, but what those images communicate to audiences changes as times change. Thus, what Marilyn Monroe impersonators embody in their performances now may not be the same aspect of Monroe that was embodied by impersonators twenty years ago, and it certainly isn't the same interpretation of those images that is embodied by drag impersonators. For Taylor, this is what makes the repertoire so meaningful: as 'embodied memory,' the repertoire 'allows for individual agency' and 'requires presence' (20). The images in the archive, then, are there for anyone to go back and examine if they so choose, but the images always remain the same. The performances in the repertoire, however, may be replicated and altered, may be 'in a constant state of againness,' but they also 'generate, record, and transmit knowledge' through their presence (21). The archive and the repertoire work together to create cultural knowledge, but embodied performances are bound to have a different effect than static images in the archive.

Monroe impersonators feel as though they have become the sex symbol brought to life, that they are objects re-presented, and their audiences respond to them in kind. Karen Motherway notices a kind of magic happening for herself and her audiences when she impersonates Monroe:

I could bring the president of a huge corporation to the stage and ask him his name and he won't even remember it! It's really just like you would see in a Monroe film when the men just melt and will do anything for her. This is not something I have ever had the ability to do to men in my personal life, but something Marilyn's character seems to bring out. (email interview)

Perhaps this spell arises from Monroe's own iconic personality, but that personality was certainly a construction. Norma Jeane Baker did not have the confidence of Monroe: Monroe was the movie star, Baker the human being. As Walter Benjamin posits, 'the cult of the movie star, fostered by the money of the film industry, preserves not the unique aura

of the person but the “spell of the personality,” the phony smell of a commodity’ (231). It’s easy to see that Marilyn Monroe’s image has become a commodity; sitting in my apartment right now, I can look at my Marilyn Monroe purse, see her face in pop art on my wall, and look at her image in magnet form on my refrigerator. But the spell of Monroe’s personality, of course, doesn’t come across in such static commodities as photos on bags or refrigerator magnets. For that, we need impersonators; iterations of the live Marilyn Monroe, stepping out of the archive and into the repertoire of embodied experience. Perhaps presence, then, provides the missing link to fill the gap in the explanation of the need for Marilyn Monroe impersonators. Impersonator Karen Motherway says:

Many people only know Marilyn as a photographic image. They have never seen her act or sing and know absolutely nothing about her personal life other than her alleged affair with JFK. [...] Once they have begun to believe they are in the same room with Marilyn Monroe the audience changes, they begin to respond to Marilyn and that is really when the magic happens. (email interview)

For most people, Monroe is nothing more than an image—but for those who witness an impersonation, Monroe becomes a live object with which to engage.

Diana Taylor explains this as embodiment’s ability to make ‘visible (for an instant, live, now) that which is always already there: the ghosts, the tropes, the scenarios that structure our individual and collective life’ (143). The shadow of Monroe’s photographic image is always present, as well as the myths about her death and alleged affair with JFK, in scripts of femininity and American consciousness. As S. Paige Baty contends, ‘her name may be invoked by guests on talk shows, newspaper reporters [...] as an instantly recognizable expression of a mood, an era, a sexuality’ (39). Impersonators bring Monroe’s image out of the archive into the repertoire of embodiment, but these embodiments most often serve to rebury the ghosts of her reality, in order to re-emphasize how wholesome and

pure American women have always been. Audiences seek Marilyn Monroe impersonators to achieve the feeling of standing next to fame, or mystery, or beauty, or sex when they stand next to an embodied performance of the archival image of Marilyn Monroe – not to stand next to an abused, lonely, addicted woman.

Marilyn Monroe impersonators, by embodying the archival representation of Monroe, become live, present Marilyns. The question remains: why does an audience seek a live, present Marilyn Monroe? By hiring a Marilyn Monroe impersonator for their events, people are bringing the past back to life, so they can talk to it, dance with it, and tell it goodbye at the end of the evening. Dennis Grunes describes the era that Monroe embodies as ‘an anxious present that turned out to be a fantastic respite before an all-too-real future of presidential assassination, civil rights upheaval, and [...] war without the clarity of moral coordinates to locate its necessity in the blunt American consciousness’ (193). While much upheaval followed Monroe’s death, then, her heyday was an era of calm before the storm. Monroe impersonators can bring that calm back to life in a modern America also facing civil rights crises and uncertain, unnecessary wars. Impersonator Jami Edwards has titled her website, ‘Modern Marilyn,’ which suggests some of what Diana Taylor has said about embodied performances that step out of the archive: ‘They are [...] always in situ: intelligible in the framework of the immediate environments and issues surrounding them’ (3). Baty posits that Marilyn Monroe ‘allows for a dislocation and relocation of the present through the circulation of an image that collapses notions of subjects frozen in linear time’ (34).⁸ Cultural history and 1950s American identity come back to life in order to be recirculated in the present; they are no longer trapped in their historical time and place. Of

⁸ See Baty’s *American Monroe* for a discussion of Monroe as a representative character that is essential to the formation of the postmodern body politic, a topic which, unfortunately, exceeded the scope of this essay.

course, the 1950s weren't really so calm. Like Monroe, they have become sanitized: stripped of all controversy and molded into the glittering image of all that could be right with the world.

Monroe, stripped of trauma, is nothing more than a sex symbol – a desirable body to have around for men to flirt with, for women to be jealous of, and for all to prove that they can resist the ultimate temptation. The idea that impersonators represent Marilyn Monroe as no longer trapped in the historical past becomes particularly interesting when we consider the reactions of older gentlemen who may actually remember the ‘real’ Marilyn Monroe. Impersonator Jami Edwards says, ‘Marilyn would be eighty-one this year, and so people of that certain age group definitely know her best’ (email interview). She continues: ‘to see their faces light up when they talk about how much they loved her, or how much it means to dance with an older man because he always had a dream of dancing with Marilyn, is the best reward you can ask for’ (email interview). Certainly, for people of an older generation, Marilyn Monroe impersonators provide the opportunity to bring their fantasies to life. A CNN.com article on Strom Thurmond’s one-hundredth birthday party in 2002 remarks that Strom ‘relishes his reputation as a ladies man, flirting with women young enough to be his great-granddaughters,’ and that ‘he brightened when a buxom Marilyn Monroe impersonator came up to his wheelchair and sang “Happy Birthday[,]” [...] reach[ing] out to the woman’ (Loughlin).⁹ Likewise, in a video entitled, ‘Mr. Frisky’s 90th Birthday Party with Marilyn,’ impersonator Karen Motherway plays Marilyn Monroe for an older gentleman, whose face beams with the realization of a long-

⁹ Article and images available at <http://archives.cnn.com/2002/ALLPOLITICS/12/05/thurmond.birthday/index.html>.

held fantasy as he caresses her shoulder in the backseat of a 1950s model car, and at one point even gestures to onlookers to get a look at his date.¹⁰

Those who don't remember Marilyn can also get the idea of the past brought back to life, even for just a moment. The fact that Marilyn Monroe impersonators are often hired to perform at events that already feature a solid community, like a birthday party or a dentist's convention, only serves to reinforce 'the sense of community' that 'arises from being part of an audience, and the quality of the experience of community derives from the specific audience situation, not from the spectacle for which that audience has gathered' (Auslander 56). In other words, the sense of community derives from the group getting together, who the group is, and their purpose for gathering, not from what they've come to see. But it still remains interesting that so many of these groups have chosen to see Marilyn Monroe impersonators. Baty theorizes that Monroe 'allows an audience to draw from a common ground of memory in understanding the subject at hand,' but this time around, the audience has some control over Monroe's performance, because they choose to have her there, and then to send her home (40). For impersonators, the embodied image of Marilyn Monroe is capable of providing something for everyone. Impersonator Karen Motherway says that to little girls she represents 'a great big Barbie doll' (email interview). Jodi Fleisher is 'always sure to give the women attention too, compliment them, pose with them, let them feel sexy, not like [she is] stealing their men' (email interview). All of these acts represent the non-threatening, available-to-everyone Monroe, not the abused child or the failed wife.

While the Marilyn Monroe impersonators I spoke with might strive to overcome the sex symbol image of Monroe by emphasizing her talent as a singer and comedienne, most

¹⁰ Video available on youtube at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ogOmlHdCN48>.

audiences don't see Monroe as more than sex, because that isn't what they've sought in the impersonation. Impersonator Jodi Fleisher has been asked 'where the "fan" is to blow up [her] dress,' and at bar-mitzvahs, some 'grandparents have [...] tried to cop a feel' (email interview). And while the impersonators I've spoken with 'take great pride in breaking [the] stereotype' that Marilyn Monroe 'was a dumb no talent who slept her way to the top,' (Motherway, email interview), they do admit that 'some impersonators [...] force men's heads into [their] cleavage or [make] dirty jokes at public events' (Fleisher, email interview). However, this is all part of a performance, and the impersonators know that they are being paid to represent Monroe in a certain way.¹¹ The 'real' Monroe, and any threat that she might carry, is safely lost to the past; these Marilyns will say goodbye at the end of the evening, not threatening anyone's marriage, not corrupting anyone's children. Marilyn Monroe impersonators may be invited to family functions and corporate events as an opportunity for audiences to confront the past, to neutralize Monroe's excessive sexuality by containing her in an ultimately safe environment. Marilyn Monroe impersonators, as embodiments of the ideal, normative femininity scripted by the historical representations of Marilyn Monroe, represent a femininity that 'inhabits its mark at a critical distance, with [...] some mixture of anxiety and desire' (Butler, *Bodies* 104). This critical distance allows audiences to overcome their anxieties and embrace their desires. Audiences who witness Marilyn Monroe brought to life through an impersonation can feel as if they've touched the past, as well as sexuality in its rawest form, and yet their lives and families have emerged unscathed. In doing so, they can definitively reject the sex symbol for the family and the home they return to after their evening with Marilyn Monroe.

¹¹ Certainly, some performances of Monroe are highly sexualized. However, even these performances are under the control of a paying customer, and, unless they have hired a prostitute dressed like Monroe, the encounter is sure to end at an appointed time, and certain acts are forbidden.

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