Hemispheric Raciality: Yellowface and the Challenge of Transnational Critique

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A few days into the week-long Performing Asian/Americas working group at the 2014 Encuentro meeting organized by NYU’s Hemispheric Institute of Performance and Politics, on what seemed like another typical day of presentations and discussion, one of the members innocently asked if anyone in the group had attended last night’s town hall meeting. Only one other person in our workshop was present at the town hall, and the rest of the group was eager to learn more about what all this drama was about. The workshop member explained that it was an impromptu town hall meeting responding to the emerging discontent around *Juana La Larga*, the performance piece by respected Mexican theatre director and actress Jesusa Rodríguez and her partner, singer and actress Liliana Felipe. He described a scene in which different people expressed disappointment, anger, and hurt around a cluster of issues, with the two most salient being the treatment of the transgender subject and the “yellowface” performance of a Japanese doctor.

Because our working group dealt directly with critical questions of representing “Asian-ness,” we were immediately engrossed in conversation about the “Japanese doctor.” What was the role of this character? How was he portrayed? Is this a fictional character or is it based on a real historical figure? How exactly was the character portrayed? The workshop member who saw the play said—simply and without hesitation—that “it was yellowface performance.” In shock, the group asked for details, and the member continued to describe the characteristics: “Buck teeth, squinted eyes, and accented speech. Yellowface, plain and simple” (fig. 1). Most of us were silenced by disbelief and shock as we
Figure 1  Jesusa Rodríguez, "Juana La Larga." Hemispheric Institute Encuentro 2014, Montreal, Quebec, Canada.
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