Thinking with Imposters: call for contributions

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The figure of the imposter seems to stir a captivating combination of societal responses ranging from intrigue to suspicion and horror. From bots posing as humans, to scientific fraud and migration border control; the figure of the imposter (which may take on many guises) plays a prominent role in a variety of situations. The continuing presence of imposters in films, literature, and theatre further illustrates our fascination as a society with such stories and themes. Suspicions about imposture, moreover, impact lives, relations and interactions. What insights can these shadowy figures provide into the social relations and cultural forms in the communities and social settings in which they emerge? How might 'thinking with imposters' be a useful tool of analysis in the social sciences and humanities?

The proposed edited volume collects contributions that explore practices of 'impostering', that is, situations in which the imposter is staged as a reality or possibility in everyday interactions, policy, or technology, as well as in fiction, art and film. These need not be limited to actual invocations of the term but also include situations in which a wide variety of people and things pass unnoticed before being 'revealed'. While thinking with imposters evokes epistemic concerns about who is an imposter, it also draws our attention to the dynamics of suspicion; and the dramaturgy of imposter-revealing. Our interest for this volume is on the latter aspects rather than on establishing who the imposter(s) *really* is/are in a particular case. The figure of the imposter is especially interesting when it effects a destabilising disruption of the social situation which does not easily resolve, when it is taken for granted, or staged as an ambient threat which helps perpetuate certain regimes of surveillance and suspicion. In any case, we are interested in the unsettling potential of this cultural trope, powerful both in 'the West' and elsewhere: its capacity to instil allure, discomfort *and* to disrupt. What can impostering practices tell us about identities, norms, culture and social relations?

The edited volume envisions impostering as a *performance,* in which the imposter and its audience are both mutually implicated and play their respective parts. We propose that such performances enact, among other things, *belonging* – for example, a sense of what it means to be

human, true, worthy or part of a particular social group. In a similar vein, we might say that calling someone/something an imposter is a speech act, which assigns rights and responsibilities. Such an act *intervenes* in the situation in which it is uttered. But imposters are brought into being through more than speech. They emerge as something to be known and detected through socio-material conditions, including gates, tests, scans, data, procedures, norms and manners. Within such conditions, the imposter serves as a crystallization device, revealing the values and categories a certain collective holds dear. This edited volume interrogates the imposter's analytical potential: what is gained (or lost) by seeing various phenomena through the lens of the imposter; by comparing imposter stories across domains; by identifying with imposters or advocating for their rehabilitation. We aim to learn from empirical cases of fraud, suspicion and transgression how *thinking with* the imposter might shake up, problematise, enrich, or constrain social relations.

For the edited volume, this way of thinking with imposters provokes the following questions:

- What do imposters reveal about notions of *authenticity and fakeness*, *trust* and *suspicion*?

- What are the different roles and actors involved (angry mobs, concerned bystanders, publics, the suspicious or malicious) and what communities are performed in different forms of impostering?

- What is involved in the *craft* of gatecrashing, passing or posing? How does this relate to processes of learning to detect, catch and/or 'out' imposters?

- When do questions about who is and is not an imposter get *settled* or left open?

- How do dramas of revealing play out? What if one 'plays the part' perfectly? To what extent do revelations retro-actively transform past relations?

- What is the role of agency (or perceived intentions) in impostering? How is agency, blame and responsibility distributed between imposters, gatekeepers and audiences?

- What are the political and methodological consequences of deploying the imposter as analytic?

- What can we as researchers learn about impostering from the problems of gaining access to sites and interactions which may be hidden from us, or alternatively, so taken-for-granted that they are 'hiding in plain sight'?

This initiative builds on a highly successful conference in summer 2018 at Linköping University. We are currently seeking contributions for this edited volume and exploring the most suitable publishing options. We envisage a broad interdisciplinary volume including contributions from across the humanities and social sciences. All contributions addressing the above themes and questions are welcome, but we particularly encourage chapters exploring the following topics: Spies, actors, magic, fakery/forgery, lie detection, covert fieldwork/research as fiction, Artificial Intelligence, trials of authenticity of spirits/religious phenomena and confabulation.

Do please join us in exploring this generative topic!

Abstracts should be maximum of 500 words.

Please send inquiries and submissions to thinkingwithimposters@gmail.com

Timeline

Deadline abstracts: 7 December.

Notification: end of January.

Submission of first draft: June 2019.