

The Maya Rudolphification of Kamala Harris: A Performative Cruzo

Amani Starnes

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I proposed this paper in late 2024, in the midst of an unfolding presidential campaign barreling toward its definitive end. As many of us likely understand, using performance theory to unpack a political phenomenon playing out in real time can be a vexing trap. The breakneck speed at which the media cycle changes all but guarantees that whatever claims we make about the evolving personas of political figures can crumble instantly in the face of a political rebrand. Yet precisely this rapidity makes Kamala Harris an unusually compelling political figure. Her persona did not collapse under that speed. It was actually *constituted* through it. Her notoriously inarticulate persona benefited from the dynamic nature of media attention predicated on memes and asynchronous, online platforms like TikTok, X, Instagram, etc.

Today, I explore how the interplay between Kamala Harris's public performances of self and Maya Rudolph's Saturday Night live impersonations of her produces a performative site of *cruzo*. Here, *cruzo* is a crossroads where digital, disembodied meme culture intersects with embodied live performance. It is also where the intricacies of race, gender, and political identity can momentarily crystallize into a legible public persona. Harris's persona does not predate this interplay; rather, it emerges through it. Rudolph and Harris's reciprocal performances constitute a call-and-response dynamic that ultimately co-creates the "Kamala" figure. Sometimes lovingly referred to as "Momala," this figure's coherence becomes most possible through the crossing.

To develop this argument, I first trace the evolution of Rudolph's impersonation as a hybrid archive and experimental repertoire. I then examine how digital culture and live performance converge to form a site of *cruzo*. Next, I consider how the performers' bodies themselves function as crossroads of racial and ethnic meaning. I then turn to the affective implications of their doubled performance, exploring how recognition, empathy, and the structural logic of humor make possible this co-created persona. And, in the spirit of our conference, I wrap up by considering the global relevance of this iteration of *cruzo*.



Credit : Kamala Harris/ Instagram

By election night Nov. 2024, presidential candidate Harris—long regarded as an ethnically ambiguous candidate often criticized for a weak campaign identity—had become the most legible version of herself to liberal media and her supporters. This transformation owed much to decentralized meme circulation across platforms, where users stitched, remixed, and reframed Harris’s gestures and sound bites. But the transformation also owed something else: the embodied labor of comedian Maya Rudolph, whose SNL impersonations contributed significantly to the public’s understanding of “Kamala.” Across repeated iterations, Rudolph’s impersonations and Harris’s public performances accrued meaning together, each shaping the other in the production of the “Kamala” figure and presidential candidate: a jolly, wine-drinking, pop-culture-savvy, foodie with deep civil rights commitments. While Rudolph cannot claim sole authorship of Harris’s transformation, the unique interplay of these women’s embodiment of “Kamala” warrants attention if we wish to understand how political identity is fashioned at the crossroads of humor, race, gender, and digital spectatorship.

Importantly, this interplay is not merely representational—it is generative. It does not depict Harris; it helps *produce* her. The X-shaped crossing between the public figure and her comedic double makes Harris legible not in spite of her multiplicity, but through it.

to better understand the cruzo, we can look to its archival roots...



We can understand Rudolph’s impersonations as both a mnemonic archive for Harris’s emergent public persona and a repertoire of embodied experimentation that reflects the unfinished, contested nature of Harris’s identity. In her 2024 *New York Times* article, political reporter Rebecca O’Brien tracks this development. In 2019, Rudolph played Harris as a martini-loving *funt*—“fun-aunt”—magnifying Harris’s swagger with generous helpings of charm and sass. This characterization not only won Rudolph a 2020 Primetime Emmy Award, it spawned memes and GIFs, signaling early that Rudolph, Harris, and online publics were all in on Harris’s intended use of social media.

As these viral moments circulated, they disseminated Rudolph’s impersonations of Harris as a rhetorical equivocator. Despite capturing Harris’ charisma, Rudolph, somewhat mockingly, made fun of the non-speak Harris used when dodging questions during debates. These performances offered comic relief as Harris’ first presidential campaign faltered.



But as Harris became vice president and later the Democratic nominee in 2024, Rudolph's approach shifted. Her Harris became more composed, more authoritative, drinking sophisticated red wine. She began serving as a poised foil to chaotic male counterparts.

Real-life Harris, for her part, welcomed the parody. She praised Rudolph's impersonations, leaned into self-deprecating humor, embraced her own laugh, and openly referenced pop cultural moments.

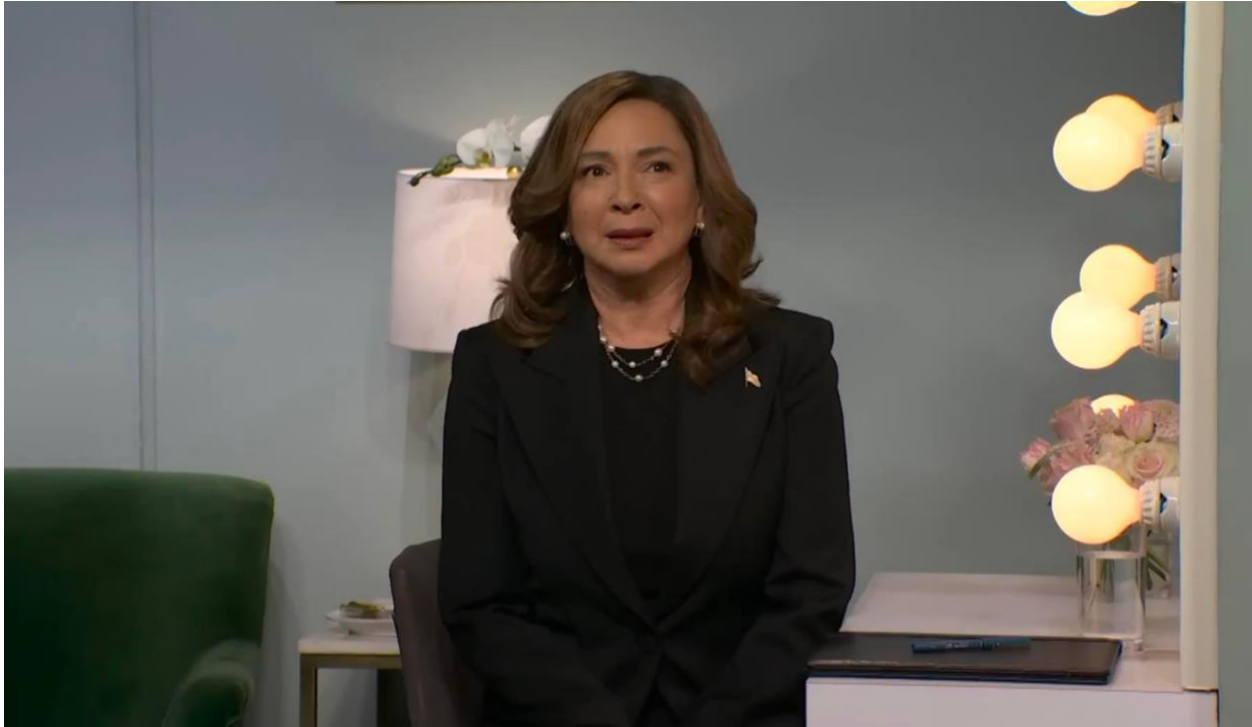


Her campaign harnessed her memefication as a strategy to appeal to Gen-Z...



... including the unforgettable moment when musician Charli XCX tweeted, “Kamala Harris is Brat,” prompting the Harris team to immediately adopt the neon green visual language of *Brat* branding. This mutuality culminated in the ultimate performance of “Kamala” in an SNL sketch three days before the election. Starring both Rudolph and Harris, the sketch pulled from the archive of Harris memes that Rudolph helped author and embraced the kind of experimental comedic repertoire that fueled that archive. The effect was uncanny, humorous, and revealing—a literal performance at the crossroads.

let's examine the mechanics of the cruza itself...



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What conditions intersect here to create a site of *cruzo*—a crossroads where the performers explore the intersecting aspects of their identities and consolidate Harris as a coherent figure? The primary crossing is between the disembodied digital world and embodied live performance. The near-literal staging of a digital meme becomes the mechanism through which the performance gains its charge. The digital discourse that shaped the emergence of “Harris” becomes enflashed; the meme becomes incarnate.

Harris occupies a global stage that includes both the real-time liveness of the SNL studio and the non-linear, rarely accountable, often anonymous digital stage of the Internet. In this configuration, Harris and Rudolph respond to the ghostly presence of countless online users whose participation in Harris’s memefication made this moment possible.

Following Sarah Bay-Cheng’s assertion that, in digital contexts, “people do not participate by being there; people are ‘there’ by participating,” this performance extends digital participation into embodied space. The dramatic irony for the viewer—especially one who has interacted with Harris memes—is palpable: you are “in” on the joke. The performance feels funny, yes, but also radically inclusive. It metatheatrically projects the ethos of humor, relatability, and community that Harris’s campaign sought to cultivate.

These affective resonances are made possible by the architecture of this proverbial stage of *cruzo*, built collectively by Rudolph, Harris, the SNL production apparatus, online publics, and the infrastructures that carry their interactions.

the crossroads also lives within the performers' bodies...

We must also attend to the kinds of crossroads these women's bodies house, and how their respective racial and ethnic intersections facilitate both the Kamala persona and the uncanny doubling in the sketch. Despite their differing backgrounds—Rudolph as the daughter of Black American singer Minnie Riperton and Jewish music producer Richard Rudolph, and Harris as the daughter of a Black Jamaican academic and an Indian academic—the two women share a public-facing “ethnic ambiguity.” Although such phenotypes have long existed in the U.S., they continue to perplex, and sometimes agitate, American media and its consumers.

Rudolph's mixed-race background has drawn less scrutiny, likely due to her parents' celebrity. Harris's racial makeup, by contrast, has become a political battleground. Opponents have questioned her Blackness in an effort to sow distrust among Black voters, exploiting her ambiguity as a site of suspicion and even negation.

Yet the women's co-creation of the Kamala persona enacts the opposite maneuver. Rather than framing ambiguity as a lack, they deploy it as generative hybridity. Their doubling crystallizes Harris's ambiguity into something not only legible but politically viable. This becomes explicit when Rudolph, facing Harris in the SNL “mirror,” declares, “I wish I could talk to someone who's been in my shoes. You know, a Black, South Asian woman running for president.”

And while Rudolph is not South Asian, the moment reveals that both women have worn each other's shoes—not merely as a character shared between them, but as public figures navigating the expansive yet constrained terrain of racial ambiguity. Their bodies function as X-shaped sites where histories, stereotypes, national imaginaries, and future possibilities intersect.



The moment when the Kamala persona is most fully actualized—distributed across the women’s proximate bodies—offers an uncanny pleasure that blends recognition and becoming. Parodying the Lacanian mirror stage, the Harris figure glimpses herself as a unified subject for the first time. The joke is that this unity is shared between two women, not a singular person.

But the affective space between the women, thick with the jouissance of mutual recognition, is animated by a profound empathy. This moment is not merely one “Otherized” person seeing herself in another; it is a becoming of the self *through and as* another. Jill Dolan might describe this as a utopian performative, a fleeting instance that gestures toward a more capacious social world. At the same time, the performance echoes José Muñoz’s disidentification, as both women refuse racial foreclosure and create meaning in the gaps between identities.

The humor at play is not superficial. It is the mechanism that allows this co-created figure to exist. Without humor’s capacity for elasticity, contradiction, and relationality, the *cruzo* could not hold.

the cruzo extends far beyond the U.S....



Mexico's popular program *El Privilegio de Mandar* demonstrates how comedic impersonation can function as a parallel civic sphere, producing political personae through remix, exaggeration, and embodied play that migrates and emerges across media platforms.



In a different geopolitical context, Volodymyr Zelensky exemplifies how comedic doubling can prefigure and even authorize real political leadership. Before becoming Ukraine’s president, he performed a fictional version of the role on television in a farce called *Servant of the People*, blurring the boundaries between satire and statecraft.

While geographically and circumstantially distinct, taken together, these examples reveal that the Harris–Rudolph *cruzo* is part of a broader global pattern in which political figures become legible through the interplay of humor, hybridity, and media remixing. Political personhood now emerges not from stable identity but from navigating—and performing within—the ongoing crossings of mediated public life.



The Harris–Rudolph dynamic makes visible the performative truth of contemporary politics: that public figures are not singular beings but crossroads. “Kamala” emerges not despite the flux of media, humor, and racial meaning but *through* it. Their doubling stages an X where digital publics, live performance, and hybrid identities converge to produce a recognizable persona.

In the end, this *cruzo* reminds us that identity is not a fixed destination but a movement—an ongoing choreography across screens, stages, and the bodies that carry them. Harris becomes legible only as she is passed between performers, platforms, and publics, each adding a layer, a gesture, a laugh. The persona that results is less a portrait than a crossing: a figure shaped by the very pathways that connect us.

