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Elvis the Drag King of Rock and Roll

➔ by Parry, Ryan - Monday, March 12, 2018, 12:42 AM

Britton's article, "Women Who "Do Elvis": Authenticity, Masculinity, and Masquerade" addresses the stage presence of Elvis and how it not only was a performance of gender and sexuality but a unique one in its manifestation and reproduction. The Elvis persona, "the King", is discussed to be a hypermasculine incarnation not comprised directly from Elvis's authentic behaviors, but masculine behaviors from countless other resources including actors, African American culture, and even other Elvises. As this unique combination of masculinities became seen to be natural for Elvis, others began to impersonate an impersonation. Elvis actively impersonates the

masculinities he saw and wished to be. In essence, as Britton notes, Elvis is a man impersonating a man. This act goes to separate the man from the persona, resulting in impersonators being able to become the King without knowing, or seeing the Elvis in person as the King.

The division of the inauthentic persona from the performer results in a discourse on what is the fundamental core of the behaviors being performed, and if they are to be seen directly connected to the initial performer. This ambiguity can be seen as a direct link to the supposed ease of becoming an Elvis impersonator but raises the difficulty of knowing what is strictly the persona and what is the realization of behaviors many would not want directly connected to themselves.

How does performing gender and sexuality in the way of Elvis question the authenticity of the performance to the performer?

Does this performance show a means of freedom or limitation for the performer? Depending on the answer, does the discourse of the article show a fundamental characteristic of society where such a performance can be liberating for one gender but limiting and socially harmful for another? How does questioning the core of Elvis's masculinity both aid female impersonators but also show the "artificial" nature of gender as a whole?

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Authenticity

➦ by Sheats, Katrina - Monday, March 12, 2018, 12:41 PM

Ryan,

You bring up a good point about authenticity. I have been struggling with the idea of authenticity since the Music, Gender and Sexuality classes last week. So for this post I Googled "authenticity" (like a typical college student).

"Authentic: of undisputed origin; genuine" I thought it was odd that they used the term "genuine" to define "authentic." So what is "authentic" then? The idea of "undisputed origin" can, in itself, be disputed.

Let's take this quote from the article "he (Elvis) argues strenuously for the naturalness of his hip thrusting and finger wiggling—it is something that “just happens” when he hears the music—while acknowledging that it had become a trademark central to his stage persona. At a 1958 press conference he explained: “Sir, the wiggle can’t straighten out . . . when that leg quits shaking I’m finished” (Osborne 121). His sexualized gestures, he suggests, had become integral to self-performance..." So although Elvis certainly stole his signature ideas from many places, does the repurposing of several borrowed concepts into a new concept become "authentic?" Why should we oppose ideas taken from other cultures? Is it

because they are not credited? Because the new party doesn't have the right to use them? Is it cultural appropriation? I really want to figure this out. It could be an interesting in-class discussion.

I would argue that Elvis's gestures and mannerisms were authentic to him. historically we know that the snarled lip, shiny white bell-bottomed suit and sunglasses are 'of undisputed origin' to Elvis. At least that seems to be the case of American culture as a whole. If anyone else would like to comment and chat about this, I would love to discuss these ideas.



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Re: Authenticity

➔ by Mani, Alexa - Monday, March 12, 2018, 2:51 PM

Hi Katrina and Ryan,

This is a great discussion, I'm enjoying reading your responses and developing a more nuanced understanding of this discourse!

I'd like to first address Katrina's question of "Why should we oppose ideas taken from other cultures?"

I don't believe we should however, the issue with this 'borrowing' is when the ideas taken are perceived as created by the performer who 'borrowed' them. While it is important that Elvis repurposed several examples of masculinity to develop his own construction I think it is arguably more important to remember that he took these dance moves from African American performers. African Americans men could dance this way through the exploitation of their stereotyped gender construction as hypersexual. Elvis 'stole' this in order to access an expression of sexuality that was previously not part of the construction

of a white male. That is why he is such as 'revolutionary' sexual figure. Therefore, I suppose he was 'authentic' in his construction of a hyper sexualized white male but no, I do not think he was revolutionary in developing never before practiced expressions of masculinity.

While engaging with this discourse if Elvis is or is not authentic I think it is important to ask why we're asking this. Why do we care so much about authenticity? Who can really judge what is and what isn't authentic? Is it because we desire the real, natural, innate performance (masculine) and reject the possibility that Elvis, the king of masculinity, was inherently "feminine" in his heavily performed construction of gender?

Also addressing Ryan's second question I agree that this performance of gender can be liberating for one and limiting for another. Through impersonations of Elvis by women we can observe the exploitation of masculinity through the cloak of Elvis. These impersonators were rebecoming what they have always been but, were unable to express it because it wasn't part of their assigned gender construction. Through Elvis they explore his gendered construction but also gain a more complex understanding of themselves. Female impersonators are such a threatening image because they disprove the root of masculinity being innate. If a female Elvis impersonator can make you believe they are a man, then what separates them from men and the power men have? It is a performance (fem) of masculinity that appears to be truly masculine but, is actually drenched with the criticisms of femininity.

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Re: Authenticity

➔ by Parry, Ryan - Monday, March 12, 2018, 3:12 PM

Katrina,

Thank you for your reply. I feel the discourse over what is 'authentic' and what is not is so difficult because of how the concept itself is formed. There is the chance that the concept of 'authenticity' does not actually exist and that it just an additional way of marginalizing what is viewed in society. As I have a feeling this is going to come up in group discussion again, I will leave that there for now.

What I would like to discuss is how the concept is very subjective to the person trying to judge it. Between the two of us, we have taken two different lenses. As you stated, the mannerisms of Elvis can be seen as being authentic to him. I see this point as he was the original person to display that exact combination of masculine traits so in that way it is authentic to him. When writing this post, I aligned more with the idea that if this was a performance similar to a man impersonating another man, Elvis is copy and pasting what he sees from others as being masculine, and creating a personality from it separate from his own. In my thinking, this went to explain the quote stating one can become Elvis without

having met him; just through recordings. In a way, I compared it to Elvis going to Masc-Mart (a masculinity grocery store), where he picked out what he wanted and made something from it. I saw those parts that he picked to reproduce were not authentic to him because they can be seen as authentic to other cultures and people.

This is where your questions were really great because do we look at the sum or do we look at the parts that make it up? The concept of 'authenticity' is so subjective that in one lense Elvis is very authentic, but through another, it can be said he really is not. It is very interesting to discuss and think about so thank you again for your post.

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Re: Elvis the Drag King of Rock and Roll

👤 by Edwards, Amanda - Monday, March 12, 2018, 7:57 PM

It's always an interesting notion of 'authenticity,' we generally think that authentic performance is when the performer themselves are projecting their own truth in the rawest form unto the audience (or in other cases performing a character through their own special lens unto the audience). But that authenticity certainly comes into question in regards to imitating another person to the extent that the Elvis impersonators do.

Elvis in his stage projection of his person drew on other men that he admired in Hollywood, so we see the influence there, intermingled with his own vision of staged masculinity.

The interesting factors that Elvis presents is that of being a sex idol/symbol, so he is the epitome of hypermasculinity.

There does exist freedom with specificity, unlike bringing a character to life, Elvis was a real person, we don't get to make up his backstory and his influences; an impersonator (a good one) has to do their homework in regards to his gestures, mannerisms, speech pattern, singing style, etc. In many ways you could spend a lifetime analyzing a person, and you will still discover new things about them.

Many times when an actor takes on the task of bringing a character/person to life, they end up discovering more about themselves; and thus while immersing oneself into another's reality, we can simultaneously discover our own truths through that endeavor.

It's always been societally less palatable for a woman to assume the role of the male, and male sexuality; even more so when a woman performs it convincingly. In the ways of romance and sex traditionally women are placed in the passive role, we are the pursued rather than the pursuers; and so for a woman to adopt such an active, confident, overt, and powerful position in the ways of sexual presence it is no surprise that it is uneasy for men to see.

For women, I can see this as being an incredibly freeing foray, delving into this masculine presence Elvis presented; even in today's society women get incredible flack for being more dominant and active by means of their love lives or sex lives.

It does bring to light just how much of a show it all is, there's nothing inherently 'male' about it, not if women can play the same game and be just as convincing.

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Re: Elvis the Drag King of Rock and Roll

➔ by McCartney, Olivia - Monday, March 12, 2018, 10:13 PM

In regards to your question, "Does this performance show a means of freedom or limitation for the performer?" I believe that it functions more on the freedom side. It demonstrates freedom because of how Elvis used influences from so many other people/cultures. This leads to so many new and possibly undiscovered areas that can impact one's performance. There is a lot of freedom here to emphasize one's creative individuality.

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Re: Elvis the Drag King of Rock and Roll

➔ by Prosper, Taylor - Tuesday, March 13, 2018, 12:21 AM

Ryan,

The article discusses the impersonation of THE Elvis by other Elvises. All I can think about is a trip I took to Las Vegas a couple years ago where there was quite literally, an Elvis every hundred feet. Each one had their own twist on the King's coined mannerisms and gestures (we'll call them). What I noticed about them mostly was their way of flirting with the tourists (more than likely to procure a payment for their act). They radiated sexual desire and couldn't walk or talk without their hips flying everywhere. I do believe that performers who impersonate this "King" do in fact try to play into his legacy of being a sex icon. This post is in response to your question, "How does performing gender and sexuality in the way of Elvis question the authenticity of the performance to the performer?"

I would also like to respond to, "...does the discourse of the article show a fundamental characteristic of society where such a performance can be liberating for one gender but limiting and socially harmful for another? To put it bluntly, yes. I do believe in cases of women portraying this figure of hyper masculinity, there would be such a reason to feel liberated. When reversed to viewing this lifestyle through the male lens, I see there being reasons to be timid. As discussed earlier in the course, the masculine lens often chooses to observe the intellectuality and mind of the object. Whereas the feminine delves into the body and emotion of their subject.

I also want to agree with Olivia in this performance type representing freedom and not limitation. The fact that any one of us can dress up as Elvis tomorrow, perform the moves, and add our own flair shows that his legacy is an evolving entity.

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Re: Elvis the Drag King of Rock and Roll

➔ by Hance, Cameron - Tuesday, March 13, 2018, 12:35 AM

Hi Ryan,

Your final question was very thought-provoking and made me think of the final paragraph on page 177 where Brittan states that Elvis' masculinity was a performance of something outside the realm of typical male behavior. In this way, Elvis was operating as an individual completely free from the bonds of gender expectation. He was almost a caricature of himself, marked by distinct actions and behaviors that any talented impersonator can emulate. This gives us a great glimpse into the artifice of gender. So many individuals have found great deals of success in their lives operating outside the construct of binary gender.

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Re: Elvis the Drag King of Rock and Roll

➔ by Carter, Paige - Tuesday, March 13, 2018, 8:33 AM

Great initial post, Ryan, and so many thought-provoking points in this thread!

I would like to draw on something I mentioned in last week's discussion forum. As many have already noted, it is rather difficult to pin down exactly what it means to be authentic. I think in the case of female Elvis impersonators, using the argument of "authenticity" against them is more about a general distrust of female actors and musicians than a true concern of authenticity. We are reminded of the paradoxes wherein, for example, men performed women's roles in Shakespeare's plays because women were not allowed on stage, or to draw on an example we've examined in depth: the castrati. These cases were questioned much less so for their "authenticity," in general. Critics of female performers, particularly those performing masculine personalities (or even just normative masculine traits) often use the guise of "authenticity" in an attempt to shield their own gendered biases and the inherent notion that society distrusts women performers, especially in an unconventionally gendered setting.

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Re: Elvis the Drag King of Rock and Roll

➔ by Stroinski, Matthew - Tuesday, March 13, 2018, 8:54 AM

Hi Ryan,

Great lead off for the discussion. I want to address your second question in regards to both the freedom and limitations to the performance of gender. I believe Schechner's argument of "not me" but "not not me" becomes integral to this discussion for both female impersonators of Elvis and Elvis himself. Elvis's construction of his persona as well as the ability to impersonate him relies on definable and recreateable characteristic of "masculinity". As stated in the article Elvis was able to draw on a variety of sources to create a hyper-masculinized character. I was very interested on the aspect of performing gender and how Elvis took aspects of masculinity and exaggerated them to the point of excess. Returning to the Schechner quote, though Elvis created himself into what we know him as it is not to say that this persona does not draw from an internal source. The part about drag kings and their performance in the article discusses how they feel that performing "masculine" gender is an exciting and rewarding act where they are both able to bring out aspects of themselves which are not regularly presentable and to explore the limits of female "masculinity". I think the article makes good comparisons to Elvis and drag performance exactly because he is doing what drag performs do, take traditional aspects of gender and exaggerating them in a dramatic fashion. In a way this act can be very liberating in a way that people recognize the way in which we show gender is constructed and is so predictable as to easily recreate it on the opposite gender.

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 Discussion Forum on Early Rock 'n' Roll Masculinities

- **Elvis the Drag King of Rock and Roll**

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