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Critical Crossings: Intersections of Passing
and Drag in Popular Culture

A dissertation in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy
in Women's Studies

by

Loran Renee Marsan

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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Loran Renee Marsan

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Professor Juliet Williams, Co-chair

Professor Douglas Kellner, Co-chair

My dissertation, *Critical Crossings: Intersections of Passing and Drag in Popular Culture*, offers an innovative study of the political possibilities of two related performative strategies: Drag and Passing. "Drag" refers to the excessive performance of feminine gender, i.e. drag queens, but more recently has been linked to other parodic performances such as blackface. "Passing" originated in the post- and antebellum eras when mixed-race African-Americans passed as white to escape oppressions. It denotes the believable portrayal of another identity, usually racial or gendered. Both have long been topics of media representations. Probing where and how they are used differently in popular culture yields insight into the operation of identity, engaging such issues as the social construction of authenticity, performance, and the "real." I argue cinema and television have changed how drag and passing are deployed, such that what

passes for reality and authenticity comes into question while the purposes and functions of drag and passing are also changed. I utilize an interdisciplinary multiperspectival cultural studies approach that draws connections across fields of inquiry and theoretical paradigms. Through analysis of context, production, and reception of texts with theoretical insights from queer, feminist, critical race, film, media, and cultural studies, this project shows how these theories can align to create new knowledges about the subversive potential of drag and passing. A series of four case studies that range from Cher, to journalistic passing texts such as *Black Like Me* and the TV series *Black. White.*, to Divine and John Waters, to Stephen Colbert as pundit passing-in-drag, my dissertation critically reapplies passing and drag to unconventional texts or in unconventional ways to broaden their critical cache while using their unique parameters to reinterpret representational politics in media texts to reveal what has not been seen through traditional critiques of the politics of representation of identity, authenticity, and reality. The resulting analyses show the possible shifting multiplicities not only of identity but also reality and how producing and consuming media through the optics of passing and drag can take authenticity out of the identity equation and redirect attention to aspects of performance, repetition, and modification.

The dissertation of Loran Renee Marsan is approved.

Christine Littleton

Elizabeth Marchant

Sue-Ellen Case

Juliet Williams, Committee Co-chair

Douglas Kellner, Committee Co-chair

University of California, Los Angeles

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter One

Introduction: Passing/Drag/Media/.....1

Chapter Two

Cher-ing/Sharing Across Boundaries.....58

Chapter Three

Divine Intervention: Passing-In-Drag in an Abject Reality.....86

Chapter Four

Passing Truths: Journalism, Education, and the Experience of Authenticity.....129

Chapter Five

Celebripunditician: Truthiness in the Language of Passing and Drag.....170

Conclusion

Passing-In-Drag Toward a Better Tomorrow, Tomorrow.....235

References.....244

VITA/BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Education

University of Arizona, M.A. in Women's Studies, August, 2004.

University of California at Santa Barbara, B.A. in Women's Studies and English, June 2002.

Publications

“Cher-ing/Sharing Across Boundaries.” In *Visual Culture and Gender* Vol. 5, 2010. Pp. 49-64.

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“Constructing Landed Hegemony: Race and Class in *Emma*.” Women’s Writing in Britain, 1660-1830. University of South Hampton and Chawton House Library. Winchester, England, July 15-17, 2003.

“Emma: Premodern and Postmodern Representations of Difference.” New Directions in Critical Theory: Theory Matters. University of Arizona, April 18-19, 2003.

Selected Academic and Professional Experience

Thinking From Women’s Lives: Sandra Harding, Standpoint, and Science 31 min. educational/documentary video produced for UCLA’s Women’s Studies Program, 2007.

Teaching Fellow, UCLA:

Women’s Studies 185-1: Crossings in Popular Culture: The Politics of Representation of Drag and Passing, Winter 2010.

Women’s Studies/Communications M149: Media: Gender, Race, Class, and Sexuality, Summer 2009.

Teaching Associate, UCLA:

Women’s Studies/Communications M149: Winter 2009, Spring 2008.

Women’s Studies/Education 178/278: Critical Media Literacy and Politics of Gender: Theory and Production, Fall 2008, Winter 2007.

Women’s Studies 10: Intro to Women’s Studies: Feminist Perspectives – Women and Society, Winter 2006, Fall 2005, Winter 2005.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION: PASSING/DRAG/MEDIA/

The very nature of acting itself is about passing; passing oneself off as an/other and, in the process, throwing off the shackles of any natural or normed identity markers.

– Gwendolyn Audrey Foster. *Class-Passing: Social Mobility in Film and Popular Culture*, 2005: 8.

In 1914 the major motion picture *A Florida Enchantment* was released. Based on a novel and play from the 1890s, this comedy features magic seeds that change the sex of the recipients. Unhappy with her fiancé's apparent lack of attention to her, the main character Lillian Travers (whose name is telling in itself) takes the magic seed and instantly starts to perform in stereotypical masculine fashion, which includes strutting about, lighting her/his own cigarettes and flirting with all the women around while still in a dress, much to the dismay of her fiancé. The film has been acclaimed as one of the first cinematic representations of homosexuality because of the gender-bending theme enacted not only through the taking of the pills and subsequent actions but also shifts between masculine and feminine dress throughout that allows for multiple flirtations where it is unclear who is "really" male or female within the film as well as to the audience. This representation has been labeled in varying arguments as passing, drag, and/or butch lesbianism (Somerville, 2000). This film also features white actors in blackface who are portrayed in the era's usual racist manner in which presents African Americans as intellectually challenged, bumbling, and/or as savages who are objects of ridicule and "comic foils." Hence, the "hilarity" of such a transformation is intensified when the now manly Lillian/Lawrence forces her/his maid (a white woman in blackface) to swallow the seed as well. It all ends up being a fanciful dream from which the heroine learns her lesson and is now satisfied again with her femininity and her fiancé. Her maid, who endured being punched through a curtain, having things thrown at her, and who generally acted the foolish buck while

transformed, is absent from the ending entirely. These multiple identity boundaries crossed throughout the film open a space to critique the polysemic meanings and messages of the movie. While some of the gender boundary crossings might be seen as subversive, the ending (changed greatly from the original novel and play) creates a picture of heterosexual static identity and the representations of blackface are wholly racist and not addressed within the film (or outside of it at the time) as a topic of boundary crossing at all. This film is an interesting example of how multiple identity boundary crossings are simultaneously deployed, encoding both progressive and hegemonic meanings where the contested terrain of the film can only be understood when they are all addressed together in their contradictory and complex relations.

When looking at both the gendered and racial aspects of *A Florida Enchantment* and comparing how they are enacted, a conclusion about the progressive possibility of such a film is hard to achieve given its portrayal of female-to-male transformation as beneficial for the white woman, yet detrimental to the “black” woman and white man. Indeed, the consequences of the change in her maid-turned-valet are intensified savagery and foolishness, reinforcing racist caricatures of black men which promoted fear of them. Predictably, the male-to-female transformation of Lillian’s fiancé is also “comical” and degrading – mirroring longstanding attention to such transformations where rising in the power structure to the status of man is much more acceptable than lowering oneself to acting as a woman. Most interesting for my dissertation is similarities between this and more recent gender-bending representations where focus remains on the process of transformation, the performance of masculinity and femininity through posturing and props, and the all-important scene of revelation that in *A Florida Enchantment* creates chaos and death before the heroine awakens. While these all have different outcomes and meanings in their multiple media representations, they have remained the focal points of many

boundary-crossing representations across gender, race, sexuality, class, and other supposedly disparate categories. The messages about white and black masculinity as well as the troubles created when gender is bent are evident at the close of the film – but the processes of boundary crossing throughout the film leave room for deeper analysis and questions which focus, in part, on who benefits, who does not, and what other lessons about gender, race, and their constructions can be gleaned from this film and others that utilize representations concerned with the boundaries of identity. Hence, it is only through critical attention to all aspects of identity boundary crossings in such films, from the implications of masculine women to the white-focused presentation of black identity as well as the meanings of drag, passing, blackface, and parody, that a nuanced conclusion about context and meaning can be reached. Indeed, it has been almost a century since *A Florida Enchantment* was released and it still provokes rich discussion about its meanings for film and culture ranging from attention in *Celluloid Closet* (a 1995 documentary film based on Vito Russo’s book of the same name) as the first representation of homosexuality in film, to Eric Lott’s (1993) analysis of the connection between drag and blackface which argues that these simultaneous portrayals connect the two as related forms of boundary play with ambivalent meanings and results. Lott and other scholars address the politics of representation of blackface in order to critically interrogate its historical contexts and multiple meanings in relation to other boundary crossings in representational fields. Lott is among the few scholars whose work begins to address the relations between these multiple kinds of crossing – work which my dissertation will draw from in order to analyze their many connections and fissures in media representations.

Drawing on the long history of identity crossings in mainstream film and media from *A Florida Enchantment* to *The Colbert Report*, my dissertation will address these simultaneous

deployments of different kinds of identity crossings in order to pay nuanced attention to the forms these representations take, including the connections across historical examples, the “educational” purposes of some crossings, the broadening possibilities in recent media of what boundaries are open borders for the purposes of passing as well as drag, and how these crossings contribute to and challenge the formation of authentic subjects.

As I will demonstrate in this introductory chapter, passing and drag have a long history in mainstream media of related and/or simultaneous deployment than has in many cases been overlooked. From this lens of drag and passing I will interrogate how particular representations present ideas about identity, reality, authenticity, subjectivity, performance, performativity, education, subversion, and boundaries of all kinds.

If, as Gwendolyn Foster and many others have argued, all acting is itself a form of passing – and in many cases one could easily see its identitarian excesses as drag – then visual media and fictional performances are particularly fertile ground on which the contradictions and complexities of boundary crossings are enacted and played out across multiple loci of identities. As Foster points out, it is apparent that all acting is someone performing the story and/or identity of “an/other.” But when these performances of another become performance of an Other, something different happens. This difference is in itself complex and ambivalent. This is evidenced by the broad spectrum of incidents of drag and passing in media from the uncritical presentations and stereotypes of blackface in films of the 1910s and ’20s and more recently in films such as *Soul Man* (1986), *Tootsie* (1982), and *Norbit* (2007) to more critical and reflexive texts such as *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* (2001) and *Tropic Thunder* (2008) - not to mention complicated representations of identities such as *A Florida Enchantment* which do not fit neatly into any one category or argument. There is such a plethora of enactments of passing or dragging

an Other that closer attention is warranted in order to interrogate these media practices, their relation to each other, and their possible cultural meanings and impacts. Therefore, my dissertation will describe and apply multiple transdisciplinary approaches to a qualitative and contextual study of the manner in which drag and passing are represented and evolving in a multiplicity of media texts and genres.

TERMS

“Passing” and “Drag,” in diverse and multiple forms, are the primary names given to particular performances that cross the boundaries of conventional identity categories. The term “Passing” originated in the United States during the era of slavery when, because of the oppressions associated with Jim Crow Laws and racism in general, in conjunction with the “One-Drop Rule” that dictated anyone with one drop of African blood was legally black, those who today would be identified as mixed race could potentially live as white in order to gain access to the rights white Americans possessed and escape the horrors of racism that black Americans were forced to endure – thus passing from one finite legally defined racial category into a more privileged one. “Passing” is generally used to describe the act of realistically “pretending” to be a race or gender that one is not such that people believe you are the different race, gender, class, etc. – of course one of the issues with this that will be discussed throughout this chapter and dissertation is that this definition posits an original immutable identity which in itself is problematic for some scholars, though others contend it actually challenges these originary constructions – I will argue that it depends on the representation.

“Drag” has been defined generally as wearing the clothes of the opposite sex, but it has come to refer more specifically to “queens” and “kings” who perform parodic, excessive, or

hyperbolic femininity or masculinity, and has a rich history of challenging and subverting traditional ideals of gender and sexuality. As Verta Taylor and Leila Rupp point out in the *Encyclopedia of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender History in America* entry on drag queens and kings, the term “drag” is usually applied to gay men and lesbian performing “femininity, masculinity, or some combination thereof. [And] Drag queens have long been part of gay life and gay communities” (2004: 316), though kings are a more recent phenomena with their own particularities and relation to gay communities and ideas of subversion. Drag has also been described as a performance similar to passing, but with the specific intention to fail (Koenig, 2002). This argument in particular ties it directly to passing in a way useful to my argument that the two are connected and together create a more complex picture of identity and its multiple possibilities for crossing and subversions. It is important to distinguish between drag, impersonation, and cross-dressing though slightly harder to actually do so since much scholarship overlaps in its address of one or more of these terms. Most notably Marjorie Garber’s *Vested Interests* (1992) seems to continually cross between the many terms uncritically, but for the purposes here the above usages by Koenig, and Taylor and Rupp will serve as a starting point and this vacillation within the terms will be further addressed in the literature review below.

METHODS

While passing and drag are often addressed as separate endeavors, attention to the forms they take in representational fields provides a possible space of intervention to address their similar enactments, particularly in visual media where they are so often intertwined and subject to the conventions of a visible reality. These visual representations and the scholarship addressing them open up the field of inquiry to interrogate not only the effects of and the reasons

behind passing and drag but also the production and visual embodiments of them across different areas of identity, intent, and outcome. Hence, my study takes the next dialectical step to examine these multiple, divergent, and overlapping arguments and apply them to media texts across the spectrum of representations of passing, drag, and everything in-between. This will, in turn, interrogate the place of passing and drag within and affects on identifications, binaries, and strategies of subversion. How and in what contexts these media representations are produced and consumed as well as other possible meanings that can be mined from their presentations are all important aspects in the analyses of the politics of representation of drag and passing. Hence, my dissertation enacts a multiperspectival cultural studies approach that takes into consideration not just analysis of texts, but investigation into the modes of production and reception as well, in order to more fully understand the contexts, politics, and meanings involved in the many representations of drag and passing.

My methods for this study follow an interdisciplinary cultural studies method of inquiry that interrogates texts, their production, and their reception. Each chapter focuses on a set of related media texts as case studies to illuminate particular arguments and concepts. Each chapter utilizes a cultural studies based approach that employs a combination of textual, production, and reception analysis though each has its own unique focus. I will be following Durham and Kellner's assertion that "no one approach contribute[s] *the* key to cultural and media criticism, that all given theories and methods have their limitations as well as strengths, their blindspots as well as illuminating perspectives. ...Conjoining production/text/audience perspectives can thus help provide a more complex sense of how culture and media actually operate in everyday life" (2001: 4). I therefore utilize the three-pronged approach expounded by Kellner as well as theoretical work from multiple fields including queer theory, feminist theory, cultural studies,

critical race theory, and film theory in order to fully explicate the meanings and usages of the diverse representations and productions of drag and passing and their media combinations. I will also be using a cultural studies method of inquiry into cultural artifacts that examines not only the text itself but also its context, production, and reception. As Durham and Kellner argue:

Culture is produced and consumed within social life. Thus, particular cultural artifacts and practices must be situated within the social relations of production and reception in which culture is produced, distributed, and consumed in order to be properly understood and interpreted. Contextualizing cultural forms and audiences in historically specific situations helps illuminate how cultural artifacts reflect or reproduce concrete social relations and conditions – or oppose and attempt to transform them. (12)

Accordingly, I will address both production and consumption contextually as well as examine multiple texts that occupy “contested terrain” within culture, some of which reinforce dominant ideologies, some of which challenge them, and many that do both.

OVERVIEW

There is a prevalence of passing and drag and their combination in television, film, and pop culture since at least the 1910s (possibly primarily in fiction – but across all genres, especially more recently). These instances in media function in multiple ways such as part of the main plot, a subplot, or one trope/action/scene among many passed through in the narrative/mise-en-scene/or even setting. Such representations have been primarily gendered and racial/ethnic, though some are also across nationalities and class (which is present but much less noticed or addressed as “passing” or “drag”). Varying examples that show the breadth of use include but are not by any means limited to: *Birth of a Nation* (1915), *Imitation of Life* (1934, 1959), Mickey Rooney as the Asian landlord in *Breakfast at Tiffany’s* (1961), cartoon drag/passing scene in 1973 animal *Robin Hood* (1973), an episode of *Sabrina the Teenage Witch* (titled “Sabrina, the Teenage Boy” 1997), John Waters films (1960s to the present), *White Chicks*

(2004), *The Colbert Report* (2005-present), *Boys Don't Cry* (1999), *Tropic Thunder* (2008), and multiple reality and most variety shows dating from the 1970s to the present. Many of these representations combine passing and drag in different ways, and with different techniques or levels of "realism." And although some of the many examples of drag and passing produce at least partially counterhegemonic representations such as the androgynous "It's Pat" skits on *Saturday Night Live* (1990s), the television passing series *Black. White.* (2006), *The Colbert Report* (2005-present), *Bamboozled* (2000), many others simply use drag or passing as a trope or stereotype that uncritically reproduces traditional ideals about identity. This raises several questions: Why are passing and drag such popular tools and topics in media? Where and why are they subversive? How are drag and passing related to and affected by ideas about authenticity and reality? Where do representations of drag and passing create a non-normative message or aim and why? My dissertation will address the prevalence of drag and passing while also examining the exceptions which defy hegemonic and binaristic ideologies in some way through their deployment and application of drag and passing. How exceptions such as John Water's films featuring the drag queen Divine, *The Colbert Report*, and other media accomplish this, what it means within particular cultural contexts, and how these particular representations open spaces for challenging normative ideals of identity, authenticity, and reality will all come under the lens of my investigation.

The large quantity of representations of both passing and drag in mainstream media throughout the history of cinema in such movies as *A Florida Enchantment* and *Imitation of Life* (1934, 1959) through more recent presentations such as *Norbit*, *To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything!* *Julie Newmar* (1995), and *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* in many cases cannot be fully categorized as drag or passing but fall somewhere in-between. The labeling of acts as passing or

drag is also complicated and intertwined with issues of intent, realism, speech and silence, visibility, audience, and style and are applied across multiple identity categories including race, gender, sexuality, class, nationality, body type, and many other possible crossings with differing effects. And when focusing on media representations the issues and disagreements become even more complex. For example, is the drag of *Mrs. Doubtfire* (1993), where Robin Williams character somewhat realistically poses as an older female nanny, subversive or stereotypical or is it really passing with a completely different effect all together? The meanings of particular performances become the battleground for debates over intent, meaning, and possibilities for subversions or reinforcements of hegemonic ideology. And with the recent advent of reality TV and shows such as *Joe Millionaire* (2003) and *Black. White.*, intent and meaning become intertwined with a focus on authenticity and what creates “reality” for both the participants and the audience. It is within this context that I will argue that some representations in both cinema and television have blurred multiple boundaries, not just those of identity, in order to change how drag and passing are applied and deployed such that what passes for reality and authenticity comes into question at the same time that the purposes of drag and passing are also possibly changing. For example, the recent series *Black. White.* illuminates a particular shift in the deployment of passing for educational purposes that has an interesting history in the media field of journalism. Hence, part of my dissertation will address how educational passing in such texts as *Black Like Me* (Griffin, 1961), *Nickel and Dimed: On (not) Getting By in America* (Ehrenreich, 2001), *Self-Made Man: One Woman’s Journey Into Manhood and Back Again* (Vincent, 2006), and the TV series *Black. White.* utilize passing and employ techniques of drag in differing ways in order to illuminate oppression and to educate individuals about not only oppression but also identity formation. These texts also help to reveal the ground on which

battles about what is authentic and what is real take place. My dissertation will address these educational purposes in journalistic accounts in order to shed light on the ways drag and passing are combined and function as representations of crossing supposedly impermeable boundaries. The arguments that result from this genre-specific examination will lead to a broader examination of the ways in which representations of drag and passing can produce subversive meanings about identity, authenticity, reality, and the possibility of infinite boundaries as well as infinite crossings.

The labels and issues of “drag” and “passing” are only sometimes agreed upon in the scholarly literature in feminist, queer, ethnic, and cultural studies. To further complicate matters, these tropes of passing and drag frequently overlap in media representations which I will argue broaden the possible meanings of each as well as both together. For example, the film *White Chicks* (2004) features two African-American men who go undercover as upper-class white women such that they pass in the plot of the film but not very believably to the eye of the audience: is this drag or passing? Can it be addressed as only one, or does the meaning change when it is addressed as both and complicated by the combination of racial and gendered passing/drag? There is a rich history of discourse surrounding drag and passing separately and, more recently, some scholarship has addressed the two in tandem as they inform and modify each other as well as how different types of passing and drag effect the possibility of different and multiple meanings. I will argue that in media it is almost impossible to address the two as completely different or distinct phenomena because they are so often deployed together in texts. Hence, my dissertation will address both together in order to interrogate the fissures in meaning that become evident when particular texts are not just examined as one or the other, but both, with interesting synthesized results. When looked at in this way, different focal points emerge. In

my dissertation I will revise and re-envision current conversations about drag and passing in order to address the construction of reality; the uses of drag and passing as educational; the relations between similar performances of drag and passing in mainstream culture and the differing currencies of parody and authenticity; the way drag and passing enable and are enabled by other types of blurred boundaries such as those between genres and between levels of cinematic reality; and how these blurred boundaries and crossing have more recently created the possibility of infinite crossings such that what passes for “truth” or “news” on *The Colbert Report* becomes new territory for the analysis of drag, passing, reality, and authenticity.

The scholarship on passing has its starting point in attention to black-passing-for-white in literature and later in film. Attention to this kind of passing initially focused on issues of visibility, access, and personal angst. Most notably, a rich literature has focused on the three *Imitation of Life* texts as well as Nella Larsen’s *Passing* (1927) and argues that passing becomes necessitated by racial inequalities but also does serious psychological damage to the person passing because there is a disjuncture between the “real” identity of the passer and the one they are performing to those around them when they pass. This can be seen in the very title of one book, Brooke Kroeger’s *Passing: When People Can’t Be Who They Are*. While the positive and negative effects of passing, particularly in media, are debatable, there seems to have been consensus that passing is first and foremost about identity and the crossing of supposedly immutable boundaries of identity (Ginsburg, 1996). While many authors from Judith Butler to Mary Ann Doane agree that passing is about identity, whether or not these crossings reinforce or challenge the boundaries of identity has been a point of contention in the literature. In addressing gendered “passing” and its application to transgendered people, Judith Halberstam argues that “Passing as a narrative assumes that there is a self that masquerades as another kind of self and

does so successfully” (1998: 21) and that this in turn only reinforces the idea of innate stable gender categories. And Patrice Rankine (2005) argues that race passing narratives are inherently tragic for the same reason. But many authors including Ginsburg, Siobhan Somerville (1994; 2000), and José Muñoz (1999) argue that by crossing between supposedly set categories of identity, passing actually challenges the essentialism and supposed naturalness of identities by showing how easily they can be traversed.

The literature on drag has a similar trajectory, starting from the analysis of drag queens and gradually expanding to include other types of drag such as drag kings (Volcano and Halberstam, 1999) and the possible application of the term to blackface (Lott). Many argue that because of its very nature of crossing boundaries between identities, drag therefore always has subversive potential. Beginning in 1972, Esther Newton defined drag in *Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America* in general terms as “the clothing of one sex when worn by the other” (3). Since then the definition has been honed to mean parodic or excessive performances of gender. There is a wealth of literature since the 1970s addressing drag queens in particular as a subculture that subverts hegemonic ideals of inherent femininity for female persons by not only showing how males can perform femininity as well but how the excessive femininity of these performances calls out all femininities as performances (Ferris, 1993; Rupp; Butler). But even this has been challenged by such authors as Halberstam who argues this is more applicable to queens and the excess of feminine drag, and kinging has a different sort of performance which challenges the universalist and unmarked nature of maleness through understatement and a “paring down” rather than an excessive performance.

Like passing, there is debate over whether drag (particularly queens) is misogynist or subversive or whether it reveals the constructedness of gender (a la Judith Butler). The most

quoted phrase addressing drag appears in almost every source used in this dissertation and comes from Butler's *Gender Trouble* where she writes, "*In imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself – as well as its contingency*" (1990: 175, italics in original). Some argue that drag queens were once subversive but that this is no longer the case due, in large part, to the appropriation and commercialization of this subculture. Authors addressing "kinging," including Halberstam and many authors in *The Drag King Anthology* (2002), argue that drag queens have become co-opted by the mainstream and it is really drag kings that are the most subversive. Other scholars such as Rupp argue that drag queens still have subversive potential and that there are many feminine drag acts that challenge hegemonic ideology. Still other authors such as Lott and Somerville argue that blackface is in fact a type of drag that shows the ambivalence inherent in the practice as well as the prevalence of combining different forms of boundaries crossings in performances such as the use of gender drag in blackface acts of the 19th century. It is this kind of critical scholarship that demonstrates that there is no one Truth or definitive explication about either drag or passing because not all drag and/or passing are the same. For example, it can (and has been) argued that movie representations such as *To Wong Foo* are stereotypical misogynist performances that demean both gays and women but there are other media texts or films such as *Hedwig* which critically explore the idea and meaning of drag and gender in ways that might subvert dominant hegemonic gender categories and performances.

More recently there has been a surge in scholarship that expands what we see in media as "passing" and "drag" to include such acts as class passing (Foster) as well as attention to performances that combine the two in interesting ways, providing for more multidimensional readings of these often intertwined processes. For example, Amy Robinson (1994) argues that passing and drag are in the eye of the beholder and posits a triangular relationship in passing

literature where there is a passer, a dupe who is passed to, and an in-group clairvoyant who sees a drag performance. She argues that when reading passing literature it is useful to use “the optic apparatuses of drag” (727) in order to further interrogate the meanings of passing. These and other recent scholars are part of a trend that strategically addresses the possible overlaps between drag and passing and their multiple forms in order to address the ways that meaning is created through and challenged by these multiple kinds of crossings.

Before embarking on new analysis of passing, drag, and their combination in theory and representation in the rest of my dissertation, it is first necessary to outline and explain their histories up until this point in order to situate my work within what came before it both theoretically and cinematically. This chapter is the departure point for the rest of my dissertation which focuses on the impact a few particular examples have had or could have on cultural constructions of identity, reality, authenticity, binaries, and the performative. While the majority of this dissertation examines texts that deviate at least slightly from how passing and drag are represented and combined in media and critiqued in media analysis, in this chapter I lay out the bases on which my analysis is founded and in some cases departs from. The history of both passing and drag as well as their combination is rich in film and television and can be traced almost to the very advent of cinema with *A Florida Enchantment* – which is no surprise given their extended history in the performing arts long before that (for example, 19th-century minstrelsy and all the way back to no-female-actor policies in ancient Greek theatre). In this chapter I will give an overview of theoretical attention to passing, drag, and their combination that covers general attention to them as cultural phenomena but focuses primarily on theory about their representation in performance and media. Though my dissertation is primarily about the combinations of passing and drag, it is first necessary to understand the separate scholarly

attention given each before addressing the two together. Below I lay out a theoretical overview of each concept and the films associated with them before addressing their combination. Each section in this chapter presents a corresponding history of passing, drag, or their combination in film, television, and popular culture. While many examples can be interrogated as both passing and drag and indeed the purpose of this dissertation is to do just this in order to illuminate new meanings missed by previous analysis focused on either passing or drag (with notable exceptions that are covered below as well), for the purposes of this chapter practical demarcations between the two have been made in order to trace and delineate large filmic histories. The filmic examples I give here are just that – examples – and by no means are meant to be an exhaustive list but an informative overview that helps to contextualize the theoretical attention and exemplify the arguments that have been made about the concepts and their representations as well as show the breadth and depth of the history of passing and drag in popular culture representations.

While performances of passing, cross-dressing, drag, and blackface have long histories that can be traced back to ancient theatre practices (Greek as well as Japanese among others), Victorian British theatre, and antebellum U.S. minstrelsy, not to mention a very rich literary and theatrical history including the likes of Shakespeare, Twain, and most Peter Pans, I focus this literature and historical review on cinema. Authors such as Lott, Wald, Ferris, Moore, Garber, and many others have already covered in their works the histories of these phenomena (usually separately) in theatre and literature but for the purposes of this dissertation it is a genealogy of media representation that is necessary to illuminate the extended attention to passing and drag in modern popular culture as well as where and how they are combined in unique ways.

Theatre has a long history of banning women from acting and some scholars pinpoint this as a source of male-passing-for-female in the popular performance arts, and indeed a racialized corollary can be found in early 20th century cinema where blackface in film was huge due to bans on black actors interacting with white actresses. But, just as cross-dressing failed to die when women were allowed on the stage, blackface cannot be fully explained in this way either. Foster notes in her book *Class-Passing* that all acting is a kind of passing. This link might partially explain the large history of passing and drag in cinema and popular culture: the preoccupation with and tension caused by acting as a form of passing may have been reiterated in the very texts performed on stage and screen. There seems to be a popular culture obsession with crossing identity boundaries in multiple ways from tragic mulatta characters to situational passing (like *Tootsie*), to movies about blackface, drag queens, transgendered persons¹, to “investigative” reporting that goes “under-cover” as someone else. Outside of the pre-moving-pictures representations of passing and drag (though drag is often termed as cross-dressing, an important distinction that will be covered below) there are literally hundreds of examples of identity boundary play in popular culture in the last century that span all genres and many roles from the main focus to bit parts. And most do not fit entirely into one category or another but bridge both passing and drag, such as the many cases where passes within the film is really seen by audiences more along the lines of drag in such movies as *White Chicks*, *Tootsie*, and most blackface cinema. Though the literature review of theoretical inquests into drag and passing shows that many theorists argue that both can be subversive and challenge the construction and stasis of multiple identity categories, most mainstream films work hard to bring these

¹ As Halberstam argues, transgendered persons are not passing per se, but movies about them inevitable focus on the actor or actress playing them and their expert acting skills that help them pass as either their “opposite” sex or as transgendered itself.

subversions back into the fold to reify rather than challenge the ideologies of binary identity to which our social world generally adheres. The exceptions that refuse to be fully contained by these ideologies are the topic of the rest of this dissertation, but in this chapter I will first explore and explain the majority of passing and drag representation in order to give the context in which the remaining chapters and texts have been produced and interrogated.

PASSING

Literature Review

Passing is distinguished from other forms of identity boundary crossings, particularly drag, as an act that believably crosses a particular boundary – usually of race or gender but also of other categorical binaries – and allows the passer to reside within an identity category that is not their own, based on how others view them. Kroeger addresses the many possible forms of passing when she writes, “In the most general way, it is passing when people effectively present themselves as other than who they understand themselves to be. ... Passing means that other people actually see or experience the identity that the passer is projecting, whether the passer is telegraphing that identity by intention or by chance” (7-8). While it is always debatable how individuals define and construct – as well as are defined and constructed by – categories of identity, within media representations this is the premise of the pass: a character acting as someone s/he is not. But beyond this base definition there are as many arguments about what representations of passing mean as there are forms of passing. Some authors argue that passing is inherently problematic because it reinforces the binaries it crosses while others argue that because it crosses these boundaries it is inherently subversive. Still others argue that passing’s meaning and possibilities for subversion or containment depend on context, function, and form.

My dissertation will fit into this last category, but will also address how audience decodings contribute different meanings as well that are just as important and contribute as much, if not more, to the resultant meanings of drag and passing.

Whatever its meanings, all who write about passing agree that it is, at its core, about the formation and utilization of identities. In the introduction to *Passing and the Fictions of Identity*, Ginsburg writes, “passing is about identities: their creation or imposition, their adoption or rejection, their accompanying rewards or penalties. Passing is also about the boundaries established between identity categories and about the individual and cultural anxieties induced by boundary crossing. Finally, passing is about specularity: the visible and the invisible, the seen and the unseen” (2). Traditionally, passing (particularly black-for-white, but also as a function of closeted gay identity and other crossings) is about passing for the unmarked category in order to “appropriate the ‘privileges’ of invisibility” (Ginsburg 15) and pass “up” such as in black-passing-for-white or female-passing-for-male. Other authors – including Eve Sedgwick and Judith Butler commenting on very different forms of passing as sexuality passing in the closet (Sedgwick 1990) and racial passing in Nella Larsen’s novel *Passing* (Butler, 1993) – relate the drive for invisibility in representations of passing to a marked silence by the passer such that what is visible speaks for itself and particularly speaks to the assumptions of the person being passed to. Butler writes that in Larsen’s novel the character Clare passes not only because she is light-skinned but because she also “withholds the conversational marker which would counter the hegemonic presumption that she is white” (1993: 171). Passing is premised upon the visual, the visible, and recognition simultaneously as it is intertwined with invisibility, silence, and misrecognition. This relation of silence, visibility, and recognition between the passer and the “passed to” is also the anxiety and ambivalence inherent within representations of passing that

rely on the visual and are premised on recognition but also misrecognition, on communication but also silence.

One of the consistent parts in most representations of passing and the theoretical attention to them is held within this anxiety of (mis)recognition which within media representations of passing (as well as within society) can be accompanied by severe violence if the passer fails. But when s/he succeeds, it is necessary within media representations to create recognition of the pass *as* pass within the diegesis as well as to the audience at large in order to still communicate the anxiety and ambivalence of passing. Amy Robinson writes of this particular function of visibility and identification:

In the many textual incarnations of passing, a triangular event appears with conspicuous regularity. Three participants – the passer, the dupe, and a representative of the in-group – enact a complex narrative scenario in which a successful pass is performed in the presence of a literate member of the in-group. As a standard feature of the passing narrative, such a triangle poses the question of the passer’s ‘real’ identity as a function of the lens through which it is viewed. Resituating the question of knowing and telling in the terms of two competing discourses of recognition, the pass emerges as a discursive encounter between two epistemological paradigms. (723-724)

This is also addressed by Foster who argues “Part of any ‘passing’ narrative is the reveal” (114). A representation cannot be recognized as one of successful passing unless there is a reveal, at the very least to the audience and usually within the plot as well, as Foster shows within recent reality TV shows that include multiple forms of passing such as *Joe Millionaire* where what viewers most want, and what is indeed contained within the most-watched finales of such shows, is the reveal of “real” identity. Regardless of how passing is addressed as either disrupting or reinforcing a “real” identity, within the context of the triangle of identification posited by Robinson what holds the most interest – both narratively and theoretically – in representations of passing is who sees/knows what and how this positions actors, including the audience, in very

different points of view that have the possibility of changing and “resituating the question of knowing.”

Passing has its longest history as a convention, primarily in literature but also in film, in narratives of racial passing. And within racial passing it is black-passing-for-white that receives the most theoretical attention. This is in part due to the origins of the term “passing” itself: “Black-for-white passing first brought the Americanism *passing* into use,” writes Kroeger (4). Passing, both social and representational, in the 18th, 19th, and early 20th centuries was a function primarily of attempting to access the privileges denied African-Americans and was enabled by the one-drop rule. Within literature and early film this is usually figured by the “tragic mulatta” as represented in such texts as *Imitation of Life* (a 1933 novel as well as two film versions, 1934 and 1959) and Nella Larsen’s novel *Passing* (1929). There are many other popular culture tragic mulatta/o representations, but these texts are the ones most often dealt with by authors addressing the representations of passing. In a current climate of acceptance and utilization of multiracial identity, it is important to remember that until recently this was not a possibility of identification, within media or otherwise, and especially not for African-Americans whose identity has been premised upon the one-drop rule since at least the time of Jim Crow when, regardless of appearance or heritage, one drop of African blood legally defined a person’s identity as black (G. Reginald Daniel, 2002). In her article “Reading the Intersection of Race and Gender in Narratives of Passing,” Valerie Smith addresses the relation between passing and legal definitions of blackness when she argues, “Given the legal basis of the notion of passing, it is not surprising that classic passing narratives seem ideologically self-contradictory. Narratives of passing, whether written by African American or by white authors, presume the African American internalization of the ‘one-drop’ and the related ‘hypo-descent’ rules” (1994: 44). This

contradictory position thus created the opportunity for passing within both society and literature because, as Smith articulates, “The light-skinned black body thus both invokes and transgresses the boundaries between the races and the sexes that structure the American social hierarchy. It indicates a contradiction between appearance and ‘essential’ racial identity within a system of racial distinctions based upon differences presumed to be visible” (45). Race has a history of being presumed to be visible, and passing - as well as the figure of the mulatta within passing – profoundly troubles this presumption, showing both its fissures and the attempts to hide them.

This question of visibility is at the core of narratives of passing within literature but even more so within film, where the logic of visibility is doubly confounded not only by the trope of passing itself but by the necessity of visually representing it. Mary Ann Doane writes,

[I]n the cinema [passing] produces a dilemma which is absent in its literary incarnation, for film requires an actual embodiment of the figure of the tragic mulatta – and hence a choice of the racial identity (defined genealogically) of the actress who represents the figure. ... But it also tends to demonstrate inadvertently the quiescent discordance between ideologies of racial identity (defined by blood) and cinematic ideologies of the real (as defined by the visible). . . . The success of typecasting hinges upon assumptions based on visual certainty or the immediate unthought knowledge one gains from looking. (1991: 235)

This is also where we can begin to see similarities between different kinds of passing, their representations, and the theoretical attention paid to them. This issue of visuality within film is also a large concern within cinematic narratives of gendered passing. Just as those who wrote about *The Imitation of Life* addressed the representation of the tragic mulatta Peola by biracial Fredi Washington in the 1934 version juxtaposed to that of Sarah Jane by white actress Susan Kohner in the 1959 version (usually attributed to the kiss scene which supposedly couldn’t be handled by white audiences if the actress wasn’t “really” white), similar attention is paid those actors and actresses portraying the characters who cross gender and/or sex boundaries. In her article “The New Queer Spectator,” Michele Aaron addresses this issue of cinematic

representation in her attention to *Boys Don't Cry* where it is not the actual identity of Brandon Teena or how he enacted it in real life that was spectacularized by/for the audience but Hilary Swank's performance of passing that got the most attention: "it is Hilary Swank's cross-dressed success, her 'stellar stunt performance' as Brandon, which made the film an international hit, and garnered her an Oscar among numerous other awards. Indeed, it was not so much Brandon's as Swank's passing as a man that was at stake in the reception of *Boys*, and she more than merely passed, she got gold" (2004: 189). Ironically, in a representational trope that poses "a 'real' inner self against the outer surface of the pass" (Robinson, 730) and traditionally results in reifying the inner Self or punishing the passer for not returning to the fold, cinema in effect emphasizes the visual necessity of looking the part, and passing realistically.

The majority of theoretical literature on the trope of passing in media representations addresses its origins in racial passing – particularly black-for-white passing but also white-for-black passing figured through attention to John Howard Griffin's autoethnography *Black Like Me* (1960). But in the past two decades, scholarly consideration has shifted to representations of gender/sex passing as well as other forms of passing represented in popular media and their relations to each other, including sexuality passing and the function of the closet, and most recently the function of class passing that Foster argues has been wholly ignored by scholars addressing passing in popular media. Where racial passing is often addressed as dependent on skin color, gender or sex passing is at least partially dependent on clothing and appropriating the props of gender that are the signposts of masculine and feminine identity. In her influential book *Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety*, Garber argues that "the desire to pass ... mandates conformity to prevailing vestimentary rhetoric, and a corresponding realism of expectation" (50). While physical approximation of the "opposite" sex is necessary in gender or

sex passing (as noted in the sock scene in *Boys Don't Cry* as well as other cinematic representation including the bodysuit with breasts in *Mrs. Doubtfire*), one might say here that clothes make the man (or woman). Discussion of gender or sex passing becomes tricky, though, because of the confluence between representations and real life. Most serious representations of gender/sex passing occur in cinematic projections of transsexual-identified persons which problematizes the question of passing with the question of self identification. This differentiates it from most representations of racial passing where an inherent identity (even if partial) is assumed to some extent and there is no discourse (as yet at least) for people who want, or a representation of, a possibility of a switch in racial self identification. For this reason I, like most others who address the topic, confine my study to representations of the sex/gender pass such as Aaron's attention to Swank's portrayal of Brandon Teena rather than the actual person Brandon Teena. It is unproductive to address "real life" transsexual identity in the context of passing because, as Halberstam argues in *Female Masculinity*, "For many gender deviants, the notion of passing is singularly unhelpful. Passing as a narrative assumes that there is a self that masquerades as another kind of self and does so successfully" (1998: 21). But this argument does not rule out the possible usefulness of attending to how narratives and representations of passing are produced and consumed *as* passing (or drag) in order to illuminate how they, and identity in general, function in and affect society and culture.

Halberstam, and others who address either race or gender passing, find the idea and representation of passing problematic because, they argue, it merely reinforces set categories within the binary rather than challenging them and ultimately leave these categories whole and intact (Halberstam, 1998: 171). This is reiterated in terms of race passing by authors including Rankine who writes, "Passing is, at core, a personal tragedy, a story of loss as much as an

anecdote about access” (7). But labeling racial passing as necessarily a tragedy evacuates any other possibilities of meaning and pre-empts other scholars’ arguments that it might be a strategic crossing, like others, with possibilities of subversion.

In recent scholarship on passing, attention to the relations between different kinds of passing and their representations has been brought to the fore. For example, in her 2005 book *Class-Passing: Social Mobility in Film and Popular Culture*, Foster interrogates what she terms class-passing in relation to other forms of passing. She argues that class-passing has been historically ignored even though it has been ever-present as a necessary part of the American Dream. She writes,

A significant number of films, often but not always romances, comedies, and Horatio Alger-type narratives, are about class mobility and what I called class-passing. This class-passing often involves marrying up, marrying down, and moving through social positions because of a change in job, marriage, or any number of plot contrivances. I began to obsess about this notion of class-passing and its relationship to the American Dream of social mobility. I began to wonder how class-passing is like and unlike passing in terms of race or gender...why is class-passing so often celebrated rather than problematized or stigmatized? (4)

One might argue that Foster elides class mobility with class passing, but this would miss her point of the erasure of the representation of and desire for class passing/mobility based on notions of privileges available and received that are indeed similar to those representations of black-passing-for-white as well as quite possibly woman-passing-for-man. While there are obviously differences between the functions and forms of representations of race, gender, and class passing as well as other possible crossings, the similarities are most striking in creating the possibility of a generic taxonomy of passing that might be useful in media critiques. Like Foster, I aim to critically re-apply theoretical terms of passing and drag outside their usual zones in order to reveal previously unseen politics of representation of identity, in particular the relation

between boundaries, reality, and authenticity as well as how passing and drag might be used to disrupt these concepts and ideologies.

One of the similarities between scholarly attentions to different kinds of passing is the lack of agreement on its potential meaning and disruption of norms. Where authors such as Halberstam and Rankine quoted above see passing as not useful because it reinforces and fixes stable categories of identity, many other authors see it as exactly the opposite – as that which inherently questions and disrupts the stability of identity categories. Ginsburg writes, “both the process and the discourse of passing challenge the essentialism that is often the foundation of identity politics, a challenge that may be seen as either threatening or liberating but in either instance discloses the truth that identities are not singularly true or false but multiple and contingent.” (4). This is also argued by multiple authors who say passing challenges the very idea of authentic identity, including Samira Kawash who writes, “Passing insists on the fallacy of identity as a *content* of social, psychological, national, or cultural attributes, whether bestowed by nature or produced by society” (“*The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man: (Passing for) Black Passing for White*,” 1996: 70), and Valeria Rohy who writes that “In matters of race as well as sexuality, passing both invokes and unravels the logic of primary and secondary, authenticity and inauthenticity, candor and duplicity, by placing in question the priority of what is claimed as ‘true’ identity,” thus revealing the “arbitrary foundations of categories” (“Displacing Desire: Passing, Nostalgia, and *Giovanni’s Room*,” 1996: 227). But, as with most things when it comes to binaries, the most convincing arguments are those that say the answer lies somewhere in-between, depending on the context, of course. In *Disidentifications*, Muñoz argues that “The subject who passes can be simultaneously identifying with and rejecting a dominant form” (108) and Somerville argues that “while racial, gender, or sexual impersonation

can disrupt the supposedly ‘natural’ status of those boundaries, it can also reaffirm the cultural hierarchies associated with racial and sexual boundaries” (1994: 15-16). The subversive or reaffirming meanings of passing can be multiple and overlapping. Not only can one particular representation be both partially subversive and partially reifying of identity categories, the consumption of these representations can contribute to these meanings as well, opening up the possibility for Muñoz’s “disidentificatory practices” by which subversion can be in the eye of the beholder – and these disidentificatory practices reinforce the discourse of passing as dependent on how the people being passed to (both within the plot of narratives as well as in the audience) see it, interpret it, and thus contribute to its denotation, connotation, and function within culture.

Filmic Overview

Passing has a long history in cinema and television. There are a few different kinds of what can be called “passing” in popular culture representations. Many of them involve different levels of drag as well and these will be address in a later section². The most famous passing category is the “tragic mulatto/a” narrative of mixed-raced individuals defined as black because of the one-drop rule who pass as white in a segregated society. There are also more recently multiple transgender stories where media, awards, and press releases focus as much (or more) on the gender and sex of the actress or actor as on the story told in the film. For example, Hilary Swank’s portrayal of Brandon Teena in *Boys Don’t Cry* received accolades and awards for her “believable” passing as a female-to-male transgendered individual (see above) as did Felicity Huffman for her portrayal in *Transamerica* (2005) of a male-to-female transgendered individual. There are a few main passing narratives that have been popular in media culture over the last

² Including blackface which was enacted similar to drag but passed within the filmic reality, i.e. those in blackface were performing black characters and this was uncommented upon within films as well as by audiences at the time.

century³. These popular passing stories are the tragic mulatto/a (which can be correlated to some extent with what can be termed a tragic transgendered narrative), detective or investigative passing, and comedic passing stories aimed specifically at “tricking” people. In addition to this there is a history of popular public figures such as actors and musicians who passed in their public personas. It must be noted that these categories are artificial demarcations and many examples fit into more than one category just as many examples are simultaneously both passing and drag. The following is meant to give a general idea of the multitude of possible representations and enactments of these phenomena in popular culture. I focus primarily on the Tragic Mulatta genre in order to give a specific sense of at least one kind of passing that has a long filmic history.

Tragic Mulatto/a

The tragic mulatto/a character has a history that can be traced back to literature written in slavery times in the United States. From the 1853 *Clotel: the President's Daughters*, Nella Larson's popular 1929 novella *Passing*, to *The Human Stain* written by Phillip Roth in 2000 and adapted into a 2003 movie with Anthony Hopkins in the starring role, these mixed-raced characters are a category all their own because of their tragic nature. The most popular filmic examples include *Pinky* (1949), *Lost Boundaries* (1949), *I Passed For White* (1960), two versions of *Imitation of Life* (1934 and 1959), and most recently *Human Stain*. The key element to all of these novels and films is that these mixed-raced characters (usually women, but not always) are not only tragic because of their mixed-heritage that means they can never fit into

³ This is excluding the popular passing/drag duo used in multiple comedies where character pass within the diegetic world but are seen by audiences as in drag such as *Tootsie* and *Mrs. Doubtfire*. This will be addressed in a separate section.

either black or white worlds but specifically their attempts to pass as white result in harsh consequences, a moral frequently related to a (white) fear of miscegenation. Most of these examples fit into the genre of melodrama. As addressed in the above literature review, the most popular of these narratives, at least with academics, was the *Imitation of Life* films made in 1934 and 1959. These films together represent two different eras of American history and as such are a prime target for interrogating representations of passing across time periods because they share a storyline.

Fannie Hurst, a white Jewish American from the North, wrote *Imitation of Life* in 1933. The novel was almost immediately taken up by Universal Pictures for production as a black-and-white movie directed by John Stahl and released in 1934 starring Claudette Colbert, Louise Beavers, and Fredi Washington. In 1959 Douglas Sirk released through Universal again a remake in color with a drastically changed storyline starring Lana Turner and Susan Kohner. Both filmic adaptations make key changes to the preceding versions that fundamentally change the themes of the story. *Imitation of Life* is a story of two mothers and two daughters - one pair is white, the other black. Though technically the white mother and daughter are the main characters, both movies are drawn to the more turbulent aspects of the black mother and her light-skinned daughter who wants to pass as white.

In both films Peola (1934) and Sarah Jane (1959) (the African-American daughter) employ multiple forms of passing from expressing their whiteness to those around them to instances such as when Sarah Jane is outed by her mother while passing at school as a child. Sarah Jane says to her mother: “they didn't ask me - why should I tell them?” (*Imitation of Life* 1959). The defining characteristics of the “tragic mulatto/a” text are a suffering associated with an inability to fit into set categories of black and white and punishment for trying to pass “up”

into the white category. The following scene from the 1934 version is replicated to some extent in the 1959 version as well:

Peola: mother I've done everything you wanted me to, ... I just couldn't bear it. ... I want to go away... I mean I want to go away and you mustn't see me, own me or claim me or anything, I mean even if you pass me on the street you'll have to pass me by.

Bea (white mother): No, Peola!

Peola: Oh I know it's terrible of me Miss Bea but you don't know what it is to look white and be black, you don't know, I can't go on this way any longer.

Delilah (Peola's mother): I can't give up my baby. ...

Peola: You've got to promise me mother.

Delilah: I'm your mammy child, I ain't no white mother. It's too much to ask of me, ...I ain't got the strength.

Peola: I'm sorry mother, I know it's asking a lot, but I've got to live my own life.

Goodbye. [they part, both in tears]

This is the last time Peola and her mother speak to each other before Delilah dies (presumably from a broken heart because of Peola, which is problematic in its own right) and Peola sees the errors of her ways (thus being punished for her passing with her mother's death). But the pain in passing experienced by both mother and daughter is revealed in this scene as well as its counterpart in the 1959 version in which Annie goes to Los Angeles to see her daughter one last time. Sarah Jane says, "Well might as well pack, I suppose you've been to the boss, lost me my job and my friends" as she begins throwing her things in a suitcase. Annie tells her this time she hasn't done that (as she had in a previous instance of discovering Sarah Jane's passing). Annie asks Sarah Jane if she is happy and she chokes out through sobs, "I'm white, white, WHITE, does that answer you?" And later tells Annie, "Please mamma go, if ever we pass on the street please don't recognize me." At which point Sarah Jane's friend comes in the room and Annie tells her she used to look after Miss Linda (Sarah Jane's pseudonym), thus protecting Sarah Jane's passing, before she and Sarah Jane exchange one last tortured look through tears before she departs. Sarah Jane continues to cry after Annie leaves while trying to hide this from her friend who says, "well child, so you had a mammy?" and Sarah Jane responds through tears as

she presses her face on the closed door, “all my life.” The complexity of the pain suffered by both reveals that passing is not easy but hard and hurts the passer as well as her black friends and family whom she must desert.

While there are these subversive inroads that show the complicated experience of passing, overall both films replicate what Smith refers to in her article “Reading the Intersection of Race and Gender in Narratives of Passing” as the predetermined narrative trajectories of classic passing texts which:

so fully naturalize certain givens that they mask a range of contradictions inherent within them. For instance, they presuppose that characters who pass for white are betrayers of the black race, and they depend, almost inevitably, upon the association of blackness with self-denial and suffering, and of whiteness with selfishness and material comfort. The combination of these points ... has the effect of advocating black accommodationism, since the texts repeatedly punish at least this particular form of upward mobility. These texts thus become sites where antiracist and white supremacist ideologies converge, encouraging their black readers to stay in their places. (1994: 43-44).

These passing narratives often reveal a white cultural fear and policing of miscegenation – the representation of which in film was prohibited by the Hays Motion Picture Production Code from 1930 to 1968. The 1934 production notes (housed at the Margaret Herrick Academy Library) reveal an extensive fight over the underlying theme of miscegenation that reveals the historical context of these representations. In one among many correspondences that address miscegenation, Moving Picture Censor Joseph Breen of the Motion Picture Producers Association wrote to Harry Zehlner of Universal Pictures, “This main theme is founded upon the results of sex association between the white and black race (miscegenation), and as such, in our opinion, it not only violates the Production Code but is very dangerous from the standpoint of both of the industry and public policy. It therefore suggests to us the type of story, which, if picturized, will necessarily have to be rejected.” Unlike the original novel which has a Peola that marries a white man and moves to Europe, conservative Hollywood dictated that Peola must

return to her black identity in order to make the film acceptable to white audiences and thus nullify the “threat” of further miscegenation. In the end, Peola goes back to her designated place as a black woman in a colored teachers college in the South where color lines were the sharpest. This ending implies rectification of past miscegenation because Peola goes back to the black community, thus perpetuating the white social myth of separate worlds. Brooke Kroeger sums up the attitude and representation of the tragic mulatto/a character and the scholarly attention to it well when she writes:

We judge the Peolas harshly for the lies and deceptions they perpetrate, and for the pain and embarrassment they seem so willing to inflict on those they owe the most. We accuse them of duplicity, of cowardice, of not being themselves, of not fighting the good fight. Yet think of Peola’s seventy-year-old example through twenty-first-century eyes, Of life, she asked no more than to hold on to privileges sure to be denied in her adult future for reasons that made no sense. And what were these gold-standard privileges she so determinedly sought? The chance for nothing more than a job other than housemaid and marriage to someone she loved. Clearly Racism, not Peola, was the bad guy in *Imitation*. If we didn’t grasp this the first few times we saw the movie, we know it now. (2)

Detective/Investigative Passing

There are both fictional and non-fictional investigative passing stories. These range from John Howard Griffin’s *Black Like Me* (1961) and its fictional cinematic incarnation, movies such as *Gentleman’s Agreement* (1947) which also fictionally portray a journalist’s investigation of being Jewish, and multiple book exposés including *Soul Sister* (1969), *Bessie Yellowhair* (1973), *Self-Made Man* (2006), and *Nickel and Dimed* (2001). These non-fiction accounts generally aim at revealing “truths” about identity and social treatment of “Others”. There have also been a few notable Reality TV shows that also fit more into this category than the “duping” category below including *Black. White.* (2006), *30 Days* (2005, 2006, 2008), and *Undercover Boss* (2009-2011). Overall these texts tend towards expressing a moral dilemma about going against one’s “authentic” identity and “lying” to those around them as well as a fear of losing oneself in the act

of becoming the “Other,” all of which is usually excused by the quest for “truth.” These passing stories are the topic of Chapter Four and more detailed information can be found there on the topic of how passing has been used to shore up binary ideals of Self/Other as well as those of singular authentic identity in an objective reality.

Passing's Dupes

With the advent of both television and portable cameras, a new form of entertainment has been using passing for popular consumption. These are TV shows and movies where “real” people attempt to pass in the “real world” or for a competition and the resulting “dupes” can be laughed at by a larger audience who identifies with the passer. Examples in this genre contain mostly Reality TV shows and a few comedies such as *Joe Millionaire* (2003), *Gay Straight or Taken?* (2007), *The Ali G Show* (2003-2004), *Borat* (2006), and *My Big Fat Obnoxious Fiancé* (2004).

Other Passing Examples

There are a few other notable genres of passing in popular culture. One of these is the passing of actual persons within their public careers. With the changing definitions of race and the acceptance of mixed-race identification this category is something of an anachronism – but because of the one-drop rule enforced before the Civil Rights Era, many actors and actresses had to (or chose to) deny any non-white heritage in order to achieve and maintain popularity and desirable film roles. This is mirrored in the 20th century by gay and lesbian actors and actresses who stayed in the closet. Examples of actors and actresses who passed as “white” within the context of the one-drop rule that dictated that any African-American or non-white heritage designated the person as non-white include Carol Channing whose paternal grandmother was

black and Raquel Welsh who was urged in her early career to lighten her hair and skin to erase her Bolivian ancestry (Nittle, “Passing for White in Hollywood” at about.com). In her book *Off-White Hollywood* (2001), Diane Negra chronicle’s ethnic female stardom noting multiple actresses who changed their names to fit into the Euro-American ideal of whiteness such as Rita Hayworth, Doris Day, Paulette Goddard, and Natalie Wood (respectively the former Margarita Cansino, Doris von Kappelhoff, Pauline Levy, and Natasha Zacharenko-Gurdin). Examples of closeted actors who passed as straight during the height of their careers include Rock Hudson and director Vincente Minnelli as well as many others – most recently Ellen Degeneres, Rupert Everett, and Patrick Harris, all of who eventually came out but began their career passing as straight. The topic of career passing is addressed in Chapter Two where I example the career of Cher and her journey through multiple ethnic identities as well as her unique ethnic chameleonism that combine elements of passing and drag. This chapter on Cher addresses the more public utilization of passing between categories that creates a unique position from which to address what passing itself might accomplish and reveal about the construction and deployment of identity as well as authenticity and naturalness.

Another interesting passing motif in film can be termed nationalist passing. From supporting characters in *The Good Earth* (1937) and multiple Native American extras in westerns played by actors with Hispanic heritage, to Japanese characters in *Memoirs of a Geisha* (2005) played by Chinese actors and actresses, Hollywood often finds it convenient and easy to substitute non-white actors and actresses for any number of other non-white roles. This in effect reiterates the Othering of all non-white identities – grouping multiple national and ethnic identities together as not white and thus interchangeable. With the recent release of *Memoirs of a Geisha* within a more international filmic milieu this topic came to the forefront with Japanese

anger at the use of Chinese actresses in the film including a boycott of the movie (Song Hwee Lim, “Is the Trans- in Transnational the Trans- in Transgender?” 2007). These examples as well as those in the above paragraphs on examples of passing in media illustrate the muddled ground of passing in “reality” where, because of the unstable ground of identity itself, defining and addressing passing becomes a sticky subject such that the “passing” of Chinese for Japanese went entirely unnoticed and uncommented upon in the U.S. but explicitly *did not* pass in Japan. In *Dragon Seed* (1944) as well as in *Black Narcissus* (1947), the lead actresses (Hepburn and Jean Simmons respectively) passed to audiences and within the film through what to today’s audiences might appear as drag enactments such as shoe polish coloring of the skin and tape on eyelids to perform a different race or ethnicity (see section on drag and passing for more on this phenomenon). These examples illuminate the importance of context in consumption of these texts: what was once uncritically passing (including blackface in the past) might in today’s reality be seen very differently. This opens up questioning of the singularity and objectivity of reality itself through a mixed interrogation that addresses aspects of passing and drag contextually.

DRAG

Literature Review

When one hears the term “drag,” what first comes to mind is usually “drag queen.” While this is partly from the origination of the term in the 1850s’ theater (Halberstam; Lawrence Senelick 1993), it has also come to mean more widely the act of performing gender parodically and/or excessively and has recently been related to blackface minstrelsy as well. Authors such as Michael Moore in his book *Drag!: Male and Female Impersonators on Stage, Screen, and*

Television (1994) and Newton in the first academic book written about drag (queens), *Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America* (1972), define drag in general terms as “the clothing of one sex when worn by the other” (Newton, 3). But both these authors’ titles belie a conflation that other theorists addressing drag attempt to avoid: that of drag with impersonation. While part of this conflation dates back to the origination of the term “drag” in early theatrical cross-dressing – Moore and others point out that “drag ... is as old as theatre itself” (1) – scholarship from the 1990s to the present has found it more productive to differentiate the practice of drag from other forms of cross-dressing or impersonations, particularly as “Performing gender with the specific intention to fail” (Koenig, 146) which in turn produces drag as a parodic performance (Butler; Muñoz; Neeve “Amy” Neevil). This delineates drag specifically from passing. Other authors, including Halberstam and Garber, argue that part of drag is in the audience as “a technique for double-reading gender” (Garber, 152). Halberstam, and others, argue that drag and its parodic or subversive elements – particularly for drag kings, since queens have been recently co-opted into the mainstream – is at least partially produced through the viewing practices of queer audiences in the performance space of queer nightclubs (Halberstam; Surkan; Bradford).

Modern drag can be delineated from cross-dressing by means of its relationship to camp. While some cross-dressing can be seen as drag, not all fits into this drag category and – as Garber’s book illustrates – some instances can be categorized as passing and others still as neither drag nor passing (for example the comic Eddie Izzard who performs and claims he is most comfortable in women’s clothing but who makes no effort to pass as or parody women). Camp is a form of queering popular culture. “The process of queering,” according to Gust A. Yep and John P. Elia, “attempts to make the familiar into something unfamiliar and strange so

that analysis can reveal underlying relations of power” (2007: 30). Camp originated as a gay male practice in the 1950s and is a practice that takes many pieces of popular culture, not just those relating to sexuality, reclaiming and recycling them in order to mark them with new meanings. Corey Creekmur and Alexander Doty explain camp and its meaning in their introduction to *Out In Culture: Gay, Lesbian and Queer Essays on Popular Culture*:

An attitude at once casual and severe, affectionate and ironic, camp served to deflate the pretensions of mainstream culture while elevating what that same culture devalued or repressed, thus providing a strategy for rewriting and questioning the meanings and values of mainstream representations. Camp was also, for some time, an “insider’s” attitude and knowledge, a means not only of disturbing dominant cultural values but also of disseminating information about who (or what) was in – that is, in the life (homosexual), in the know, au courant, avant-garde, or, to use a later term, hip. (1995: 2)

Drag queens, though at times disparaged, have always been intertwined with the gay camp community. The insider viewer or reader of drag queens performs and participates in a camp appropriation of femininity. This includes the claiming of icons such as Judy Garland and Bette Davis as well as many previously disparaged “kitsch” images and items that then came to connote gayness as well as drag queen impersonations of Judy, Bette, Liza Minnelli, and many others.⁴

Before Halberstam’s groundbreaking work *Female Masculinity* in 1998, scholarship on drag was scholarship on drag queens. Beginning with Esther Newton’s work in the 1970s which exposed drag queens as a particular male homosexual practice of performing excessive femininity, many authors since then, including Butler, have addressed the production and consumption of drag queen performance. Newton argues that “The gay world, via drag, says that sex-role behavior is an appearance; it is ‘outside.’ It can be manipulated at will” (103). Newton (as well as others, including Garber) also addresses the physical production of drag queens

⁴ For more on camp and its relation to drag, see Chapter Two on Cher and Chapter Three on the drag queen Divine.

through the use (and at many times altered use) of feminine props and clothing. Butler addresses a general drag when she writes, “*In imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself— as well as its contingency.*” Indeed, part of the pleasure, the giddiness of the performance is in the recognition of a radical contingency in the relation between sex and gender in the face of cultural configurations of causal unities that are regularly assumed to be natural and necessary” (1990: 175, italics in original). But it seems she is primarily addressing drag queens when she write “As much as drag creates a unified picture of ‘woman’ (what its critics often oppose), it also reveals the distinctness of those aspects of gendered experience which are falsely naturalized as a unity through the regulatory fiction of heterosexual coherence” (1990: 175) and later uses the film about drag queens *Paris Is Burning* (1990) as well as argues against simplistic radical feminist critiques of drag as misogynist in favor of a view of drag as radically ambivalent (1990; 1993). Drag queens are more prevalent, historically as well as recently, than drag kings and attention to the specific production of femininity as excess in queen performances creates a particular picture of the artificial nature of construction of “woman,” but it is important not to conflate the two since they have different histories and enactments.

Halberstam’s work on female masculinity and her later collaboration with Del LaGrace Volcano on *The Drag King Book* heralded a new twist in the theoretical attention to drag that modified what drag meant when “kinging” was taken into account. In *Female Masculinity*, Halberstam writes that “A drag king is a female (usually) who dresses up in recognizably male costume and performs theatrically in that costume” (232). While this seems to follow the general definition of drag applicable to queens and kings, further inquiry reveals the key difference embedded in *how* theatrical maleness is performed fundamentally differently than the performance of femaleness. In *The Drag King Book*, Halberstam draws attention to the fact that

whereas drag queens usually perform an excessive femininity, drag kings' masculinity is usually "achieved through a process of paring down" (35). While props are necessary for both queen and king performances, what it means to perform one or the other is addressed as quite different in literature about drag kings (Kathryn Rosenfield, "Drag King Magic: Performing/Becoming the Other," 2002). In an article in *The Drag King Anthology* titled "Whose Drag Is It Anyway?: Drag Kings and Monarchy in the UK," Annabelle Willox argues that drag kings and queens are fundamentally different from each other:

By parodying the presumed original of gender, from which femininity as Other is a derivative, drag kings do not simply question masculinities, they question what can be parodied. This is a fundamental difference between drag kings and queens in that drag queens simply parody the masquerade of femininity through their performances, yet femininity as masquerade is always already parodic as it is only ever a performance. Drag kings, on the other hand, question the distinctions between masculinity and femininity, camp and masculinity, performance and masquerade, by parodying that which society presumes to be a pre-given: masculinity. (2002: 280)

Branching out from Butler's use of drag that shows all femininity as a performance of sorts, drag king scholarship addresses the difference enacted when the unmarked category of maleness is parodied. In *Female Masculinity* Halberstam writes, "Performances of masculinity seem to demand a different genre of humor and performance. It is difficult to make masculinity the target of camp precisely because, as we have noted, masculinity tends to manifest as non-performative" (238). From this idea many writers on the subject of drag kings tend to mark king performances as inherently more subversive than queen performances because, writes Alisa Solomon, "'man' is the presumed universal, and 'woman' the gussied-up Other, drag changes meaning depending on who's wearing it, depending on which way the vestments are crossed. And since femininity is *always* drag, no matter who paints on the nail polish and mascara, it's easy to caricature" (1993: 145). Solomon here also draws on Butler's theoretical work on gender, and particularly femininity, as a "regulatory fiction" (quoted in Solomon 145) to argue that femininity in general

is always a fiction and always performance based on the props of femaleness such as makeup, jewelry, heels, etc. But dragging maleness through the parodic mud first must reveal masculinity itself as a performance as well before creating a parody of the performance of the unmarked universal category of maleness. For this reason, where drag queens as representations are often ambivalently interrogated for traces (or more than traces) of misogyny, drag kings perform misogyny in order to refute its naturalness as part of a male masculinity: “by exposing smarmy male attentions to femaleness as staged, the drag king refuses any construction of misogyny as the natural order of things,” argues Halberstam (30).

Authors including Halberstam, Butler, Muñoz, Newton, and the many authors in *The Drag King Anthology*, argue that drag is at the very least potentially subversive. While most who write about drag kings argue for an undeniability of its subversive nature (as opposed to drag queens), the appropriating of representations of drag queens in mainstream culture as well as the possibility of misogyny lead many, including Butler, to argue that even in these co-opted or denigrated instances drag’s ambivalence leaves the door open for the possibility of subversion because of its contradictory location on the boundaries of gender distinctions. Butler argues that in many mainstream representations of drag such as *Victor Victoria* (1980), *Tootsie* (1982), and *Some Like It Hot* (1959) that she “would be reticent to call them subversive” (*Bodies That Matter* 126), but that even when mainstream representations such as these are taken into account, there is still a “critical potential of ‘drag’” which “centrally concerns a critique of a prevailing truth-regime of ‘sex,’ one that I take to be pervasively heterosexist: the distinction between the ‘inside’ truth of femininity, considered as psychic disposition or ego-core, and the ‘outside’ truth, considered as appearance or presentation, produces a contradictory formation of gender in which no fixed ‘truth’ can be established” (233-234). Even though drag can be and many times is

unsubversively appropriated in mainstream media, there is always still the kernel of subversive possibility encased in its ambivalent nature. For this reason a link between drag and blackface as related sites of contested textual terrain have led some authors to a more nuanced and contextual analysis of those cultural texts that utilize what many have dismissed as simple racism in a racist time, yielding instead a conclusion that looks more closely at the reasons, contexts, and productions of such representations.

Blackface and Drag

In addressing the misogynist nature of some drag queen performances (though definitely not all), In “It’s Never Too Late to Switch: Crossing Toward Power,” Solomon argues that a connection between the representations in some drag queen performances have the same effect as blackface minstrelsy representations of the past. She writes of misogynist drag and blackface as both being “a kind of dressing down by dressing up. Misogynist drag ... like racist blackface, reassures, making fun of the socially subservient class by parodying it, always reminding the viewer that the power-granting penis remains – what a relief! – just beneath the skirts. This is slumming; in the end it restores and reifies the standing order.” (1993: 145). A connection between the excesses and parody of drag and performances of minstrelsy has been forged by others in recent years as well. Drag and minstrel representations are in fact quite similar, utilizing the excessive presentation of markers of gender or race to parody the “Other”: false eyelashes and glittery archly painted eyebrows for drag queens, black charcoal for blackface, and exaggerated lips and overly typecast clothing as well as grandiose gestures for both. In her article “‘To Be Real’: Drag, Minstrelsy and Identity in the New Millennium,” Esther Godfrey asks, “Why does minstrelsy offend in ways that drag does not? ... an analysis of the ways both gender

and race are performed, subverted and affirmed will begin to move the discussion forward and reveal the political possibilities that parody holds” (4). But before we can address Godfrey’s call for analysis, we must first address the phenomenon and history of blackface minstrelsy and how it relates to “drag.” The deployment of blackface has particular similarities to drag such as parody and excessive imitation reliant on makeup and props and, as some scholars have pointed out, is also often represented in tandem with gender drag. Blackface in this vein can be seen as a kind of racial drag that, like some misogynist gender drag, has a tendency towards racist depictions but also has the possibility for sharp social critique in such texts as *Bamboozled* (2000).

In his work *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class*, Eric Lott discusses the uses and meanings of blackface in the 19th century and works against the oversimplified rejection of blackface as solely and only white racism to argue that part of blackface was about transgression as well as voicing class conflict. He defines blackface minstrelsy as “an established nineteenth-century theatrical practice, principally of the urban North, in which white men caricatured blacks for sport and profit” (3) but also argues that it has been perpetuated in many forms since: “From ‘Oh! Susanna’ to Elvis Presley, from circus clowns to Saturday morning cartoons, blackface acts and words have figured significantly in the white Imaginary of the United States” (4-5). Lott as well as Somerville argue that blackface minstrelsy must be seen in its historical context and multiple possibilities for reception. For one, Lott points out that blackface was surely offensive but was also read by liberal white audiences in the 19th and 20th centuries as valorizing black culture to at least some extent. He also argues that it presented an opportunity to be turned around on its supposed target where “it was possible for a black man in blackface, without a great deal of effort, to offer credible imitations of white

men imitating him” (113), something wholly dangerous for African-Americans otherwise but in this case perfectly acceptable and winking with transgressive possibility. Just as Butler (and others) argue that even mainstream representations of drag that may ultimately reinforce gender binaries and ideologies can also still contain some kernel of subversive potential, so too do these authors argue that blackface and its consumption are contextual and thus also open to ambivalent interpretations, partially because they occupy a liminal space of boundary crossings and parody.

Lott as well as Somerville have drawn attention to the prevalent combination in minstrelsy of blackface and transvestism. Both address how any “respectable” minstrel troupe in the 19th and early 20th centuries (pre-motion pictures) includes a “wench” character, creating scenes in which blackface and drag are enacted simultaneously. This overlapping of gender and racial drag and Lott and Somerville’s attention to it as such is one of the arguments hinging my dissertation together. In order to fully understand either blackface or the drag deployed simultaneous with it, both must be interrogated together and the resultant analysis often changes our interpretation of both. Lott and Somerville both point out that all-male minstrel troupe’s requisite “wench” character creates a unique space for interrogation not only of blackface but drag and homoeroticism as well. Lott argues that “One might posit here an unsteady oscillation in ‘wench’ acts between a recoil from women into cross-dressing misogyny and a doubling-back from the homoeroticism that this inevitably also suggested, with the misogyny serving as a convenient cover story for or defense against the homoerotic desires aired in the process of achieving it. In any case, there is no question that the ‘wench’ brought homosexual desire to the stage” (164). And Somerville – addressing the 1914 film *A Florida Enchantment* which included blackface, transvestism, and a plot that utilized ideas of sex-change – argues that through the close-knit use of both blackface and drag the film inadvertently created an analogy between race

and gender where even though “the film attempted to construct a stable division between black and white, the very use of blackface and its proximity to drag threatened to break that division down” (2000: 66)⁵. Somerville’s analysis illustrates the usefulness of interrogating the overlapping boundary crosses together rather than separately: when seen together they can yield a different analysis and reveal what isn’t seen by other authors. Here this technique is used to show how blackface, dismissed so readily by many, can in fact be interpreted in novel ways and its proximity to drag can change our conclusions about both as well as the contexts they are created within when we look at them in conjunction with each other.

Movies About Drag Queens

There are actually very few movies that contain drag alone – please consult the section below on the combination of drag and passing for more examples. The majority of movies that straightforwardly include drag alone are movies about drag queens and primarily white drag queens, for example: *Too Wong Foo Thanks for Everything, Julie Newmar* (1995), *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* (1994), *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (1975), *The Birdcage* (1996), *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* (2001)⁶, *Rent* (2005), and *Torch Song Trilogy*

⁵ Somerville uses the term “drag” here, possibly to call attention to subversive potential. Lott primarily addresses “cross-dressing” or “transvestism” as do some of the other theorists who address not only drag, such as Newton who also periodically uses the phrase cross-dressing, but also those who address any form of wearing the clothes of the opposite sex including authors who address gender passing and other forms as well. In particular, Marjorie Garber’s oft-cited work *Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety* uses primarily “cross-dressing” and “transvestism” but seldom uses the term “drag” and she is referenced by multiple authors writing about both drag and passing. In my dissertation, I will use the more politically-charged term drag when applicable, as in the relation between blackface and transvestism, in order to bring the politicized nature of these representations to the forefront.

⁶ *Hedwig*, though included in this list as about a drag queen, is a very unique example in itself where the fluid ground between drag, passing, and transsexual identity could be addressed and indeed *Hedwig* has been addressed by some authors as a postmodern representation of identity production which refutes singular and finite boundaries between these identities and their representation. Unfortunately, there was not room within this dissertation to address this film.

(1988). But even these quite often include elements of passing. For example *Connie and Carla* (2004) is the story of two women who flee after witnessing a murder and disguise themselves as part of a drag queen troupe. So, in effect, they are in female drag (what some in drag king circles term “bio-queens”) but also passing as male drag queens. Like many of the cross-dressing examples cited above, this particular text utilizes comedic conventions such as learning to walk, talk, etc. like the “Other” such that the end result either reifies the naturalized categories that link femininity with females and masculinity with men and/or presents a space in which men are “better” women than bio-women. This is illustrated in all the examples above with the exception of *Hedwig* which plays with and camps these categories in a very unique way (it is also the only film mentioned above that began as an independent movie made by an out gay man). For example, as Kathryn Kane points out (2005), in *Too Wong Foo Thanks for Everything, Julie Newmar*, the drag queens who are stuck in a small middle-America town waiting for their car to get fixed give all the women makeovers, help one young woman find her heterosexual mate, and end the domestic violence of another pair, but none of the drag queens ultimately end up in romantic relationships and here, as in other drag queen movies, their main purpose is to reinforce and shore up heterosexual relationships.

Cross-Dressing and Blackface

Cross-dressing films can be delineated from “drag” films as those that incorporate men-dressing-as-women or women-dressing-as-men but do not include any or few camp aspects within their representations. They are usually comedies and include some diegetic passing. This topic will be more fully covered below in the “Passing and Drag” combinatory section but some cursory examples include *Tootsie* (1982), *Mrs. Doubtfire* (1993), *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (1953),

White Chicks (2004), *Mulan* (1998), *Florida Enchantment* (1914), *Juwanna Mann* (2002), *Sorority Boys* (2002), *She's the Man* (2006), and Tyler Perry's *Medea* films (beginning with *Diary of a Mad Black Woman* in 2005 and followed by three *Medea* films in 2006, 2009, and 2011). There are a few notable racial drag films within this genre as well, including *White Chicks*, *The Associate* (1996), and *Soul Man* (1986). These films almost always reinforce what bell hooks calls "white supremacist capitalist patriarchy" (*Reel To Real: Race, Sex, and Class at the Movies*, 1996: 84) and usually include a man or woman who uses cross-dressing and passing in order to get an insider look at the Other sex and hence have a better chance at getting into a heterosexual relationship (or improving their heterosexual relationship). Usually, this gendered or racial cross-dressing is not very realistic yet passes within the reality of the film and the audience, in on the joke, must suspend their disbelief. For more on blackface and examples of its usage, see the following section on passing and drag.

PASSING AND DRAG

My (and others) attention to blackface as a possible space of reappropriating drag as applicable to race is an attempt to cross the boundaries of terms usually delineated and separated by gender, sexuality, and race or ethnicity in order to create analyses of each that are informed by the other categories and the ways they overlap. Where many authors cited in the above sections on passing and drag argue that these boundary crossings always involve at least the possibility of subversion because they show that these categories can be crossed, I would argue that some recent scholarship takes these crossings a step further by not only analyzing the crossings over boundaries of identity categories but also by critically crossing the boundaries of the defining terms applied to them. For example, Kane applies the language and politics of

blackface minstrelsy to argue that the film *To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything! Julie Newmar* “participates in the blackface tradition of erasure” (10) that she coins as “queerface” because homosexuality and gay men are represented wholly by straight actors and the resulting depiction “involves representing gay/lesbian sexual identity as a playful performance that supports heteronormative ideals” (9). She also argues that John Leguizamo’s character “Chi Chi,” who is mostly berated and taught how to be a proper drag queen by the other characters, functions as what she terms “whiteface” by “modeling a form of racial inclusion ... [where] people of color are encouraged to participate in the social body on the condition that they attempt to adopt the ways of whiteness” (12). Kane’s article is one space in which reappropriating and modifying terms can generate new ways of looking at texts and producing different optics of cultural analysis. The uses here, as well as in work such as that addressed above by Godfrey that links drag and blackface in order to shed light on the misogyny of drag as well as the possible subversions of blackface, suggest much more than terms like assimilation or cross-dressing could by incorporating and critically applying rather than erasing the politics and meanings of drag and blackface.

Most recently it has been the reapplications of blackface and drag such as Kane’s and Godfrey’s that have created the possibility of term crossing. But the differential terms of passing as realism and drag as parody have been reappropriated and reapplied productively as well. The most salient example is Robinson’s use that argues passing and drag are in the eye of the beholder and labels both as spectatorial positions where (as explained in the triangle of production of the pass in the passing section) the passers see themselves passing, the dupe reads business as usual, and the in-group clairvoyant quite possibly sees performative drag. Robinson writes, “What I would like to call passing in drag, therefore, can be understood to read the pass

from the perspective of the in-group, in whose terms the pass is intelligible as a calculated performance. In order for an in-group clairvoyant to see drag, therefore, she must witness a successful pass” (727), and argues for the use of what she terms “the optic apparatuses of drag” (727). This modification of drag as an “apparatus” opens it up as a possible method of consumption similar to Muñoz’s disidentificatory practice that identifies the way viewers from oppressed populations can differently view, consume, and participate in the media texts they encounter – creating a space in which and from which a continuum of drag and passing (for Robinson) can be seen and then critiqued in ways not possible through interrogating texts as solely drag or passing. While there are many other unproductive co-optations of terms by multiple authors as well as in popular media culture, such as those of cross-dressing addressed above, Robinson’s reappropriations here critically cross the boundaries of terms in order to reinvigorate their stagnant meanings as well as the mainstreaming which attempts to subsume them. In the much-contested essay “F2M: The Making of Female Masculinity” Halberstam attempts her own reappropriations:

We are all transsexuals except that the referent of the *trans* becomes less and less clear (and more and more queer). We are all cross-dressers but where are we crossing from and to what? There is no ‘other’ side, no ‘opposite’ sex, no natural divide to be spanned by surgery, by disguise, by passing. We all pass or we don’t, we all wear our drag, and we all derive a different degree of pleasure – sexual or otherwise – from our costumes. It is just that for some of us our costumes are made of fabric or material, while for others they are made of skin; for some an outfit can be changed; for others skin must be resewn. There are no transsexuals. (212)

Though these appropriations were argued against by many in transsexual communities and scholarship (and addressed and explained by Halberstam in *Female Masculinities*) it is these very crossing of the boundaries of terms that show their conflation itself, like the original meanings, are primarily ambivalent. And it is in threading through these ambivalences that new terrains of inquiry are created.

While passing and drag are usually addressed as separate endeavors, attention to the forms they take in representational fields provides a possible space of intervention to address their similar enactments, particularly in visual media. These visual representations and the scholarship addressing them open up the field of inquiry to interrogate not only the effects and the reasons behind “passing” and “drag” but also the production and visual embodiments of them across different areas of identity, intent, and outcome. In this line of examination, the next step is to take these multiple divergent and overlapping arguments and apply them to media texts across the spectrum of representations of passing, drag, and everything in-between, in order to interrogate their place within and effect on identifications, binaries, and strategies of subversion. I aim to continue this productive line of inquiry in my dissertation by applying these sometimes divergent and sometimes overlapping arguments about passing and drag to media texts across the spectrum of representation in order to illuminate their places within and affect on identifications, binaries, and strategies of subversion as well as their relation to and production of reality and authenticity.

Blackface: Then and Now

Blackface films of the early 20th century almost all function between the categories of passing and drag because they play between audience knowledge, realism (or lack thereof), parody, and diegetic passing. What in effect is drag to the audience in the form of stylized makeup (though less stylized than previously in vaudeville and stage minstrelsy) passes within the context of a film. The most infamous instance of blackface is of course *Birth of a Nation*, D.W. Griffin’s 1915 homage to the Klan that also holds the distinction of being the first feature-length film produced in which all African-American characters were played by white actors in

blackface. This was preceded by *A Florida Enchantment* (1914), a most interesting example given extended treatment by Somerville and in the introduction to this chapter because of its unique combination of blackface and cross-dressing. In this film (white) Lillian Travers finds and takes a mysterious pill that changes her sex, forcing her black maid (a white actress in blackface) to also take the pill. The film follows their transformation and hi-jinks before revealing the entire scene to be a dream – but only after Lillian’s fiancé also takes the pill and is severely punished (with drowning) for his “downward” transformation into femininity. This film in particular includes so many combinations and complexities of drag and passing that they are hard to pin down exactly. The multiple uses of blackface as outside the diegetic world and thus passing within it is combined with cross-dressing within the film that functions as sex passing in a very similar way to that in such films as *Tootsie*. This combination historically harkens back to minstrelsy in the 1800s which almost always involved a cross-dressed figure (Lott) but also begins a long tradition in cinema of gender and sex crossings used in both moral tales (as Lillian’s transformation teaches her about accepting her feminine place) and comedies (as evidenced by her fiancé’s overblown feminine wiles and resulting chase scene).

The use of blackface in films of the first half of the 20th century was performed in very similar ways to cross-dressing films: dressing up as the Other – here “blacking up” as the Other is at once not very realistic to the audience but passes within the film. The main difference was that actors in blackface played African or African-American characters within the film as opposed to cross-dressing films where actors played men within the film who dress up as and pass as women within the diegesis. While blackface in minstrelsy of the 19th century was very

stylized, blackface in film strove for realism⁷. This blurs blackface's relation to both drag and passing. As cited above, blackface in many ways mirrored the production of misogynist drag and thus fits well within this category. Also, blackface movies made in the 1940s and 50s often mirror those drag queen movies addressed above, portraying blackface performers who "black up" within the context of the film – thus creating white characters who put on blackface within the film as opposed to earlier uses of blackface that has white actors in blackface portraying Black characters. Examples of these include *The Jolson Story* (1946) which portrays the career of Al Jolson, a famous blackface performer, *Babes in Arms* (1939) which stars Mickey Rooney and Judy Garland as young vaudeville performers who perform in blackface (which interesting is left out of most synopses of the film including that on IMDB and Wikipedia). More recently Spike Lee's *Bamboozled* (2000) followed the rise and fall of a modern television network's "The New Millennial Minstrel Show" and Robert Downey, Jr. dons much more realistic and less stylized blackface in *Tropic Thunder* (2008). Similar to those examples above from the '40s and '50s that contained blackface within a film by making it the subject of the film rather than a white actor in blackface passing as African-American, *Tropic Thunder* is a film about a film in which Robert Downey, Jr.'s character is the ultimate character actor. He is billed within the film as getting, and staying, in character throughout the duration of all his movies and here that means an African American. But this is twisted within *Tropic Thunder* because it is constantly remarked upon and questioned by the other characters and juxtaposed to a "real" African American who points out Downey's character's reliance on stereotypes and lack of any "real" referent of blackness. This portrayal links the passing narrative of realism to the drag use of

⁷ Somerville shares the example of the actresses in *The Octoroon* (1913) who, as a protest against a director's decision, neglected to blacken the backs of their necks for a shot and were promptly dragged off the set. Somerville writes, "[Norma] Talmadge's prank reveals how important a naturalistic use of blackface was to the film and how ineffective it supposedly became when the audience could recognize the white body beneath it" (2000: 64).

stereotypes. The language of drag, passing, and boundary crossings is useful in an overall critique of this movie because of its use of layered realities (a film within a film) that creates the situation in which passing and racial drag can both occur and be commented on within the film. A critique that only addressed Downey's character as one or the other would miss essential components that contribute to the distinctive representation and critical commentary on race that the text creates.

Yellowface

Though blackface is by far the most utilized as well as the most attention-getting of early racial drag, there are multiple instances of white actors putting on an/Other's race or ethnicity for the big screen. In 1937's *The Good Earth* both the main actor and actress were played by whites in what even IMDB terms "yellow-face drag" (Loius Rainer Biography page <http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0707023/bio>). This movie was lauded for its realism and Rainer won an Oscar for best actress performance. Just as black and white actors were not allowed to play opposite each other in romantic roles because of the ban on any representation that even remotely intoned misegination (Production Code), the same was true for Asian and white actors and the decision to cast white actor Paul Muni in the lead necessitated a white actress as well – even though there was talk of having popular Chinese actress Anna May Wong play the part (Rainer bio). In *Dragon Seed* (1944), another Pearl Buck adaptation, Katherine Hepburn's "Chinese" look was effected with tape on her eyelids and all of the named characters in this story about a China-Japan conflict are played by white actors. In 1947's *Black Narcissus* – a film about nuns succumbing to temptation in the Himalayas – Jean Simmons plays young local girl Kanchi in what appears to be brown shoe polish make-up. Later, in 1961, in a film not about an

Asian country or storyline, Mickey Rooney played the extremely stereotypical Japanese landlord Mr. Yunioshi in the famous and revered *Breakfast at Tiffany's*.

Post-Production Code Films

There is a wide range of media in the latter half of the 20th century through the present that employ some combination of passing and drag. Many of these contain any subversive potential by creating drag for the audience that passes within the context of a film where men must dress as women or vice versa (though not as common) for some reason within the plot. From *Sylvia Scarlett* (1935), *Some Like it Hot* (1959), *Tootsie* (1982), one memorable scene in *The Birdcage* (1996), countless TV series episodes (my favorite being *Sabrina the Teenage Witch*), a scene in the Disney 1973 animated *Robin Hood*, and many others. Related to this passing-in-drag theme that is contained within a film's plot is the recent *White Chicks* (2004) in which the Wayon's brothers play two cops who must go undercover as rich white socialites. Their performance creates racial and gender drag (mostly the misogynist kind) that would never pass on the street but does within the context of the film. These instances all function on the level of creating the audience as "in the know" and thus able to laugh at dupes (a la Robinson's argument) within the films. A significant departure from this occurs in the form of Divine in John Waters' films and this is the topic of Chapter Three.

Science Fiction

Some interesting analysis has been done of racialization within science fiction movies and how this relates to either/both passing and drag. Significant in the drag category is Godfrey's article that addresses Jar Jar Binks in the *Stars Wars* prequel movies (1999, 2002, 2005). More recently

District 9's (2009) obvious allegory of apartheid done with squid-like aliens in the place of people of color has raised some eyebrows though it is hard to say (though interesting to muse) about whether the aliens are meant as some sort of metaphorical ethnic or racial drag or passing. Even more recently, uproar over the portrayal of the Navi in *Avatar* (2009) drew questions about the choice to use almost solely actors of color to voice these CGI creations. The movies all utilize some form of marked racial or ethnic "Otherness" to connote literal alienness and, while outside the purview of this dissertation, these examples show places where the intervention of theories on both passing and drag might prove illuminating in analyzing the politics of representation of race within them.

"Reality"

In the same vein as the Post-Production Code films mentioned above, some of the Reality TV shows mentioned in the first section of this chapter on passing might fit more comfortably in an amorphous category of passing-in-drag. Most notably *Borat: Cultural Learning of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan* (2006) features comedian Sacha Baron Cohen who plays the character he invented among many others for his comedy act *The Ali G Show*. The fascinating part of *Borat* is that it is unclear how much of the film is scripted and how much is Cohen's over-the-top character actually passing to "real" people. Made famous partially for the number of people who sued him and his production company after the film was released, Borat attempted and succeeded at making fools out of the likes of southern frat boys (among those who sued him) for an audience in the know and participating in his dupe. But Borat also manages to get close enough to harass Pamela Anderson during her publicity appearance which is one of the scenes whose "realness" has been debated based on him not getting his butt kicked by her

security guards and thus it is argued that she must have been in on the joke. There are also clearly scripted and planned scenes that involve no “real” people at all such as a naked fistfight with his producer. All this together leaves viewing audiences confused and possibly duped themselves by the very production and bending of the idea of reality itself. This bending of genre and reality and their relation to the production of authenticity is the topic of Chapter Five which addresses *The Colbert Report*’s place in the murky waters between passing and drag, reality and fiction, news and comedy, and punditry and journalism.

CHAPTER OUTLINE

Chapter Two, “Cher-ing/Sharing Across Boundaries,” interrogates the multiple performances of Othered identities by the artist Cher throughout her career as drag. In considering the possible influence of these performances on ideas of ethnicity and gender in mainstream media, I question the very concept of authentic or originary identification through a cultural studies analysis of Cher as traversing the boundaries that supposedly separate identity categories. I use Judith Butler’s (1990, 1993) concept of performativity as applied to drag as well as multiple authors’ converging theories about the politics of camp aesthetics such as those of Jack Babuscio (1999), Caryl Flinn (1999), Andrew Ross (1999), and Pamela Robertson (1996), to situate the ethnic and gendered politics of Cher’s many differing performances. Spanning music videos and her variety show in the 1970s, motion pictures in the 1980s and 1990s, concerts in the late 1990s, and appearances *as herself* in the new millennium, her performances allow us to consider the production of identity itself and whether subversion of confining ideas of naturalness or authenticity is possible within these enactments.

Chapter Three, “Divine Intervention: Passing-In-Drag in an Abject Reality,” investigates the distinct place occupied by the drag queen Divine in John Water’s films of the 1970s and 1980s. In this chapter I study how and why Divine passes-in-drag and specifically how camp, the carnivalesque, the abject, and the grotesque interact within the trash aesthetic of Waters films to create a reality in which the terrorist drag of Divine – shaved head, giant arched eyebrows and all – passes within the context of the film but also to audiences and censors. This unique combination of obvious drag and diegetic passing is fertile ground for interrogating the possible combination of passing and drag identity play as well as their relation to productions of multiple realities.

Chapter Four, “Passing Truths: Journalism, Education, and the Experience of Authenticity,” examines the phenomenon of journalistic passing in both print and television media. In this chapter, focused specifically on instances of passing, I look at how passing has been used as an educational tool to shore up ideals of authentic identity. I interrogate six main texts that span almost 50 years: John Howard Griffin’s *Black Like Me* (1960), Grace Halsell’s *Soul Sister* (1969) and *Bessie Yellowhair* (1973), Barbara Ehrenreich’s *Nicked and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America* (2001), and Norah Vincent’s *Self-Made Man: One Woman’s Year Disguised as a Man* (2006) as well as the self-styled documentary reality TV series *Black. White.* (2006). I look at how in these texts the search for “truth” takes precedence for writers and reality TV participants and passing becomes a means to an end through which to do this. I interrogate how and why this occurs through such tactics as Othering, doubling, objectivity and emotion, and the reveal of the pass. Ultimately, this chapter shows how passing alone – when not combined with drag – can be, and often is, used not to challenge identity construction but to solidify its singularity, truth, and authenticity.

Chapter Five, the concluding chapter of this dissertation titled “Celebripunditician: Truthiness in the Language of Passing an Drag,” takes Stephen Colbert and *The Colbert Report* as its case study in order to address the possible effects on identity production and the construction of reality and truth when drag/passing/passing-in-drag are performed in a new unique way. In this last chapter I will address what *The Colbert Report* does differently. Still within the vein of journalism and education, I will address how *The Colbert Report* and Colbert himself create a reality based on both passing and drag similar to that described in Chapter Three on Divine that is not dependent on authenticity but on performance, how his character creates a doubled Self rather than an opposing Other, how this challenges not only the standard of authentic experience discussed in Chapter Four but also the boundaries between Self and Other, and how through disavowals and parody he succeeds in producing a less-false knowledge based not on authenticity but on performance through such things as the interrogation of ideas of truth with ascription to truthiness and the refusal to ever provide a closing “reveal” of his “true” Self. This chapter argues that Colbert is a performative instance of passing-in-drag that defies the generic conventions traditionally associated with both drag and passing. This chapter argues that through these means of creating multiple selves, refusing a culminating act of revelation, and blurring the lines between real and fake such that simulation is privileged for origination, Colbert’s performances/actions work to disrupt ideals of authenticity, reality, and link between singular Truths and education to direct the debate away from authenticity and singular identification and towards a space where drag, passing, and their combination can be tactics through which to produce a middling ground of becoming that includes multiple truths, selves, and realities outside the language of authentication.

CHAPTER TWO

CHER-ING/SHARING ACROSS BOUNDARIES

“Doubtlessly crucial is the ability to wield the signs of subordinated identity in a public domain that constitutes its own homophobic and racist hegemonies through the erasure or domestication of culturally and politically constituted identities.” – Judith Butler, 1993: 118.

Identities defined as “Other” or possessing “difference” are abjections from privileged categories of whiteness, maleness, and heterosexuality (hooks, 1992). Ambiguous identities from transgender to masculine women and feminine men, to multiracial (only recently acknowledged in our social world) have been a source of cultural angst since the mid-20th century (and much longer for multiracial identification—dating back before the Jim Crow era which legally defined as black anyone with one drop of “Negro” blood). While mainstream culture has become more accepting of multiracial and transgender identification in the 21st century, cultural discomfort and fascination with identity ambiguity continues within the public imaginary with focus on such public figures as Michael Jackson (with his changing skin tone, facial features, and feminine masculinity), comedic as well as tragic popular culture representations such as *Saturday Night Live*’s “It’s Pat” skits and movie (Wessler, 1994)⁸ and *Boys Don’t Cry* (Hart, 1999), and “regular” people’s lives in reality shows such as the Discovery Health Channel’s *Pregnant Man* series (Campbell, 2008)⁹. Part of this fascination and discomfort relates to a desire to categorize races, genders, classes, and ethnicities that stretches back to the importation of African slaves to the Americas and subsequent fear of miscegenation and adoption of anti-miscegenation laws (Daniel, 2002); to the 1800s with sexual inversion science that strove to concretely define (and medicalize) homosexuality (Foucault, 1978); or even further with the desire to hierarchalize male

⁸ View more information at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pat_%28Saturday_Night_Live%29 (Pat (Saturday Night Live), n.d.)

⁹ View video and more information at <http://health.discovery.com/videos/pregnant-man-pregnant-man-on-discovery-health-channel.html> (Discovery Communications, 2008).

and female traits and thus keep women in less powerful positions and explain why women shouldn't vote, or go to school, etc. All of these definitional moments rely on authentication of a singular static identity and the assumption that identity is something one IS: defining blackness based on particular parts of one's ancestry, homosexuality on gender inversion, or gender status on genitalia.

These historical examples and meanings continue into the present through an emphasis on what Judith Butler (1990, 1993) addresses as the myth of originary identity – ideas of original or authentic identity reproduce themselves as truth and thus reinforce oppressions based on these “truths” of gender, race, class, etc. In *Gender Trouble* (1990), Butler argues that addressing gender as performative demystifies this assumption and the normativity that accompanies it by showing that the repetition itself of performances of gender is what creates femininity, and there is no original from which these gender norms start. She claims gender identity is not something a person is, but created by what one does. Gender comes into being through its performance and the reiteration of it solidifies its authenticity. The assumption of an original reifies these normative categories and thus continues the oppressions and exclusions related to them. In this vein, I am primarily interested in how popular culture challenges authentic or originary identities in order to interrogate how certain images or people within it might divert mainstream culture away from ideals of authenticity and thus also away from the identitarian “truths” that reinforce oppression of those in the “Othered” categories.

It is one thing for academics and theorists to concern themselves with the construction of gender and race, but once this idea enters popular culture it is important to assess its possible impact and meaning for its audiences. How the public imaginary produces and consumes identity construction and the question of authenticity holds greater power over the practical implications

of “Othered” identities such as those of women, gays and lesbians, and people of color than those within the ivory tower. Though, of course, much fomentation of change can be traced back to and explained by these same academics, it can be argued that public acts, such as Rosa Parks and the Freedom Riders of 1961, and the media publicizing of such events had a much more immediate impact on the regulation and oppression of particular identities in the public forum. For this reason, in this chapter, I will address the productions of such identities in the past half century in one sustained popular icon: Cher illustrates the production of gender and ethnicity as performed identity. In this chapter I will take a multiperspectival cultural studies approach that melds multiple theoretical approaches in order to illuminate their (and Cher’s) critical crossings and relations to each other. Cultural studies author Douglas Kellner coins the term “multiperspectival” in his book *Media Culture* and defines it as an approach that “draws on a wide range of textual and critical strategies to interpret, criticize, and deconstruct the artifact under scrutiny. ... The more perspectives one focuses on a text to do ideological analysis and critique ... the better one can grasp the full range of a text’s ideological dimensions and ramifications” (1995: 98). Primarily, I will utilize queer theory discourses on camp and drag with those of feminist theories about masquerade in order to produce a nuanced interrogation of Cher’s performances of femininity that goes beyond what these theoretical discourses would create separately. I also apply these theoretical arguments about gender performance to reveal subversions enacted in Cher’s ethnic performances.

Throughout her career, Cher has performed gender drag through her outrageous costumes and wigs as well as shifting ethnic ambiguity in her multiple different ethnic performances in her variety show, her songs, and her film career. The longevity of these representations as well as their combining of gendered and ethnic identity play provide an exemplary case through which

to investigate the meanings and productions of difference and Otherness as well as the enactments of disruption to the assumed originary nature of gendered and ethnic identity categories. Cher (b. 1946) has been a mainstream entertainment staple for the last 50 years: from her rise to popularity in the early 1960s as part of the singing duet Sonny and Cher,¹⁰ to four seasons starring in *The Sonny and Cher Comedy Hour*¹¹ (1971-75) and two in *The Sonny and Cher Show* (1976-77), to acting in several Oscar-nominated films in the 1980s and 1990s, and creating Top Ten *Billboard* songs in each decade between 1960 and 1999 (“Singles Charts,” 2003) before starting a successful Las Vegas show at Caesar’s Palace in 2008.¹² Amongst these multiple reinventions over the last half-century, Cher’s feminine drag and ethnic ambiguity are constantly apparent.

Cher’s numerous incarnations have fascinated me since I was a child attracted to her glittery costumes and unruly performances. As I grew into a feminist in my college years, Cher became for me a favorite example of strong female performers who thrive in a hostile environment that tells them they are too old, outdated, plastic, etc. Cher’s *personal* representation became part of my *political* understanding and as her persona and career drew more of my interest and attention, I realized the personal was political for her as well. Her lesbian daughter coming out to her spurred her to become active in PFLAG (Bono, 1996); subsequent to acting in *Mask* she became the spokesperson for the Children’s Craniofacial Association (“Cher–National Chairperson,” 2010); and after an earthquake rattled Armenia in 1993 she helped bring food and supplies to the country that is part of her heritage (Cheever, 1993). Her persona and performances may be the individual choices of one woman, but they are

¹⁰ See image at <http://www.imdb.com/media/rm3345192960/nm0000333>

¹¹ See image at <http://www.imdb.com/media/rm3412301824/tt0066717>

¹² See image at <http://www.cherworld.com/cherphotos/displayimage.php?album=51&pos=35>

also indicative of a politics of representation of identity that subverts ideas of authentic identity. She may enact ethnic ambiguity because of her own multiethnic background, but the resulting performances scrutinize the cultural myth of originary stagnant or singular identity.

The academic love affair¹³ with Madonna in relation to similar arguments about gender, unruly women, and racial or ethnic celebration (or cooptation (hooks, 1992)) frustrated me as I began to meld my love of Cher with my feminist ideals. Where were the academic theorizations of Cher's persona and career? They are few and far between. This article contributes to studies on Cher by those such as Diane Negra (2001) and Kathleen Rowe (1995) with my focus on Cher as a critical subject for feminist media and cultural studies. Cher has been performing since Madonna was a toddler and continues to reinvent herself nearly every decade. Peggy Phelan argues "the promise of feminist art is the performative creation of new realities" (quoted in Wark, 2006: 87). Cher's persona, performances, and acting career are a microcosm through which to explore theories of drag, masquerade, and performativity, and to critically reapply them to ethnic performances in order to bring to light how this icon of popular culture challenges the myth of authentic or originary gender or ethnic identity and potentially creates new realities.

Esther Newton in the first academic book written about drag (queens) in 1972, *Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America*, defines drag in general terms as "the clothing of one sex when worn by the other" (3). It has come to mean the excessive or parodic performance of gender when done by either sex. In *Gender Trouble*, Butler (1990) quotes Newton who is in turn quoting Parker Tyler in order to address the performance of gender as performative drag: "Garbo 'got in drag' whenever she took some heavy glamour part, whenever she melted in or out of a

¹³ Some of the most notable scholarly contributions to the study of Madonna include Susan McClary's chapter "Living to Tell: Madonna's Resurrection of the Fleshly" in *Feminine Endings* (1991), Carla Freccero's article "Our Lady of MTV: Madonna's 'Like a Prayer'" (1992), bell hooks' chapter "Madonna: Plantation Mistress of Soul Sister?" in *Black Looks* (1992), Douglas Kellner's chapter "Madonna, Fashion, and Image" in *Media Culture* (1995), and Pamela Robertson's book *Guilty Pleasures: Feminist Camp from Mae West to Madonna* (1996).

man's arms, whenever she simply let that heavenly-flexed neck bear the weight of her thrown-back head. . . . How resplendent seems the art of acting! It is all *impersonation*, whether the sex underneath is true or not" (163). I apply this concept not only to Cher's gender performances but also her ethnic ones. The diverse ethnic identities she performs act in a similar way such that it is all impersonation for her—creating an ambiguity of ethnic identity that challenges the idea of an original ethnicity as well.

Cher's subversion comes not from individual performances of identities but from the shifting multiplicity of ethnic performances from "Half-Breed" and "Gypsies, Tramps, and Thieves" to *Moonstruck* and *Tea With Mussolini* and the excessive femininities of her costumes and wigs' identities (addressed below) that exposes the manufacturing of ethnic and/or gendered identities and rejects ideals of *naturalness* or *authenticity*. Revealing the creation of these Othered identities—those that have been oppressed in many ways to the benefit of the "white supremacist capitalist patriarchy" (hooks, 1992)—as well as one person's ability to traverse these categories almost at will works to challenge these very categories and their associated oppressions. If identity is constructed then that construction can change (Butler, 1990, 1993), leading to improved conditions, more flexible definitions, and the negating of originary and authentic identifications that bind individuals and groups into constrictive boxes of who they can be and what that means in our social world.

In order to argue that authentic identity is a product that can be challenged and changed, I outline the structure and content of Cher's feminine drag and ethnic ambiguity. My analysis of Cher's drag and ambiguity involves the entire production of Cher's performances and uses specific examples from many points in her career in order to show the breadth and depth of her identity constructions. I primarily address Cher's drag since the 1970s including a selection of

Cher's ethnic performances in her 1970s' songs and *The Sonny And Cher Comedy Hour*, as well as a more recent movie, *Tea With Mussolini*, and appearances as herself in order to interrogate the ambiguity and subversion present in Cher's persona and performances and demonstrate how her performances challenge the very idea of authenticity and static originary identity designation.

CHER, DRAG, CAMP, AND EXCESS FEMINITY

The gender drag that is "Cher" is twofold. First, Cher herself stages femininity in a way that I argue is both drag and camp (for example, an outfit—including wig—at her 2008 Caesar's Las Vegas concert that consists entirely of blue tinsel).¹⁴ Secondly, her large gay following performs Cher drag that she in turn embraces in interviews and in her Mirage Las Vegas concert, as well as through re-recording some of her songs for gay audiences. She recorded *male* and *female* versions of her 1999 hit "Strong Enough" (AOL Chat 99, 1999). In *Bodies That Matter*, Judith Butler (1993) argues that not all drag is subversive, especially if one views all gender as a sort of drag as Butler does. She also writes that gender's ambiguity opens up possibilities of ambivalence such that "drag is subversive to the extent that it reflects on the imitative structure by which hegemonic gender is itself produced and disputes heterosexuality's claim on naturalness and originality" (1993: 125). Cher's own performativity of excessive gender, in this case a kind of female-female drag, enables the large gay following (Bono, 1996: 58), camping, and dragging of Cher. Cher's feminine drag, especially in conjunction with the many impersonations of Cher by gay men, is an opening where this subversion can take place because it blurs the lines between artifice and naturalness.

¹⁴ See image at <http://www.cherworld.com/cherphotos/displayimage.php?album=51&pos=19>

Butler's theory of performativity evolves from J. L. Austin's definition of performative acts as types of authoritative speech that carry out an action in their very utterance (the most used example is the "I do" of marriage). Butler expands on this to claim that it is the performative act of repeating codes of gender and ethnicity that creates and perpetuates gender itself. Because there is no original gender but only the repetition of codes there is room for slippage and subversion within these repetitions (1990). While Butler uses ideas of performance of gender codes in her argument about performativity she also refutes theatre as a possible form of performativity (1993). But other authors argue that performance can be performative. In her introduction to *Into Performance*, Midori Yoshimoto quotes Kristine Stiles to argue that because performance art involves actions, meaning "resides precisely in the act of their performance" (2005: 1). Jayne Wark also uses performativity in her address of performance and argues that Butler oversimplified the complex nature of performance (2006: 126). Wark writes that performativity is useful in analyzing feminist performers because "the feminist performer in art or in theatre can simultaneously inhabit herself (as woman/character) and stand beside herself (as actor/agent) in order to show or mimic how the reiteration of stylized acts produces gender, rather than the other way around" (126). In my analysis of Cher's persona and performances I follow Wark's assessment that "[b]ecause Butler's theory of the performativity of sex/gender purports to explode the very idea of gender as a category of identity, it seems conducive to feminist performance that used roles and transformations to expose the fallacy of fixed identity" (127). While I'm not sure we can definitively mark Cher as a feminist performer (as she's never claimed the term herself—though many of her songs, film choices, personal politics, and interviews might imply her as such), Cher's persona and many of her performances fit into these definitions particularly because she is not performing a character but performing (and re-

performing) herself. The overlap of performance and performativity in her persona becomes a space in which to address the production and repetition of codes of gender as well as their drag elements.

Over the last 50 years Cher has created a signature Cher performance and look. All of the clothes she had worn since the 1960s have been excessively feminine such as Bob Mackie's costume designs with plenty of lace, leather, sequins, wigs, and skin¹⁵ including her trademark "If I Could Turn Back Time" outfit that she's worn at her concerts since the 1980s with few modifications which consists of fishnet bodysuit and what seems to be a long black ribbon covering her unmentionables with a black leather bomber jacket, as well as the blue tinsel number mentioned above and many others (see photos of Cher at the websites linked in footnotes 6-10). Cher's excessive femininity is drag and camp because, as one of the first authors to critically address "camp" and a gay sensibility in 1977, Jack Babuscio, writes, "When the stress on style is 'outrageous' or 'too much,' it results in incongruities: the emphasis shifts from what a thing or a person is to what it *looks* like; from what is being done to *how* it is being done" (1999: 122). Babuscio, Sontag, and many others featured in Fabio Cleto's edited volume *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject: A Reader* emphasize how excess is "the engine of critical reflection" of camp (Cleto, 1999: 5). Butler attends to the parody of drag as revealing the performativity of gender and writes that drag "subverts the distinction between inner and outer psychic space and effectively mocks both the expressive model of gender and the notion of a true gender identity" (1990: 174). Similar to Butler's interpretation of the parody within drag, the excess of camp (and drag as part of camp)—what Babuscio phrases as the "too much" of it—is what draws attention to its surface construction, repetition, and lack of an original: "Camp, by

¹⁵ See images at <http://www.cherworld.com/cherphotos/displayimage.php?album=14&pos=15> and <http://www.cherworld.com/cherphotos/displayimage.php?album=13&pos=71>

focusing on the outward appearances of roles, implies that roles, and, in particular, sex roles, are superficial—a matter of style” (Babuscio, 1990: 123). The excess of drag is its parody of gender: like Cher’s excessive lace, glitter, wigs, etc., drag parodies femininity by blowing it out of “normal” proportion. This is exemplary of Cher in the ’70s¹⁶ and ’80s¹⁷, but more recently in the 1990s¹⁸ and into the present¹⁹ she has taken excessive hyper-femininity to the level of high drag and camp through the combination of what she wears and what she says.

Camp – a highly contested term in itself – generally means the parodic embracing and recycling of that rejected or abjected by mainstream culture and originated as a gay male practice in the 1950s and 1960s.²⁰ Camp is an unstable signifier—and intentionally so—that refutes fixed meanings and refers “to a quality of the object *not existing prior to its nomination*” (Cleto, 1999: 10, italics in original). Camp revels in “‘perverting’ all ‘originary’ intention, deviating it toward unpredicted—and often undesired—ends: in short, demystifying the ‘myth’ of authentic origins” and as such its usage is “slippery” (Cleto: 11). It can be used as a noun (a movie or person can be a camp for example), verb (to camp or to camp up—something seemingly related to parodic or satirical sending up of something of mockery), adjective (campy objects), or adverb (to campily perform) (Cleto, 1999). Queer theorist José Muñoz (1999) argues camp can be used by people of color and those “Othered” by society as a style “of performance and reception that rel[ies] on

¹⁶ See image at <http://www.imdb.com/media/rm3746142208/nm0000333>

¹⁷ See image at <http://www.imdb.com/media/rm1436194816/nm0000333>

¹⁸ See image at <http://www.cherworld.com/cherphotos/displayimage.php?album=13&pos=69>

¹⁹ See images at <http://www.cherworld.com/cherphotos/displayimage.php?album=13&pos=38> and <http://www.cherworld.com/cherphotos/displayimage.php?album=51&pos=3>

²⁰ Camp as a form (though not the term itself) can also be traced back to the Renaissance and the Middle Ages in the form of the carnivalesque: a way for the common people to poke fun at those higher up in society such as the clergy and royalty where similar employment of recycling, inverting hierarchies, and embracing of the abject took place (Stallybrass & White, 1986). This is seen even in the recycling of Stallybrass and White’s title *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* by Moe Meyer’s *The Politics and Poetics of Camp* (1995).

humor to examine social and cultural forms” (119). Drag is one type of camp which laughs at the construct of gender and parodies it in order to subvert it. The Tyler quote above about Garbo getting in drag with every glamour part she played (in both Butler’s and Newton’s work) exemplifies how both drag and camp expand to include the parodic and excessive performances of gender by all sexes.

After Cher sings the first song in the Las Vegas leg of her *Do You Believe?* concert tour televised on HBO (Mallet, 1999), she talks to the audiences and says:

If you clap too much in the beginning, I’ll just get a swelled head and then I’ll have to buy all new wigs. Except for this one, which is my natural hair color now [it’s bright orange and about a foot high]. It is. I have many natural hair colors I’m going to be wearing throughout the show tonight. This is my first good one because I’m dressing my age now. Don’t you think this is like Bozo the Clown meets Braveheart, or something like that? It’s very conservative and I feel comfortable in it. OK? This is me in a nutshell. I’m the Kabuki Bozo the Clown here, OK.²¹

Cher’s labeling of herself as a “Kabuki Bozo the Clown” links her performance to an (ethnic) male form of drag. In traditional Japanese Kabuki theatre all female parts were played by men in exaggerated makeup and dress. She addresses herself here as a woman-playing-a-man-playing-a-woman-playing-a-clown. Her statement explicitly distorts her assumed gender identity and illuminates the layers of drag she is employing – connecting her performance not only to drag, but ethnic drag, as well as the transgressive nature of clowns and their relation to the carnivalesque (as mentioned earlier, a pre-camp form of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance that also employed the grotesque or abject). Camp, drag, masquerade, and the unruly grotesque woman overlap in the spectacle of Cher to transgress boundaries of femininity by creating a diversity of identifications that confound and contest what is *natural* or *authentic*.

Cher camps up the fact that she is wearing wigs by drawing attention to their multiplicity

²¹ See image at <http://www.cherworld.com/cherphotos/displayimage.php?album=13&pos=17>

and saying that they are all “natural,” thus challenging the very idea of what *counts* as natural and creating incongruities by claiming many different naturalnesses. She also identifies her excessive and by far strangest costume (the huge red wig and sparkly outfit bearing what looks like a Middle-Ages era cross over her breasts paired with a fishnet overlay as well as a headdress that resembles something out of either a medieval battle or an apocalyptic sci-fi movie really does look like a Braveheart/clown costume) as conservative and swears she is acting her age, which when this was filmed was 53 years old. Pamela Robertson and others embrace camp as a possible feminist practice and Robertson references Susan Sontag’s 1964 “Notes on Camp” definition as “a failed seriousness, a love of exaggeration and artifice, the privileging of style over content, and a being alive to the double sense in which some things can be taken” (1999: 3). Cher’s appearance and speech here is indicative of Sontag’s and Robertson’s definition of camp: the excess of her costume paired with her claim of its naturalness and conservativeness embodies the failed seriousness and double meanings of camp by refusing to label it as excess or artifice. Insisting on her costumes’ appropriateness calls attention to the parody and performance of herself.

Cher’s attention to her own performativity in the form of her multiple wigs and outlandish costumes links her parodic speech about naturalness to drag by adding the “knowing wink” of camp to the representational masquerade of femininity. Cher exposes the irony of her masquerade. Mary Ann Doane (1991) argues that “the masquerade doubles representation; it is constituted by a hyperbolization of the accoutrements of femininity” (26) and that by flaunting femininity it “holds it at a distance” (25). The hyperbole of masquerade distances Cher from a natural femininity in a similar way to drag. Both terms here illustrate the construction of Cher’s femininity and the excess of it can be labeled in both ways—each revealing something slightly

different. Her many wigs are the capstone to her drag performance (as they are in many drag performances), and her parody of their naturalness exposes the incongruities present in her masquerade of femininity. Her parodic excess is quite obvious in and of itself, but she makes it even more obvious through her comments at her concert and her admittance of an entire room for her wigs' identities – literally holding her femininity at a distance, in another room.

The spectacle of female masquerade takes many forms including excessive or hyperbolic femininity and *grotesque* fat or aged femininity – the latter of which is also a part of Cher's spectacle. Cher turns 64 in 2010 and continues her spectacular performances at her show in Las Vegas²² where she still wears all Bob Mackie costumes, lots of wigs, and tons of glitter. She also has admitted to several plastic surgeries. Camp celebrates the supposed incongruity and irony of the “grotesque” older sexual woman (Babuscio, 1999: 119). It espouses youth worshipping, not youth – another irony that utilizes the “outer truth” to reveal the lack of any inner one (Booth, 1999: 74). Embracing what appears to be antithetical – such as age and youth, natural and artificial – is a way to challenge what norms dictate by showing that labels can be switched and opposites can go together, thus illuminating the artifice and construction of the norms themselves and putting distance between them and their assumed ordinary nature. Cher's public unapologetic acknowledgement of both her age and her plastic surgeries enacts this dual grasp on old and young, simultaneously buying into youth obsession while also negating youth itself.

The above examples show how Cher creates a disruptive spectacle of herself as a source of potential power, which Kathleen Rowe argues “points to new ways of thinking about visibility as power” (1995: ii) as well as challenges the myth of authenticity. Mary Russo (1986), in *Female Grotesques: Carnival and Theory*, reclaims the idea of “making a spectacle out of

²² See image at <http://www.cherworld.com/cherphotos/displayimage.php?album=51&pos=7>

oneself” and maintains the spectacle of female masquerade by women creates unruly representations that can be transgressive, dangerous, and produce a “loss of boundaries” (213). This loss of boundaries in masquerade is quite similar to that of drag as well as performativity – each term, however, draws attention to different (though related) results: an empowering distance from femininity and the oppression associated with it (masquerade), a challenge through parody to sex role characteristics and ideas of naturalness (drag), and a breaking down of myths of ordinary identity (performativity).

Since Cher’s comeback in the 1980s (one of many), “she’s been a favorite choice for impersonations by countless drag queens” (Bono, 1996: 58). Her inclusion in the Vegas drag revue Frank Marino’s Divas Las Vegas attests to this and a simple Google search of “cher drag queen” demonstrates the immensity of drag performances such as at screamingqueens.com which seems to have a Cher drag queen for hire in most major cities including New York,²³ San Diego,²⁴ Miami,²⁵ Vegas,²⁶ Chicago,²⁷ Dallas,²⁸ and Tucson.²⁹ Cher has welcomed this drag and the camp associated with it in gay communities, and her celebration of it helps to challenge any idea of an “authentic” Cher. Diane Negra (1999) cites Cher’s 1992 concert video from the Mirage hotel in Vegas where Cher “herself calls upon images of the multiple Cher, the constructed Cher” when a male drag queen comes onstage and “we are momentarily confused as

²³ See image at http://www.screamingqueens.com/files/images/galleries/celebrity_impersonators/0145_Cher-RJ-2.jpg

²⁴ See image at http://www.screamingqueens.com/files/images/galleries/California/0100-Cher-CM-San_Diego-2.jpg

²⁵ See image at <http://www.screamingqueens.com/files/images/galleries/Florida/0095-Cher-Miami-EL.jpg>

²⁶ See image at <http://www.screamingqueens.com/files/images/galleries/Nevada/0125-Cher-AS-Vegas-2.jpg>

²⁷ See image at <http://www.screamingqueens.com/files/images/galleries/Illinois/0030-Cher-CS-Chicago-1.jpg>

²⁸ See image at <http://www.screamingqueens.com/files/images/galleries/Texas/0010-Cher-WS-Dallas-1.jpg>

²⁹ See image at <http://www.screamingqueens.com/files/images/galleries/Arizona/0005-Cher-Tucson-AZ-2.jpg>

to which Cher is ‘real’” (175). These numerous Chers complicate the idea of any ‘real’ originary Cher at all since, as we shall see, Cher is in herself a multiplicity. Her plastic surgeries also reinforce this anti-original/natural Cher – the *authentic* Cher of 2008 literally does not have the same face as the *authentic* Cher of the 1960s.

Neither Cher’s nor Cher drag queens’ feminine performativity can be read as *natural*. There is no original because the *original* is consciously performing *herself*. Cher’s feminine drag produces a subversion of authenticity in the same way that drag queens who impersonate her also subvert this authenticity. And the combination of her drag, their drag, and their mutual embracing of each other creates a diversified and confusing picture of femininity and femaleness that denies any attempt to mark an authentic natural original within what we now know as “Cher.” One recent example of this multiplicity is an episode of *Will and Grace* where “Cher” is performed and re-performed by Cher and Jack as well as a Cher doll. The episode “Gypsies, Tramps and Weed”³⁰ camps the idea of authenticity when Jack believes Cher is a drag queen. He is in a restaurant with Will and Grace who have become annoyed with his obsession with the Cher doll. They leave him by himself with his doll when Cher comes up to him and says, “You know dude, it is a little weird that you’re talking to my doll.” Jack quickly replies, “I don’t think I need a drag queen to define normal behavior for me. But I will say this: the look, is flawless.”

The rest of the exchange between the two goes as follows:

Cher: Whatever.

Jack: Ooh, working the attitude. OK, you’re good.

Cher: I’ve had a lot of practice.

Jack: Hey, hey, hey, you’re not that great mister sister, alright. I do a better Cher than you.

Cher: You think so? [Licks lips and tosses her hair.]

Jack: Actually it’s “You think so-ho-o-o-o.” [Licks lips and tosses imaginary hair.]

Cher: Are you kidding me with this?

³⁰ View excerpt from this episode at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UnLf7ghM-6E> (CHERILOVEYOU, 2007).

Jack: Okay, the hand is perfect but it's more "Are you kidding me with this-ho-o-o-o-o"
[flips imaginary hair.]

Cher: Get a life. [Walks away, turns and comes back, taps Jack on the shoulder. Sings] If I could turn back time.

Jack: [sighs, rolls eyes, sings] If I could turn back ti-o-o-o-ome. It's ti-o-o-o-o-ome, Ti-o-o-o-o-ome [arcs pointed finger down to indicate dropping note and vibrato]

Cher: [slaps him] Snap out of it. (Kohan & Mutchnick, 2000, episode 52)

After the slap – à la her most famous scene in the camp classic *Moonstruck*³¹ when she slaps Nicholas Cage's character twice after he professes his love for her and she says "snap out of it!" – Jack realizes it is really Cher and he faints. Jack's insistence that he can do a better Cher than Cher, as well as his obsession with her doll and Cher's willingness to perform Cher, implies not only that there is no original but that the copies might well perform even better than what is perceived as an original. Not only is Jack performing Cher, Cher very obviously performs Cher as well. The mirroring they do of each other heightens this sense of performativity even more, especially since Jack is telling the *original* how to perform. This mirror of the *original* with a gay man further "exaggerates gender codes, making them obvious, grotesque," and thus, camp (Flinn, 1999: 439). While, as Judith Butler asserts, not all drag and certainly not all gender performance is subversive, the performativity involved here does open up the situation to subversion which in this case is toyed with and challenged by Cher. Just as drag queen performances of Aretha Franklin's "You Make Me Feel Like a Natural Woman" entertain while performatively redefining who can feel like a natural woman and subverting the idea of naturalness itself – Cher and Jack's performance here subverts the authority Cher has as the original as she attempts to prove herself to Jack and fails. Jack becomes the authority (at least momentarily) and the triple performances of Cher (Cher, Jack, and the Cher doll) undermine the

³¹ View this scene at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0x-fkSYDtUY&feature=Playlist&p=A64DF6711D470FC2&playnext_from=PL&playnext=1&index=14 (doojQ, 2008).

idea of an authentic Cher by creating the possibility of multiple Chers as well as the idea that Cher is always already performing her own Self. This is reiterated by the fact that it is not Cher's singing or performance of her embodiment through the lip lick or the hair toss that convinces Jack it is the *real* Cher but her re-action as one of her fictitious film characters that convinces him. It is through an unreal character that Cher performs, not through her presentation of herself, that her authenticity is secured.

CHER, ETHNICITY, AND AMBIGUITY

Cher's ethnic identities in her life, songs, and film roles take many forms from Native-American and Gypsy drag to passing as different ethnicities such as Italian and Jewish, to an unmarked ambiguity, all of which together challenge the idea of authenticity in a similar way to her drag performance. I aim to address Cher's ethnic ambiguity through specific examples that, when combined, foreground the overall ethnic ambiguity of Cher's persona and career that challenge essentialized authentic identity in similar ways to drag aspects of her female identity dealt with in the previous section. I apply terms of gender theory such as drag and masquerade utilized in the above analyses in order to make new inroads that take both her ethnic ambiguity and her feminine drag into account to show how Cher subverts ideas of essential and authentic identification. In this section I look at Cher's various performances of ethnicity, some of which can be defined as a kind of ethnic drag (such as her performances of "Half-Breed"), and in the last section, I address others such as her film roles that strive for a performance of authenticity. Attention to ambiguity is important because there are so many possibilities produced by and through Cher over the last half of a century that the sheer multiplicity and confusion create a form of subversion themselves outside of the individual performances, which some authors such

as Diane Negra (2001) interpret negatively as reinforcing mainstream assimilation of ethnic difference. I argue that, taken together, these individual constructions produce ethnic ambiguity that in turn refutes any stable ethnic identity for Cher.

Cher's diverse and shifting identities construct an ethnic ambiguity that can be interrogated through drag and performativity. Just as Butler argues that not all drag or performativity is subversive, in *Off-White Hollywood*, Diane Negra (2001) argues that ethnic ambiguity and/or passing does not necessarily challenge the status quo of racial identities and hierarchies because in many cases it serves to reinforce assimilation and a celebration of whiteness. Negra writes: "By fictionally enlarging the parameters of ethnic difference, contemporary films establish a plane on which to enact crises of difference far less volatile than crises of race and class, in the end working to conceal them" (2001: 17). However, similar to Butler's (1993) argument that drag challenges ordinary gender designation because its ambivalence reflects on the imitative structure of gender itself, ethnic ambiguity for Negra (2001) opens up the possibility of subversion because it positions Cher in particular as "neither fully inside nor outside prevailing categories of identity" (164). Negra's final chapter is on Cher and the front and back covers of the book have a picture of Cher in her "Half-Breed" costume. Negra argues that Cher is a very unique case because she has had so many transformations—from a "chameleonic sense of multi-ethnicity through bodily display" in the 1970s as dictated by the men in charge, to becoming "ethnically unmarked" in the 1980s, to her present reverting back to "ethnic mobility, but on fundamentally more transgressive terms" (167). I agree with Negra regarding Cher's ethnic mobility as transgressive, but I disagree with Negra's assessment of Cher's early career. While Negra's interrogation of Cher's ethnicities is productive in terms of ambiguity and ambivalence, it is also dismissive in many ways – such as labeling everything

Cher did in the 1970s from her vocal career to her part in *The Sonny and Cher Comedy Hour* as only based on what men (Sonny and other producers) told her to do. While this might be partially true, Sonny did control much of their early singing career and the production of their television show was network-directed as all TV at the time was, it is by no means entirely the *truth* when one takes into consideration Cher's later career choices that in many ways further these beginnings. If, as Negra argues, Cher's early beginnings were wholly against her own will and she was basically a puppet for Sonny and other men, then why would she continue in these same aesthetic veins in her later self-motivated incarnations where she continues to perform these earlier songs at every concert (specifically her ethnic-themed songs "Half-Breed" and "Gypsies. Tramps and Thieves"), still wears only Bob Mackie, and chooses film roles that portray unruly and ethnic women? While Sonny Bono directed much of their early work together, Cher reclaims these initial representations throughout her entire career and continues their production of ethnic ambiguity as well – to ignore them is to discount any agency Cher had at the time as well as how they are related to and re-performed in her later career. For this reason I look closely here at Cher's 1970s' ventures as part of her own choices and connect them with her later enactments as well. Negra's overall analysis however is very useful in its attention to the "way that Cher's body registers a sense of ontological uncertainty" (2001: 178). I focus on those instances that promote an ethnic ambiguity or shifting meanings of identities that are absent from Negra's analysis in order to show the particular disruption that Cher's persona creates by refusing to ever settle on a solid authentic or original singular ethnic identity, which in some ways reflects an ethnic version of Butler's gender performativity.

Born Cherilyn Sarkisian in California in 1946, and later adding her step-father's "La Pierre" surname as well, by the time she hit the big time she was simply Cher. Negra points out

the Whitification of many Hollywood women's names in order to make them fit more into the mainstream but she does not address why Cher did not take a new surname during her career. Both of Cher's previous surnames are obviously ethnically marked and instead of changing them to some Americanized moniker she drops a last name all together. This has the effect of rejecting any kind of ethnic marker – be it Armenian, French, or “American” (i.e., unmarked whiteness). While her heritage is Armenian, Cherokee, and French, dropping any surname at all instead of replacing it with an unmarked white one has the effect of producing an ambiguous ethnic multiplicity because she literally is not labeled. This differs from Madonna's single moniker because hers is also a religious reference as opposed to Cher's retention of her first name and refusal to attach any kind of *real* or made-up ethnically identifiable surname. This becomes a performative action through omission that refutes an originary ethnic designation through descent as her previous surnames had, while also declining to privilege one part of her ethnicity over any other or create an “American” (read white) identity through a new last name.

Many songs sung by Cher in the 1970s highlight her ability to perform multiple and shifting identities, particularly “Gypsies, Tramps, and Thieves” (also preformed on *The Sonny and Cher Comedy Hour*) and “You Better Sit Down Kids,” in which she sings in first person as a dad to his children about divorce (written by Sonny, but in the late 1960s way before their own split), as well as a cover of “Girl from Ipanema.” But a close reading of Cher's performance of her song “Half-Breed”³² provides a wonderful illustration of Cher's ethnic ambiguity and drag in the 1970s as well as an opportunity to interrogate the idea of authenticity and her relation to it. In an episode of *The Sonny and Cher Comedy Hour* (Hanrahan, 1971-1974) which aired in 1974, Cher dons her now famous Native American costume – basically a white-beaded bikini with a

³² View video at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uxoWto09Oyg> (CherMusicForever, 2009).

white feathered headdress that reaches the ground – while sitting on a black and white horse. The background is white and the camera pans around Cher so that a large totem pole periodically passes across her in the foreground as blue-screen flames appear around the edges of the screen. On a show that centers around parody it would be a mistake to not take these songs somewhat in the same vein – especially in light of the ridiculousness of the costume and flame-wreathed set (even for a time when stereotypes were routinely performed in this overdone way, they usually were not as outrageous as Cher is in this scene). Negra addresses the variety show format and writes: “With their narratively fragmented style and emphasis on masquerade, such shows ... were well suited to reflect and respond to social identities in flux and to stage social contestation in such a way as to re-orient difference as diversity” (2001: 168). Negra’s use here of masquerade relates Cher’s ethnic performance to her performances of femininity. Regardless of her “actual” identity as female or Native American, “Half-Breed” distances her through overt masquerade from this assumed essential identification and marks it as constructed, a parody that refutes an originary or authentic identification. While Cher is part Cherokee and one could interpret this song as semi-biographical, her performance of it (both then and now) focuses attention on the nostalgic production of “Native Americanness.” As addressed earlier in this chapter, Cher’s costumes were always outrageous, the “Half-Breed” costume is of particular interest because it effectively turns Cher’s “authentic” Native American identity into a performative mimicry: drawing attention not to Cher’s “actual” Cherokee identity but to her parodic performance of it. This performative mimicry distances her from any “real” Native American identity in much the same way as her feminine drag creates a female masquerade that distances her from authentic normative femininity, in effect creating a form of ethnic drag.

While I agree with Negra that to some extent Cher's body was co-opted to portray what the male producers wanted and that *The Sonny and Cher Comedy Hour* was framed in innocuous family relations, this does not erase either the subversive elements of the show or Cher's own performative abilities. Like Butler's (1990, 1993) argument that gender performativity can be at once reifying and disruptive of ideas of authentic or originary identity, it is/was virtually impossible for any variety show (or anything else for that matter) to not participate in the white patriarchal system of which it was necessarily a part. However, this does not block opportunities for fissures and disruptions even within this normative setting.

I would like to use one such example from a recurring skit originally performed in an early episode of *The Sonny and Cher Comedy Hour* in 1971 (Hanrahan, 1971-1974). The scene in question is the last skit of the first episode of the show titled "At the Opera with Freeman King" and billed as "The Operas No One Does Anymore," which consists of a pseudo-operatic setting introduced by regular cast members. An African-American cast member who says his name is Freeman Cane sits in the opera box with his parents whom he addresses as Spot and Rover: a white man covered in cobwebs who doesn't move and another white man in female drag as Cane's mother. The announcer addresses the audience and says they are about to see an opera from Venice in 1641 called "All in the Familias." This spoof begins with the following characters singing in a V formation in Archie Bunker's³³ living room (from left to right, all in ridiculous costumes): a yodeler in German lederhosen, an Italian organ grinder with monkey, an Arab, a nun, a police man, a Chinese woman, a gay man, a Hispanic woman, a Tibetan monk, a construction worker, a Native American (with a red feathered headdress quite similar to Cher's

³³ Archie Bunker was the patriarch and main character on the sitcom *All in the Family* (Lear, 1971) which ran for nine seasons throughout the 1970s. The Archie Bunker character was famous for being a blue-collar conservative who was reactionary and bigoted—often making stereotypical and prejudiced comments to or about racial, ethnic, religious, and sexual minorities.

in “Half-Breed”), a black man in African print Kaftan, and an Orthodox Jew. They proceed to sing “I am an Arab, and I am a Jew, I’m a Negro and I’m an Indian” at which point the gay man (Steve Martin) steps forward and lisps “And I’m a minority too” before they all join in to sing about how Archie Bunker hates all of mankind and they want to kick him in his behind.

This skit has multiple targets in its parody. An important aspect of this sketch is that EVERYONE is playing a stereotype of some kind – a common trope in variety TV from the ’70s to today – but it is also blatantly addressing all of these AS stereotypes. Similar to “Half-Breed,” this calls attention to the drag element of this performance, parodying the idea of natural originary identity (including race, ethnicity, sexuality, and religion) in a way similar to how drag reveals the construction of gender. This spoof follows the tone of the variety show as a whole, which also included Cher’s showcase of songs such as “Half-Breed,” as discussed earlier, and “Gypsies, Tramps, and Thieves,” in which she wears flowing red and purple dress, head wrap, and hoop earrings that must have been at least six inches in diameter. It is true that these were different formats within the hour variety show – sketches and songs – but their close proximity and similarity of aesthetics disallows separation and thus Cher’s ethnic performances through songs should be taken as in the same vein as the parodic skits. This is indicative of what Butler says about gender in *Gender Trouble*: “parodic proliferation deprives hegemonic culture and its critics of the claim to naturalized or essentialist gender identities” (1990: 176). Though it would be a mistake to analogize gender with ethnicity, this deconstruction does apply to both phenomena. Though the images presented in this skit (as well as “Half-Breed”) could today be looked at as offensive, there is no doubt that they are parodies and this in turn refutes the naturalization of these very stereotypes by reproducing them in a consciously counter-hegemonic way that is actually quite similar to gender drag in its conscious putting-on of an ethnicity (and

indeed is paired with gender drag in the form of the announcer's mother).

Both Cher's performance of "Half-Breed" and the skit referenced above function to create ethnic or racial identity as an effect that has the potential to destabilize the regulatory fictions of gendered and ethnic identity. Butler (1990) argues in terms of gender that "there is a subversive laughter in the pastiche-effect of parodic practices in which the original, the authentic, and the real are themselves constituted as effects" (186-187). I argue that the same can be true for the parody of ethnic identity such that it too can be subversively laughed at and in the process can challenge the limits and constraints on agency that occur when identity categories are positioned as "foundational and fixed" (Butler, 1990: 187). While Butler is specifically addressing gender in her analysis and warns against uncritical application of her theory to race or ethnicity in *Bodies that Matter* (1993), a critical application here reveals parody to work similarly on ethnicity and subvert its naturalized foundations as well in such cases as Cher's "Half-Breed" that takes a presumed authentic identity and recycles it to draw attention to its construction.

PERFORMING AUTHENTICITY

In Cher's more recent reincarnations she has been making more films. In many of these performances Cher in some way portrays a subversive element that is attached to some kind of identity of difference. In some cases this is ethnic, or sexual, or class-based, or challenges gender norms. In *Mask* (1985) she is a single working-class mother who runs with the biker crowd in Azusa, California, which even in the '80s was not a predominant crowd in this suburbia (I grew up in the next town over). In *Tea With Mussolini* (1999) she is first "Other" because she is American and later because she is Jewish. In *Moonstruck* (1987), she is Italian and a sexual older

woman. In *Silkwood* (1983), she is a working-class lesbian. In *Witches of Eastwick* (1987) and in *Mermaids* (1990), she is a sexualized single mother. Even in the horrible Sonny Bono-written flick *Chastity* (1969) she plays a hitchhiker who has a fling with a woman. Many of these disruptive characters can be attributed to Cher's selectiveness in roles as well her performance history of ethnic ambiguity and unruly womanhood. *Tea With Mussolini* in particular is exemplary of the idea of shifting identities as well as Cher's performance of authenticity.

Tea With Mussolini (1999) is the semi-autobiographical tale of a group of English ladies in Florence in the 1930s and 1940s. Most relevant to my analysis of Cher, *Tea With Mussolini* places shifting importance on different identities and the consequences of those identities based on changing contexts. Cher's character, Elsa,³⁴ is at the beginning of the film the U.S. "Other" to English Lady Hester (Maggie Smith), who among other things refers to Elsa as vulgar, dreadful, and flagrantly immoral in references to her Americanness. It is Elsa who is stereotyped as American, though Georgie (Lily Tomlin) is also from the United States. Georgie is Other within this group of English women because of her lesbian identity, which is not punished or looked down upon as Elsa's Americanness is, and within the film it seems that because of this lesbian identity Georgie escapes similar damning judgments of her Americanness. The film produces Otherness contextually, and who is "Other" and for what reasons is constantly changing as are the connections between individuals. Lady Hester and her friends quickly go from popular benefactors of the arts to the 1930s equivalent of enemy combatants. Their Otherness was always Englishness but the meaning and consequences of this identity shifts drastically when England becomes an enemy of Italy and they are detained. Later they are joined by Elsa and Georgie when they too become enemy aliens because they are American: thus creating a similarity where

³⁴ See image at <http://www.imdb.com/media/rm1782290432/nm0000333>

none supposedly existed before. It is soon after this that it becomes apparent the Elsa is in grave danger because she is Jewish. One of the most interesting pieces of this film is that only a few visual cues signal Elsa's Jewishness until almost the very end of the film: she is followed by soldiers at the train depot, told to be discreet by her companions, and rushed through. The only stereotypical marker is her wealth. Not even her name is a cue because she has so many different husbands that she has at least two different last names within the movie and references to at least three other husbands. How the movie presents her Jewish *Otherness* is significant: she doesn't do any of the usually stereotyped *Jewish* things like go to synagogue or wear a star of David, and no one addresses her as such or treats her differently because of this Jewishness. It is simply "known" that she is a Jew, something that had no importance to or even any acknowledgement from any characters or any other aspect of the film before this part of the movie. She is simultaneously *a priori* Jewish and becomes a Jew within the film text, similar to how the English women go from English benefactors of Florentine art to English enemy aliens. Judith Butler argues in *Bodies that Matter*, "identifications are never fully and finally made; they are incessantly reconstituted and, as such, are subject to the volatile logic of iterability" (1993: 105). The shift of what identities mean and how they are emphasized is representative of this argument. This highlights the idea that who one *is*, is in many cases dependent on the circumstances one is in, just as Elsa's Americanness and Jewishness take on different meanings throughout the film.

While quite different from Cher's parodic and drag performances, identity in *Tea With Mussolini* relocates fluidly between designations, particularly for Cher's character but also for others, and identity becomes dependent on context, not on any originary or trait-based category. Just as the previous section addressed parody of authentic identity as challenging the limits and

constraints of “naturalized foundations” of identity (Butler, 1990: 187), Cher’s performance of authenticity in fictionalized roles as well as the shifting identifications and their meaning in *Tea With Mussolini* mark authenticity as an effect that can be utilized to destabilize constrictive ideals of originary identity. Authenticity becomes another tool of performance.

CONCLUSION

In her persona and performances of *herself*, Cher employs parody and drag in such a way that her feminine identity is constructed as surface value primarily through excess and the use of *false* visual elements of femininity such as wigs and glitter that refute a connection between her representation of femininity and her female sex. They mark her as a female drag queen (or bio-queen) whose masquerade of femininity draws attention to the construction of identity that is a house of cards holding up a monolithic construct. Her simultaneous performance of ethnicity works in a similar way, and when combined with theories of gender performativity reveals the construction and myth of authenticity here as well. Ironically, it is only when Cher is acting that she strives for *authentic* identity and presumably achieves it too, as multiple awards and nominations attest to (including an Oscar and Golden Globe for her role in *Moonstruck*, and an Oscar nomination and Golden Globe award for her role in *Silkwood*) (Awards, 2010). As a result, authentic identity is something Cher performs in fictional venues, not something that is necessarily part of her performances of herself and her public persona (as the *Will and Grace* episode demonstrates). In both these arenas of performance and film, the elements of an ambiguous ethnic identity and excessive feminine drag refuse a natural originary identity and instead replace it with reflexive performances that parody identification. The film *Tea with Mussolini* exemplifies these shifting identifications and labels them as based on context and

subject to change. Interrogating these examples and Cher herself in the context of performativity, camp, drag, and masquerade reveals openings for subversion of myths of authentic or originary gender and ethnic identities that can potentially challenge the oppressions, limits, and constraints that accompany these regulatory fictions. In the case of Cher, her subversive potential comes from the combination of all her ethnic and gendered enactments that together create a multiplicity of identifications that exposes the construction of identities and authenticity and rejects the idea of natural inherent (and confining) markers of Otherness. In the next chapter I will explore further the construction of authenticity and play between real and fictive identity as enacted by Divine who brings together the ambivalences of Cher's split roles of drag persona and authentic fictional characters in order to confuse the boundaries between real and fake even more.

CHAPTER THREE

DIVINE INTERVENTION: PASSING-IN-DRAG IN AN ABJECT REALITY

Harris Glenn Milstead (1945-1988) met John Waters in Baltimore when they were both 16. John Waters' early film career was intimately connected to the display and employment of the drag queen Divine who seems to be sort of jointly created by both Milstead and Waters (though of course taken in her own direction over the years by Divine, the character actor). Billed by Waters and many in the international club circuit as "The Most Beautiful Woman in the World" (Waters, *Shock Value*, 1981: 141), in Waters' early films that remain unreleased Divine played (among other characters) Jackie Kennedy and a woman raped by a giant lobster before her infamous portrayal in *Pink Flamingos* (1972) of "The Filthiest Woman Alive." Divine was in all but one of Waters' films before her untimely death in 1988, and the only reason she was not in *Desperate Living* (a 1977 movie about lesbians) was because of a prior theater engagement (Waters, 1981: 160). These early films bled into Divine's club performances as well as her and Waters' publicity appearances where she would not only hurl obscenities at the audience but on at least one occasion dead fish as well (Bernard, *Not Simply Divine* 1993: 30). This blur between Divine's characters in Waters' film and Divine's persona contribute to an aura of abjection and grotesquerie that helped to create her ability to pass as a woman even though her persona was firmly entrenched in the world of drag.

Divine's career began when s/he starred in Water's earliest independent films which included *Roman Candles* (1966), *Eat Your Make-Up* (1968), *Mondo Trasho* (1969), *Multiple Maniacs* (1970), and *The Diane Linkletter Story* (1970). All were panned and conversely celebrated as trash, bad taste, blasphemy, and/or obscene. This was due not only to the trash aesthetic but also because their topics included reenacting the Kennedy assassination a few years

after it happened (with Divine as Jackie Kennedy) (*Eat Your Make-Up*) and the suicide of Senator Art Linkletter's daughter on drugs the same day as the story hit the newsstand. From the very beginning Divine was the Queen of Trash to Waters' King. While there were local Baltimore showings of many of these films (ironically primarily at churches (Waters, 1981: 53, 54, 59) as well as some arthouse midnight showing in Boston, Provincetown, San Francisco, and a few other big cities (*Shock Value* 61), it was not until *Pink Flamingos* that Divine became a cult star and both her and Waters' place in history as the Filthiest People Alive was secured. These films, with their extremely low budgets and church basement showings, were part of the late '60s and early '70s phenomena of midnight movies – independent films such as *Flaming Creatures* and Andy Warhol's *Blowjob* (among many others) designed for a specific audience and at many times attacked for their alleged obscenity and targeted for censorship. The trajectory of Waters' films and Divine's stardom from church basement to the PG-rated *Hairspray*'s 1988 mainstream success uniquely illustrates the functionality of Waters' trash aesthetic in different audience settings. The trash was always there, but what was trash and how it functioned changed somewhat as the films became more and more mainstream. Divine's drag and how she passes as a woman also changed throughout this trajectory such that the mainstreaming of Waters' films and his trash aesthetic allows us to explore what passes, when, for whom, and why.

The early Waters films and Divine's club performances focused around a persona of trash, filth, abuse, and disgust such that at certain points Divine and Waters were accused by mainstream media personalities of being pornographers and peddlers of obscene material and were even reviewed for possible prosecution by censors in Baltimore (*Crackpot* 83; *Shock Value* 91). This connection between pornography, camp, trashiness, and the abject and grotesque and Divine's blurred place within these intersections creates a place from which to interrogate what

meaning is produced by Divine the drag persona in terms of femininity, class, camp, passing, the “real,” and identity construction. While Divine undeniably takes the form of a drag queen, all her film parts were female characters. These roles are unique in narrative film and create a space in which to interrogate the relation between passing and drag. While many films include parts where a male character passes in drag, Divine’s roles are perhaps the only ones where both passing and drag are outside of the film’s reality. Within the diegetic worlds of these films, Divine is many things – a mother, a whore, the filthiest person alive – but a man in drag she is not. But outside these narratives, this becomes what defines her. What creates this semblance of passing-in-drag is the topic of this chapter. I argue that it is the very connections between porn, camp, trash, and the abject and grotesque that creates a filmic reality in which a man in drag can *be* a woman. This in turn produces a space through which to interrogate how femininity itself is constructed and malleable. A chain of interrelationships between camp, carnivalesque, the abject, and the grotesque creates an overlap between the associations of drag/homosexual and woman/femininity through that which is traditionally identified as flawed or trash. But the key for Waters’ films is that this flawed identification is then embraced and depicted as valued. This makes his films and Divine’s performances within them (as well as her persona) a place in which to question how identity can be differently constructed as well as revalued outside ideals of naturalness and in opposition to middle-class ideological constraints.

Waters’ trash aesthetic facilitates Divine’s passing-in-drag. While Divine’s club performances are solidly located in the realm of grotesque drag, her film roles (and particularly those in John Waters’ movies, but also in 1985’s *Lust in the Dust* and her multiple theatre performances) create passing-in-drag enabled by a representation of flawed femininity within a context of an abject carnivalesque filmic reality. Waters’ trash aesthetic constructs entire

“flawed” worlds – though he and most of his audience did not see it as flawed but as deliciously trashy. As authors including Stallybrass and White in *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* and Kathleen Rowe in *The Unruly Woman* have argued, many representations of grotesque womanhood are aimed at mocking, chastising, or regulating non-normative femininity (Stallybrass and White) (this is the charge not only against some mainstream media but also against some drag performances as well – including Divine’s club acts) but I argue Waters and Divine’s camp representations mirror that of Rowe’s unruly woman. The unruly woman, exemplified for Rowe by Rosanne Barr, makes the joke rather than being the butt of it. Rowe uses Bakhtin’s pregnant laughing hags, the carnivalesque, and the grotesque as a starting point from which to argue that women and female characters from Miss Piggy and Mae West to Rosanne Arnold and Cher participate in the ambivalent challenge to social hierarchies that is the Unruly Woman and can be traced back to Medusa. Divine’s roles in Water’s films act to embrace the abject and the grotesque through a trash aesthetic that celebrates stereotypes of low class and reverses hierarchies of value where the Unruly Woman/Unruly Drag Queen comes out on top. His earlier movies create an entire camp world in which the grotesque unruly woman is but one piece that fits into the whole grotesque/abject world of campy revaluations.

In *Hairspray* this celebration of the grotesque, though still somewhat present, is mostly abandoned in favor of a more conventional world and commentary where the good guys are good and the bad guys are bad. This is indicative of the shift from midnight movies to mainstream where the trash aimed at and understood by the specified audience of the midnight movies who were “in the know” of camp style and how to consume the so-bad-it’s-good motif is partially (though, importantly, not entirely) replaced for the broader mainstream audience with a more straightforward flattering picture of working class identity. Here the comment on class

becomes conventionalized into a story of hardworking lower class support and camaraderie with African-Americans and their plight that critiques the middle classes and conventional beauty. Fat becomes the new identifying abjection that allows for Divine's passing-in-drag. Like the previous abject campy worlds of his past films, fat here is not just a function of Divine but an organizing feature of the film that creates a space for Divine to pass in drag without making her a misogynist joke. What is conventionally viewed as flawed womanhood – fatness in *Hairspray*, trailer trash in *Pink Flamingos*, violence in *Female Trouble* – is what allows for Divine's passing, but the filmic worlds redefine these pictures of femininity as desirable. By viewing Divine's drag through the lens of passing and tracing the changes to both her drag and passing over time and into the mainstream we can illuminate productive uses of the abject, the grotesque, and their relations to class and femininity.

In this chapter I will trace the relationships between camp, carnivalesque, abjection, and the grotesque that create the world in which Divine passes in drag. Divine's passing-in-drag is made possible through the construction of these abject and grotesque realms and it is therefore necessary to first delve into their construction, as well as hers. It is the combination of all these aspects that produces the reversals and revaluations within Waters' films that in turn create space for a man in drag to pass as a woman and for that woman to be a heroine. I will argue that it is a combination of low camp, abjection, and grotesquerie that uniquely produces the reality in which Divine passes in drag. As Water's trash aesthetic became more mainstream, so did Divine's passing – the intertwined evolution of both Waters' trash aesthetic and Divine's passing-in-drag is a site through which to interrogate passing-in-drag's relation to abjection, the grotesque, and class as well as how abjection, class, and femininity are linked together and camped differently for mainstream and non-mainstream audiences. I will first outline the connections in Waters'

films between camp, carnivalesque, abject, and grotesque as well as their ties to ideas of “the real.” I will then address how these together create Divine’s passing-in-drag before delving into how her passing-in-drag functions within the trash aesthetic to revalue certain rejected forms of femininity within the realities of the films. I will end by addressing the trajectory of the mainstreaming of Waters’ films as a space in which to interrogate Divine’s passing-in-drag in the context of a wider less specified audience, thus addressing how Waters’ trash is translated successfully to a larger audience while still holding onto its original effects of revaluation and identity play, if not necessarily its original content.

DIVINE CAMP

Divine’s characters and persona as well as John Waters’ filmic worlds are deeply intertwined with and utilize a camp aesthetic. Camp – a highly contested term in itself – generally means the parodic embracing and recycling of that rejected or abjected by mainstream culture and originated as a gay male practice in the 1950s and 1960s³⁵. Corey Creekmur and Alexander Doty explain camp and its meaning in their introduction to *Out In Culture: Gay, Lesbian and Queer Essays on Popular Culture*:

An attitude at once casual and severe, affectionate and ironic, camp served to deflate the pretensions of mainstream culture while elevating what that same culture devalued or repressed, thus providing a strategy for rewriting and questioning the meanings and values of mainstream representations. Camp was also, for some time, an “insider’s” attitude and knowledge, a means not only of disturbing dominant cultural values but also of disseminating information about who (or what) was in – that is, in the life (homosexual), in the know, au courant, avant-garde, or, to use a later term, hip. (1995: 2)

³⁵ Camp as a form (though not the term itself) can also be traced back to the Renaissance and the Middle Ages in the form of the carnivalesque: a way for the “common” people to poke fun at those higher up in society such as the clergy and royalty where similar employment of recycling, inverting hierarchies, and embracing of the abject took place (Stallybrass & White 1986). This is seen even in the recycling of Stallybrass & White’s title *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* by Moe Meyer’s *The Politics and Poetics of Camp* (1995). The carnivalesque will be addressed further later in this chapter.

Water's films, in particular his early ones from *Multiple Maniacs* through *Female Trouble*, were part of the midnight movie craze of the gay community in the 1960s and 1970s – following such undisputed gay camp classics as *Flaming Creatures* (1963), *Scorpio Rising* (1964), and many of Andy Warhol's films including *Couch* (1964) and *Blow Job* (1963) (many of which Waters' cites in his own book, *Shock Value*, (1981: 40)). Moe Meyer argues that "Broadly defined, Camp refers to strategies and tactics of queer parody" (1994: 9). Waters' films and Divine's persona fit squarely within these definitions by parodying mainstream culture, embracing the abject, and calling out to the "insider" viewer who would see the parody and delight in it. But part of camp was also an emphasis on appearances and style and this is part of what enables Divine's passing-in-drag in the campy worlds John Waters' creates. In "Camp and the Gay Sensibility," Jack Babuscio writes:

camp emphasizes style as a means of self-projection, a conveyor of meaning, and an expression of emotional tone. Style is a form of consciousness; it is never 'natural,' always acquired. In terms of style, it signifies performance rather than existence. ... By such means as these one aims to become what one wills, to exercise some control over one's environment. But the emphasis on style goes further. Camp is often exaggerated. When the stress on style is 'outrageous' or 'too much,' it results in incongruities: the emphasis shifts from what a thing or a person *is* to what it *looks* like; from *what* is being done to *how* it is being done (1999: 122)

This camp rejection of ideals of naturalness and emphasis on exaggeration, performance, and appearance are utilized by Waters' to create entire worlds of incongruities, only one of which is Divine. Because of this, she passes within the camp logic of his early films. The place of the "insider viewer" of camp facilitates Divine's passing-in-drag. Those in-the-know of camp who embrace the idea of style as acquired self-projection are more open to the concept of a man in drag playing a female character and accept this within a camp logic. Ironically, it is also this camp logic and censors' place as outsider viewers who do not understand it that makes them the dupe of Divine's passing (Robinson). While she is seen as passing by insider viewers who know

it is a man in drag but accept his/her performance, her passing goes unnoticed by censors who, in the camp world of the films, see just another weird woman in an obscene film (Waters, 1981: 91). Thus the camp status and environment of the early films as well as their screenings to select midnight movie audiences facilitates Divine's passing not only to a willing audience who understood and participated in the camp viewing practice, but to clueless censors as well.

Divine and Waters' particular brand of camp utilized what many term "low camp" because it utilized grossness and the "trash" of society. Many of Waters' worlds satirically glamorized a "trailer trash" or "white trash" aesthetic that not only celebrated filth, trash, violence, etc. but also their supposed connections to lower-class status (Waters, 1981: 2; Rhyne, 2004). Waters' trash aesthetic includes what has been thrown away for mainstream society – both literally and figuratively – such as actual trash, kitschy items, excrement, vomit, but also fat women, the working class, and homosexuals. While John Waters is now considered by many in both the gay and mainstream communities as a camp king inseparable from his camp queen, this was not always the case. While drag was a practice within the gay club scene in the 1960s, few if any performers created raunchy personas such as Divine's and rather performed impersonations of famous women. Matthew Tinckom writes, "Waters notes that the power of Divine's persona abided in her ability to offend virtually everyone, including other drag queens. He recalls the 'other drag queens hated Divine at the beginning because they knew Divine was making fun of drag queens. I mean, you expected her to pull out a knife.' Waters is pointing to a commitment by some forms of drag to a more conciliatory femininity than Divine was displaying" (2002: 167). Unlike much impersonation (or high camp) drag, Divine was meant to offend and shock, to make "other drag queens run in tears," as Waters himself says in the 1998 documentary *Divine Trash*. This has been addressed as a distinction between high and low camp by many authors

seeking to explain at the same time as they embrace this kind of camp as lower class, or having less lofty goals. It is interesting that in a tactic such as camp which is meant to turn things on their heads, parody those in power, and/or embrace what is thrown away, there is a distinction and hierarchy within it of what is in good or bad taste – even if what is deemed bad taste is still celebrated, as is Divine and Waters. In “Taking out the Trash: Camp and the politics of Parody,” Chuck Kleinhans argues that

In terms of drag, a form of gender parody, high Camp aims for the seamless illusion of female impersonation, while low Camp accepts the deconstructed gender presence of drag queens. In a closely related way, what I call trash – or deliberate low Camp – originates in the perception by some gay men and others that taste, or aesthetic sensibility, is also socially constructed. ... Camp pushes a poorly done form (poorly done by conventional standards of technique and social manners) to the limits so that its very badness is what the work is about. ... low Camp deliberately celebrates bad taste and often intentionally offends aesthetic and social sensibilities in order to make a statement. (1994: 188-189)

Kleinhans uses Waters’ *Pink Flamingos* to illustrate the above argument but he goes on to argue that Divine is *too much* trash, particularly in *Multiple Maniacs* (1966): “Divine never really arrives anywhere and ends up subverting her own Camp critique. ... Divine simply assaults all audience sensibilities from a unique and inexplicable position. Shock substitutes for clever form; excess becomes its own excuse; and Divine’s four-hundred-pound excess is simply bizarre, representing nothing but itself, a non sequitur raised to an initial proposition. As a result, the deliberate crudeness of Divine’s behavior inhibits appreciation in the audience’s response.”(191). So he – as well as others including Newton and Sontag who differentiate between camp and kitsch³⁶ as well – makes what seems like an arbitrary distinction between what is enough trashiness or low-class shock and excess and what is too much and therefore outside the realm of

³⁶ Kitsch is often disparaged as “light art” that is debased, tasteless, apolitical, mass-produced, wholly commercial, often purchased by working-class people and is differentiated from camp by authors including Sedgwick, Tinkcom, and Sontag by camp’s political purpose, self-reflexiveness, and subversive potential.

proper camp statements. What is most interesting for Divine is that simultaneous “low camp” grotesque drag – what is often termed the most “bizarre” and doesn’t strive for impersonation in the very least – is used as passing within Waters’ worlds of abject trashiness. The worlds his films create utilize abjection and the grotesque within a “low camp” setting that is akin to the carnivalesque enactment of a “topsy turvy” time, and it is this combination that produces the space for Divine to pass. The socio-historic relation between camp and carnival helps to explain why and how this pass is possible more than either concept (or the theory about it) alone could accomplish.

CAMP AND THE CARNIVALESQUE

Camp has its historical corollary, if not its actual roots, in the Renaissance and Middle Ages practice of the carnivalesque. The similarities between the two include flipping hierarchies and embracing the lower strata, parody, cultural recycling, cross-dressing, inverted hierarchies, a celebration of the grotesque and abject, excess, audience participation or a blurring of the line between spectator and performer, and the ambivalent possibility of assimilating transgressive potential back into the hegemonic fold. Moe Myers even parodies Stallybrass and White’s title *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*, which focuses on the carnivalesque, in his book *The Politics and Poetics of Camp*. Seeing this connection between Camp and the carnivalesque opens up new avenues through which to interrogate camp and in particular Waters’ and Divine’s films and their use of the grotesque and abject, illuminating a connection between Camp’s abjected gay men and grotesque drag queens and carnivalesque’s abject/grotesque women that contributes to Divine’s passing-in-drag. Mary Russo argues that

it is as if the carnivalesque body politic had ingested the entire corpus of high culture and, in its bloated and irrepressible state, released it in fits and starts in all manner of

recombination, inversion, mockery, and degradation. ... Carnival and the carnivalesque suggest a redeployment of counterproduction of culture, knowledge, and pleasure. In its multivalent oppositional play, carnival refuses to surrender the critical and cultural tools of the dominant class, and in this sense, carnival can be seen, above all, as a site of insurgency, and not merely withdrawal. (1986: 62)

This mirrors both the process and criticism of camp. Creekmur and Doty write, “An attitude at once casual and severe, affectionate and ironic, camp served to deflate the pretensions of mainstream culture while elevating what that same culture devalued or repressed, thus providing a strategy for rewriting and questioning the meanings and values of mainstream representations” (2). Just as carnival was constantly in danger of being coopted and used to reinforce hegemonic ideas (such as carnival attacks on women and Jews) (Stallybrass and White), so camp has also been deemed apolitical and/or taken over by the mainstream in order to create parody that reinforces dominant ideals (Aaron “The New Queer Spectator,” 2004). But because of their play in the interstices and counterproduction of cultural norms, camp and carnival are both sites of “insurgency.” John Waters’ camp in particular bears large resemblance to carnival which, according to Stallybrass and White “is presented by Bakhtin as a world of topsy-turvy, of heteroglot exuberance, of ceaseless overrunning and excess where all is mixed, hybrid, ritually degraded and defiled” (8).

The overlapping of filmic and “actual” realities in Waters’ films that reinvents the lack of differentiation between carnivalesque spectators and performers also points to this correlation between camp and carnivalesque as well as their attentions to the abject and grotesque, thus contributing to the creation of Divine’s passing-in-drag and the subversions it potentially entails. These include Waters’ unflagging use of Baltimore in his movies including street scenes in *Pink Flamingos* and *Female Trouble* where the camera captures real Baltimoreans reactions to Divine strutting down the sidewalk (Waters, 1981: 15), the use of his own house as the set for the

Marbles home (*Pink Flamingos*), and the use of his friends as the majority of the cast in *Pink Flamingos* (most notably the unnamed singing asshole) as well as throughout all his films, not to mention the very real props used in his early films such as Divine's present from the Marbles being an actual bowel movement, the dog-feces-eating scene, and the use of live chicken in a sex scene. These uses of "the real" as well as Waters' love of audience participation and his attempts such as Odorama³⁷ in *Polyester* (1981) to foster it – not to mention his infamous trash aesthetic that employs multiple carnivalesque abjections and grotesqueries – create camp along the lines of the carnivalesque that blur the line between spectator and participant and thus have the audience contribute to the camp aspects of his films, including Divine's ability to pass.

The connection between carnival and camp reveals insight into the functions of the abject and grotesque in Waters' films and how they contribute to Divine's ability to pass-in-drag. While there is some scholarship written on Waters' trash aesthetic, delving into it with full use of its relation to the grotesque and abject and the theoretical explanations of them allows us to interrogate Divine's drag and passing in a new light, including seeing a correlation between camps' gay man and the carnivalesque unruly woman who – like drag queens – refuses to fit into the traditional box of femininity and instead offends, shocks, and will not be shut up or shut down (though often is punished or neutered in mainstream media texts for these very reasons, just as drag queens are).

³⁷ *Polyester* begins with an explanation of Odorama by a "scientist" who explains to audience members – given Odorama cards upon entering the theatre, as well as included in the DVD – should scratch and sniff each of 10 numbered spot on the card when the corresponding number appears on the lower right side of the screen. Scents include flowers, dirty shoes, skunk, pizza, air freshener, gasoline, and flatulence.

THE ABJECT AND THE GROTESQUE

There are many similarities between the grotesque and the abject, as with Bakhtin's laughing senile "old hags" who are used to describe both predicaments within literature on carnivalesque by authors such as Julia Kristeva (1982), Russo, Rowe, and Stallybrass and White. Where they differ most is in the minutia of their theoretical meanings as well as somewhat in their origins (both of which will be covered below). The abject is a broader term applying to disgust, bodily functions, and the murky space between subject and object – all encapsulated by the pregnant woman – and the grotesque is theoretically linked to the carnivalesque and that which is between human and animal, again utilizing bodily function and focused primarily on women and in certain instances on the pregnant woman or mother. The main difference is an emphasis on excess in the grotesque and an emphasis on open borders in the abject (particularly those borders of Self/Other, inside/outside, as evidenced by a focus on bodily orifices that are the portals which allow passage between the inside and outside of the physical body) Deborah Casley Covino (2000) focuses on the grotesque's relation to art and juxtaposition to the sublime (divine?) and argues that addressing such grotesquerie as abjection opens more lines of inquiry and analysis for a particular painting she is analyzing. Covino's address of the conflation of the grotesque and the abject by such authors as Russo, and her observations such as a particular painting lacking "the fantastic distortion" necessary to categorize it as grotesque add insight to definitional differentiation. I will argue that each term brings something different and valid to the discussion: the grotesque's specific relation to women and carnivalesque contributes uniquely to an inquiry into camp excess and the abject allows us to interrogate the border play of passing and drag more fully.

The abject is most simply recognized as things that can be both inside and outside the body and usually refers to bodily fluids and the disgust associated with them. Elizabeth Grosz lists them as “detachable, separable parts of the body – urine, faeces, saliva, sperm, blood, vomit, hair, nails, skin” (1994: 81) and links them back to Kristeva’s seminal book on the subject, *Powers of Horror: an Essay on Abjection*. Kristeva argues that the abject includes not only bodily fluids but other border crossers such as corpses, pregnant women, and sometimes food because “It is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite” (4). It is this aspect of the abject that is important for my argument that Divine’s grotesque passing-in-drag is facilitated by a state of abjection. The abject is that which is neither subject nor object. It lies at the borders between inside and outside and draws one “toward the place where meaning collapses” (Kristeva 2). But the abject’s bodily focus also connects it to authenticity and the “real,” which is capitalized on by Divine’s and others’ “real” abject actions within the films such as eating dog excrement, the singing asshole, etc. The abject is a space “where meaning collapses” in the binary sense but also a space of “real” bodies and bodily functions. This dual function and the utilization of it within Waters’ films produces open borders for passing while simultaneously reifying the successful pass in drag.

The abject is the space within which Divine operates as woman. Kristeva argues that “An unshakable adherence to Prohibition and Law is necessary if that perverse interspace of abjection is to be hemmed in and thrust aside. Religion. Morality, Law” (16). The worlds created by Waters expressly fly against the prohibition and laws referenced here, refusing to be safely confine by them. He instead co-opts and satirizes them ridiculously as in *Polyester*’s express attention to middle-class values (and hypocrisy) – allowing abjection to run wild, and with it the

borders, positions, and rules that hem them in. It is in this space of ambiguous borders that Divine passes and becomes the female characters mired – or more correctly happily wallowing – in abjects. Hanjo Berressem argues that “*Pink Flamingos* provides an almost complete lexicon of abjects|abjection, stringing together a number of increasingly revolting scenes that centre on gluttony, vomiting, spitting, sodomy, voyeurism, exhibitionism, masturbation, rape, incest, murder and cannibalism” (2007: 19, italics in original). In *Pink Flamingos*, Divine steals a steak and stores it between her thighs under her dress (she tells her son she got the cooking started in her special oven), defecates in public, licks everything in her rivals’ house, give her son fellatio, and – in the now most infamous scene of any Waters’ film – eats dog excrement (and in this scene of one continuous shot – Divine really does eat dog feces). In this world of abjection, the border between male and female becomes unimportant as the abject traverses multiple boundaries and takes the characters (and audience) with it. John Waters’ early films are practically practices in abjection which, as Berressem notes, is “never merely tasteless or ugly” but “are positively disgusting” (21, italics in original): *Pink Flamingos* in particular includes combinations of multiple abjects from incest to food taboos to associations between animal and human to bodily fluids traversing boundaries of the Self. It seems the movie tries to make sure it hits every possible form of abjection and the grotesque and in particular the spaces in which they coalesce: food, bodily fluids, sex, death, mothers.

The abject, in-between boundaries itself, becomes the vehicle for the border crossing of Divine. It is in the context of constant abjection that Divine passes as female – IS female within the text (and to some censors as well). A litany of abjects is paired with the uncommented-upon drag and passing of Divine. I argue that the abject status of homosexuality is linked here to the abject status of women and more specifically mothers and the working class. The entirety of

Waters early movies, particularly *Pink Flamingos* and *Female Trouble*, are concerned with that which is both abject and grotesque. In *Pink Flamingos* it is filth, in *Female Trouble* it is violence and death, in *Polyester* it is femininity itself as well as sex, and in *Hairspray* it is fatness. This focus on the abject and grotesque creates a space of camp celebration of filth that is embodied by both the homosexual and the woman, and produces a connection between the two. This connection in turn is what allows for Divine to pass in drag.

Waters' worlds and Divine place in them is not just abject, but grotesque as well. The grotesque is related to the abject but the defining difference is added excess: Covino differentiates the grotesque from the abject by its "fantastic distortion" (20) and "fetishistic excess" (27) that is "well beyond the normal" and abandons "the ordinary-material" (27). While both terms overlap in their associations with disgust, bodily functions, and women, the grotesque goes beyond the ordinary nature of the everyday abject. Russo labels "the grotesque as a repository of unnatural, frivolous, and irrational connections between things which nature and classical art kept scrupulously apart. It emerged, in other words, only in relation to the norms which it exceeded" (3). Waters' frame in his early movies of abject and grotesque mise-en-scene sets the stage for Divine's drag to pass because she does not stand out as alone exceeding norms or being frivolous and embodying queer connections, but is normalized within the context of the films such that her pleasure at receiving a pig's head for her birthday seems quite rational and normal within the scenes other occurrences such as the whole party ripping a couple policemen limb from limb and eating their raw flesh, and let's not forget the famous signing asshole that performs at the party as well (literally – there is an extended medium shot of an anonymous man's talent to open and close his anus with rhythm). Next to this, drag passes quite easily as one of the tamer aspects of the film. Indeed, on at least one occasion when John Waters' was

screening his films for censors they would believe Divine was a woman – a pass not expected or strived for by the film crew but created through the fully abject and grotesque diegetic world.

Fellow Dreamlander and Waters' assistant director Pat Moran, said of Divine's signature look in *Pink Flamingos* which consisted of a partially shaved head to leave room for more eye makeup, "believe me, there wasn't a self-respecting drag queen from here to San Francisco who wanted anything to do with that look. I mean Divine is a terrorist basically, a drag terrorist. So drag queens thought oh my god what is this and straight people thought oh my god what is this. So he was really right on out there as far as his look went" (*Divine Trash* documentary). But this drag passes because the rest of film participates in creating an entire world through the logic of the grotesque and abject. This creates a believable pass because gender identity becomes unglued from any naturalized position when it becomes evident that as long as the production of gender fits in with its surroundings, it will pass – it does not require a normalized femininity of Divine. The transgression and subversion that the grotesque embodies become the transgression and subversion of gender here as well. And, while unglued from naturalized gendered, these grotesque worlds are simultaneously tied to an abject bodily "real" that authenticates Divine as woman within the context – though it is of course as grotesque woman.

CAMP, DRAG, AND THE GROTESQUE

Russo (8, 9) and Stallybrass and White (9, 22) emphasize that the grotesque body is multiple or doubled (as well as monstrous, excessive, and abject) and it is because of this that it is identified with social transformation and blurs boundaries (such as gender and sex) or brings then into crisis through "the inversion and hyperbole of carnivalesque representation" (Russo 78). This state of multiplicity (as well as the carnivalesque nature) is exemplified by Divine's

roles in John Waters' films where Divine literally blurs boundaries "between genders, between species, and between classes" as the grotesque (Russo 78). This is done quite literally by the use of Divine in simultaneous male and female roles, through the use of and reference to pigs and superhuman abject senses, and through fatness. For example, in both *Female Trouble* and *Hairspray* Divine plays both male and female roles. *Female Trouble* follows Dawn Davenport's trajectory from teenage brat to crime-is-beauty advocate to convicted killer in the electric chair. After running away from home on Christmas day, Dawn hitches a ride from Earl Peterson who takes her to a landfill and rapes and impregnates her. Divine plays both Dawn and Earl – leading many to joke about the twist on "go fuck yourself" that Earl tells Dawn when she calls to tell him she is pregnant and wants money. But through the lens of the grotesque and the abject this "go fuck yourself" become problematic for the boundaries between genders and between Self and Other. The Self becomes the Other here. This is echoed, albeit to a lesser extent, in *Hairspray* where Divine also plays both male and female parts: the heroine's mother Edna Turnblad and the evil racist TV producer Arvin Hodgepile. In both cases it is the female character who not only has a larger role but also the more flattering role – the same man becomes Other to the female heroines he plays. Divine embodies the grotesque in these roles by being both male and female in the same frame – multiplying and confusing these boundaries.

Like camp, the grotesque is defined by excess. This is one of the key points that differentiates it from the abject, though they are still related, as when the abject is excessive it becomes the grotesque. The grotesque body is quite often the excessively fat body and marked by other excesses and abjections as well (Russo; Stallybrass and White). Divine's rather large presence on screen was accentuated by form-fitting garish clothes and paired with the excessive use of abjects throughout the films' realities (see above on *Pink Flamingos* and abjection). These

usages open up the space for Divine's drag to pass because the excess of the whole outshines the excess of drag. The level of "trashy" excess in these films ties the abject, the grotesque, the carnivalesque, and camp together with the thread of class and in particular lower-class status in order to create Divine's passing-in-drag as well as a reevaluation of these typically denigrated forms of femininity.

In all of the films s/he starred in Divine played a female character. This is in direct contrast to most "drag" films (until recently with the likes of Tyler Perry which could more appropriately be termed a form of passing³⁸) which create a diegetic reason for such a horrendous act as dressing up in women's clothing, containing it and the threat of homosexuality that comes with it within the narrative (such as *Mrs. Doubtfire*, *To Wong Foo*, etc.³⁹). But there is no such containment of drag and passing in Divine's film roles – both the drag of Divine and the fact that a drag queen is passing as a woman is entirely uncontained by and outside of the plotline. But in many of her films as well – particularly *Pink Flamingos* and *Female Trouble* – Divine's drag, while diegetically passing as female, is still most definitely drag in all its excess and signature makeup and look. The interesting combination of obvious drag and diegetically female roles creates a campy inside joke without the necessity of a suspension of disbelief. Indeed, in all of Divine's roles (with the debatable exception of *Hairspray*) s/he is without a doubt in drag but also is passing as a female character. Drag as passing without any filmic attention to it as such here draws even more attention not to the excess of drag but to the excess

³⁸ Tyler Perry's *Medea* films work in a similar way in that he plays a woman in the diegetic world of the movies rather than having the pass be part of the narrative. But in his case realism is strived for and the camp/drag apparatus is not utilized. Also, these films are premised as "Tyler Perry" films – he does not take a drag name as Divine does and his maleness is always foregrounded in publicity for them.

³⁹ Movies such as these date back to the beginning of narrative film, as addressed in the introductory chapter, from *A Florida Enchantment*, to *Some Like It Hot*, to *White Chicks*. In all of them drag is used as a plot device to actually highlight "innate" gender/sex differences rather than question them. See Chapter 1 of this dissertation for more information.

of femininity and particularly of lower-class femininity. This is reiterated by the other female characters in Waters' films such as Dawn's daughter Taffy in *Female Trouble* (a 14-year-old obsessed with car crashes played by Mink Stole who is obviously in her mid-20s), Cotton in *Pink Flamingos* (played by Mary Vivian Pearce with bleached blond/white hair and drag makeup), Connie Marble in *Pink Flamingos* (Mink Stole with fire-engine-red hair, horn-rimmed glasses, pill-box hat, fur coat, and drag makeup as well), and Edith Massey's roles including a senile woman in a crib obsessed with eggs (*Pink Flamingos*), an evil mother-in-law in a birdcage with a hook for a hand (*Female Trouble*), and a middle-aged lottery-winner-turned-debutante (*Polyester*)⁴⁰. The mirroring of bio-women's grotesque femininity and Divine's reinforces her passing in drag by situating all women within the filmic worlds as campy drag queens. This reversal simultaneously makes Divine's drag pass within the mise-en-scene because of her relation and similarity to other female characters while also revealing all the female roles as utilizing campy femininities that, like drag queens, and akin to Judith Butler's argument that drag reveals the performativity of gender, visually construct a picture of femaleness that defies traditional ideals of gender and displays the constructed nature of femininity.

As addressed in Chapter One, there has long been debate about the misogyny of drag queens (and of Divine in particular (Studlar, 1997; Kleinhans, 1994)). As with most debates like this, the answer is that it depends on the drag, the act, etc. – context is key. Divine's "grotesque physicality," as Richard Niles terms it (2004), as well as her raunchy/trashy representation of femininity has been targeted by some authors such as Ragan Rhyne who argues "Divine's appropriation of the cultural signs of female subjectivity becomes a symbolic theft and transformation that leaves men free to ridicule femininity as a self-styled excess" (122-123). But

⁴⁰ It is important to note that all the male characters are just as skewed, grotesque, and abject, but it is the female character I focus on here for specific comparison with Divine.

this could be applied to ALL drag, labeling any man who uses femininity in any way as just another jerk who hates women – this hardly seems accurate or useful. Divine’s representation of femininity is deeply connected to a representation that is nuanced, particularly in terms of class and in relation to the worlds of the films. Is Divine a parody of femaleness pointing out the flaws in the construction? A misogynist attack on women? I would argue that it is really neither, and that these are not the right questions, especially because of the context of the films in which ALL character can be defined as in a type of grotesque drag and Divine’s passing in drag is facilitated by the drag of all the characters. The trash aesthetic embraced by Waters and Divine is grotesque excess in all its supposedly lowest forms. Dan Harries argues, “The parody functions by taking constructed sex role expectations and transforming them beyond credibility, thus exposing the system which reinforces such norms. . . . The parody of femininity becomes more of a critique of the system which constructs gender roles than a criticism of the oppressed who play out such roles” (1990: 16). While an apt observation, this misses a large part of Waters’ film and Divine’s relational role in them – ALL the characters occupy parodically excessive spaces that lampoon not just femininity, but masculinity (as when Raymond Marble ties varying extra appendages such as a turkey neck to his penis to flash women in a park, only to be finally scared away by a MF transitioning woman who confronts him in a similar way in *Pink Flamingos*), the middle classes (like the Marble’s sordid business ventures including kidnapping women, impregnating them, and selling their babies, as well as the middle-class porn mavens in *Polyester*), victimhood (when said impregnated women exact revenge by cutting off the penis of their attacker), and authority (such as when Waters’ convinced real cops and firefighters to make cameos in *Polyester* where they cavalierly toss a severed head away from a car accident).

Divine's roles critique society's squeamishness about all things abject and grotesque – particularly femininity, poverty, and sex – within a context that also critiques society's supposedly non-abject statuses. The characters Divine plays in these films are normalized within the filmic worlds – particularly in *Pink Flamingos* and presumably in *Mondo Trasho*, *Multiple Maniacs*, etc. that came before *Pink Flamingos*⁴¹ because of the overall trash aesthetic. Studlar writes, “Perversions reflect on the meaning assigned to the gendered body within a given culture, on the precariousness of ‘normality,’ and on the construction of sexuality as a process taking place in the head rather than in the genes or genitalia” (117-118). The normalizing of Divine's characters concurrent with the lampooning of the privileged classes of straight men, religious advocates, and the middle and upper classes, reveals fears about the lower classes, gays, women, etc. and simultaneously parodies the privileged classes and calls out to the sheer ridiculousness of these fears and the excesses of the privileged as well. Yes, these films glamorize crime, trash, filth, obscenity, blasphemy, and violence – but only if one considers dragging these things to be glamorizing them. Offending the censors was part of the purpose – the sheer excess and shock of these representations create a reverse effect along the lines of camp that highlights the construction and process of sex and gender by showcasing perversions.⁴²

⁴¹ These earliest films by Waters are not in circulation, and he doesn't particularly want them to be. But based on his own explanation in his books including *Shock Value* and *Crackpot*, these films were quite similar in intent and exploitation of disgust, abjection, and the grotesque.

⁴² One of the possible blindspots here is race and ethnicity. Waters' worlds are primarily white, with a few notable exceptions, particularly *Hairspray*'s attention to race in association with class. But even within these worlds of whiteness, unique attention is paid to whiteness itself in ways not usually present in mainstream media. Rhyne argues that the focus on “white trash” creates a space in which whiteness becomes marked and therefore, even though the films do not necessarily address non-white race issues or relations they work to denaturalize whiteness' place as the unmarked category that can be ignored and instead address whiteness as a race that has its own specific construction, functions, and enactments (Rhyne 190).

PASSING AND MOTHERING IN GROTESQUE DRAG

In *Female Trouble* the grotesque woman takes center stage. The premise of this movie is that crime is beauty. Where objects such as feces were the focus of *Pink Flamingos*, violence is the main concern of *Female Trouble* and this violence encompasses both the abject through death and the grotesque in the form of the unruly woman. Rooted in Waters' own fascination with crime's relation to celebrity (particularly how crime and trials brought celebrity to those such as Charles Manson and his followers, and Patty Hearst) (*Shock Value* 23-34), *Female Trouble* follows Divine's character Dawn Davenport as she runs away from home as a teenager, becomes a teenaged mother, gets a coveted spot to have her hair done at the Dashers' salon, and ends up being the Dashers' "crime model" whom they photograph committing crimes because they believe that the ultimate beauty is achieved through violence – well, that and injecting liquid eyeliner. The film ends with Dawn Davenport laughing maniacally in the electric chair as she is put to death for multiple murders, at which point the camera freezes on Dawn's disfigured face with gaping open mouth. The motif here of crime as beauty mixes multiple grotesque and abject elements – most notably death. Dawn Davenport becomes the feared unruly woman – laughing openly until the end, unrepentant and unable to be controlled. Mixing beauty ideals into this grotesque story of crime, death, and unusual sex (such as her husband who likes to penetrate her with tools) shows beauty as in the eye of the beholder and thus always open to interpretation. Beauty even becomes an illicit drug: Dawn and the Dashers are addicted to shooting up liquid eyeliner. At once parody and social commentary, *Female Trouble* brings the costs of beauty as well as the ridiculousness of its pursuit to the forefront.

Within this world of excess and shock Divine passes as a woman and as a female who is capable of bearing children, being raped, getting pregnant, etc. In his book *Shock Value*, Waters'

recounts instances of Divine's drag passing. At one point when reviewing *Female Trouble* for release, a Maryland Censorship Board member tells Waters' he cannot have a shot of a vagina in the film to which Waters' responds that it is not a vagina, Divine is a man. The board member looked confused and went in for a closer look before he "let it pass" (91). What is unique to Waters' films is that Divines drag becomes passing through the overall circumstances of abjection, the grotesque and the carnivalesque/camp such that, as Waters' himself admits, "all people look terrible in [his] films" (173) – thus creating a context in which a 300-pound man with a "falsie" vagina could pass as a woman to censors scrutinizing the film. Though much can be (and has been) said as to the misogynist possibilities of clown drag and Divine in particular, what is notable is not that a man in drag passes as a flawed or terrible female, but that this representation is normalized within the films and celebrated by audiences. Divine's characters are situated within the films not as villains or the butt of jokes but as the heroine: as mothers, as fat lower-class women, as grotesque, yes, but also as women in charge, laughing instead of being laughed at, even in the face of torture and torment. These roles position Divine as an unruly woman. Like Bhaktin's laughing pregnant hags addressed by feminists as housing subversive potential, Divine becomes the laughing pregnant hag that everyone is afraid of. In *Pink Flamingos*, as Divine drives into town with her son, multiple close-ups show her laughing, mouth wide open, head tossed back, as she takes aim at (and misses) a hitchhiker on the side of the road. Divine is terrifying here, but also the unruly heroine and her role as mother here as well as in her other films made with Waters contribute not only to her place as unruly woman but as abject and grotesque too, thus facilitating her passing-in-drag. Kristeva writes that "A dark, abominable, and degraded power when she keeps to using and trading her sex, woman can be far more effective and dangerous when socialized as wife, mother, or career woman" (Kristeva 168).

Divine is even more terrifying because she embodies these traditional naturalized female roles but denaturalizes them and rejects their traditional values.

Mothers are focused on by Russo, Kristeva, and Rowe as one of the most common topics of abjection and the grotesque. Covino addresses this focus and writes “the mother’s body has often been defined as defiled, ruptured, and unclean – abject in Kristevan terms – [Yaegar] posits the birthing woman as a type of grotesque that sublimely terrifies” (7 underline in original). Divine is a mother in every one of John Waters’ films that she stars in – and quite possibly divinely terrifies audiences with her portrayals that range from incest and filicide, to tortured alcoholic mother of ill-behaved children, and (perhaps most shockingly) supportive mother to a well-behaved daughter (*Hairspray*). This space of abject and/or grotesque motherhood places Divine within a context of ambivalent and potentially transgressive abject womanhood – in-between categories as pregnant woman or mother such that there is something Other quite literally inside the Self. Divine’s status as mother in all her films is something unremarked upon in the literature addressing her drag but could very well be the defining characteristic that aligns her passing-in-drag as between categories itself.

Kristeva, Russo, and Rowe all emphasize the maternal as the ultimate in abjection, the grotesque, the carnivalesque, and the unruly woman. The pregnant woman has become the main symbol of the breaking of the boundary between subject and object for the abject, of the gaping orifice of the grotesque, and the process of “becoming” associated with the carnivalesque. Rowe writes that “The grotesque body is above all the female body, the *maternal* body, which, through menstruation, pregnancy, childbirth, and lactation, participates uniquely in the carnivalesque drama of ‘becoming,’ of inside-out and outside-in, death-in-life and life-in-death” (33-34). Birth and generation bring with them thoughts of their “Others,” death and degeneration, making the

maternal ambivalent – both celebrated and feared – as well as located within liminal borderland spaces. Divine’s motherhood in all her films is part of what creates her passing-in-drag by locating her within this liminal ambivalent space. In a system of binaries such as the virgin/whore, the mother embodies the logic of the carnivalesque, the grotesque, and the abject because culture will not let her be either virgin or whore. The mother must reside between these categories and as such is fertile ground for transgression, as Kristeva and Russo argue. Kristeva writes, “The scene of scenes is here not the so-called primal scene but the one of giving birth, incest turned inside out, flayed identity. Giving birth: the height of bloodshed and life, scorching moment of hesitation (between inside and outside, ego and other, life and death). Horror and beauty, sexuality and the blunt negation of the sexual” (155). Divine’s character in *Pink Flamingos* takes this one step further – portraying actual incest: repeating the uneasiness of the outside within of pregnancy in the fellatio scene with her “son.” The ultimate taboo, incest works on two abject statuses here: as mother-son sexual relation within the filmic reality and for those in-the-know in the audience as the abject male-male sexual act. This is a notable connection that also creates Divine’s passing as across abject categories from abject gay man to abject working-class fat woman. Divine’s passing is enabled because she is passing from one abject status to another.

DIVINE AS THE UNRULY WOMAN

The abjections and the grotesque in Waters’ films are paired with female heroine parts for Divine that I argue are not misogynist because they fit into entire diegetic worlds of abjection and the grotesque as well as follow in a long line of unruly woman characters whose open-mouthed laughter refuses to be shut down. Rowe argues that most often the unruly woman reins

in the genres of laughter but is also present in melodrama. But it is in comedy that she comes out on top: “[W]hile mythology taints and dooms Medusa, the unruly woman often enjoys a reprieve from those fates that so often seem inevitable to women under patriarchy, because her home is comedy and the carnivalesque, the realm of inversion and fantasy where, for a time at least, the ordinary world can be stood on its head” (11). Just as she argues Miss Piggy, as a representation of femininity even though created and voiced by men, is an unruly woman associated with the carnivalesque’s penchant for pigs and masquerade (utilizing normative femininity as an obvious means to an end – and reverting to karate chops when femininity fails), so too does Divine fit within this motif. Rowe argues that “the unruly woman crosses the boundaries of a variety of social practices and aesthetic forms, appearing most vividly in the genres of laughter, or those that share common structures of liminality and inversion” (19). Where Miss Piggy’s carnivalesque situation between human and animal creates a space of inversion of the ordinary world, showing femininity and girliness to be ploys (30), Divine’s place within camp and Waters’ campy worlds situates her as the unruly woman ambivalently both male and female in ways similar to the carnivalesque Miss Piggy but with camp’s modern twist that uses liminality and inversion to question not only gender but also sexuality.

Rowe associates the unruly woman with the grotesque woman – arguing that the unruly woman operates in borderlands and embodies the excesses of the carnival grotesque, most specifically a gaping mouth that laughs and eats and most importantly refuses to be shut up. She writes:

Medusa, like Bakhtin’s grinning pregnant hags, contains some of the earliest outlines of the unruly woman, an ambivalent figure of female outrageousness and transgression with roots in the narrative forms of comedy and the social practices of carnival. The unruly woman represents a special kind of excess Like Medusa, the unruly woman laughs. Like Roseanna Arnold, she is not a “nice girl.” She *is* willing to offend and be offensive.

... Associated with both beauty and monstrosity, the unruly woman dwells close to the grotesque. (10-11, italics in original)

This association with both beauty and monstrosity is a fitting description of Divine. For *Pink Flamingos* the look Divine and Waters' told makeup artist Van Smith to attempt was a combination of Jane Mansfield and TV clown Clarabelle (*Divine Trash* documentary, *Shock Value* 74). Harries writes "Divine's characters carry themselves in a glamorous fashion, particularly in terms of clothing and mannerisms, their disproportionately large breasts and protruding stomachs seem to negate any sense of normalized glamour and indeed parody such expectations" (17). Divine is often billed by Waters as "the most beautiful woman in the world" (*Shock Value* 146; *Female Trouble*) but also holds such dubious titles as "the Hog Princess" and "the Filthiest Person Alive" (*Shock Value* 142) – the latter of which is courtesy of her role in *Pink Flamingos*. In *Female Trouble*, Divine as Dawn Davenport is directly in this ambivalent space between beauty and monstrosity as the whole film is premised on the idea of crime as beauty. Dawn is ridiculed and degraded at the beginning of the film where she is a teenager in high school, but the more violent and monstrous she becomes, the more glamorous and adored by those around her she also becomes. Once Dawn has acid thrown in her face by a rival and is disfigured, the Dashers proclaim her more beautiful than ever. In her debut performance within the film, Dawn dresses in a flashy white bodysuit and does a trampoline show before shooting into the crowd. She yells, "And I'm so fucking beautiful I can't stand it myself! Now, everybody freeze! Who wants to be famous? Who wants to DIE for art?" Here the monstrous and the beautiful are melded with horrifying results. As she sits in the electric chair about to be put to death for her crimes Dawn give an Oscar acceptance-like speech thanking her fans who died and those who read about her in the paper for making "this great moment in [her] life come true"

before the switch is flipped and her wide-open-mouthed maniacally laughter is frozen on as the closing image of the movie.

This laughter is one of the key elements of the Unruly Woman. Most importantly for Rowe is the laughter of women who so often in film are laughed at. She writes, “That the unruly woman eats too much and speaks too much is no coincidence; both involve failure to control the mouth. Nor are such connotations of excess innocent when they are attached to the *female* mouth” (37). While the grotesque is often defined by open orifices, the Unruly Woman’s open orifice is her mouth. Just as the grotesque female body can be both powerful and ridiculed, the open mouth of the Unruly Woman is also ambivalent. Rowe writes, “Much of the ambivalence surrounding the unruly woman drives from her relation to margins and boundaries and from the power inherent in them” (20). Famous for committing crimes, Dawn refuses to see the ambivalence and instead embraces the power and fame they achieve for her, embodying the Unruly Woman moniker.

Related to the carnivalesque, this gaping laughing mouth that is indicative of the margins and boundaries of femininity and is transgressive because the laughing woman has an “ability to affect the terms on which she is seen” (Rowe 11) and claim “the pleasure and power of making spectacle of ourselves, and [begin] to negate our own invisibility in the public sphere” (12). This spectacle on the margins of the Unruly Woman, and Divine as Unruly Woman, is facilitated by the carnivalesque association with pigs as the animal on the margins between human and animal. Following Stallybrass and White who write of pigs as a carnival staple because they reside in the threshold between home and wilderness, eat people’s leftovers, and possess human-like skin, Rowe writes that the relation of the Unruly Woman to margins and boundaries as well the power inherent in them “is exemplified by the pig” (39). She uses Miss Piggy and Roseanne Arnold as

her examples that “fatness, rebelliousness, a sharp tongue, and an association with pigs ... have come to be associated with comedic forms of female transgression” (20) and that “The liminality that accounts for the pig’s status is also the source of the demonic power the unruly woman taps into – the power to destabilize old frameworks and create new ones” (41). It is no accident that Divine is known as “The Hog Princess” and in later films such as *Polyester* and *Hairspray* is called a “fat pig” by her enemies. This is first illustrated in *Pink Flamingos* when Divine rejoices in receiving a pig’s head as a birthday present and holds it up next to her face, which of course is laughing and smiling with her mouth wide open. The liminal space of the human/animal boundary is celebrated alongside the embrace of the liminal space between male and female – thus facilitating her passing by creating an all-around ambivalent space of boundary play that in *Polyester* also includes a traversal across borders of filmic genres of comedy and melodrama.

While Rowe focuses mainly on the transgressive potential of the genres of laughter, she also argues that the Unruly Woman is present in but contained by melodrama which “dooms her rebellion from the start, not only teaching that woman’s lot under patriarchy is to suffer but making that suffering pleasurable” (112). She argues that unlike comedy, melodrama “punishes the unruly woman for asserting her desire. Such parodies of melodrama make the unruly woman the target of *our* laughter, while denying her the power and pleasure of her own” (59).

Melodramas, also known somewhat derogatorily as “women’s pictures” were big money makers in the ’50s and ’60s and most often addressed suffering and flawed mothers who in the end are either saved by a man or continue to suffer. While Rowe’s commentary on melodrama is apt, Waters’ and Divine make an interesting contribution that refutes these arguments in the form of *Polyester*. Modeled on Douglas Sirk’s maternal melodramas (*Waters Crackpot* 2003 (orig. 1987)), *Polyester* is the story of upper-middle-class Francine Fishpaw who suffers. She is a good

Christian woman whose neighbors spit on her and is subjected to pickets on her front lawn because her husband owns a porn theater. Her son has a foot fetish that involves attacking women and stomping on their feet and her daughter gets knocked up by the local hoodlum. Though she tries desperately to command her family, most of the movie follows Francine through a downward spiral that includes a deepening alcoholism and her husband having an affair and leaving her. Things are so bad that even Francine's dog commits suicide. In true melodrama fashion, Francine seems to about to be saved by the hero/hunk Todd Tomorrow (played by Tab Hunter) but he too turns against her. The crucial turning point facilitated by a man is thwarted but the movie does not end with Francine suffering and dying (as it should from a genre standpoint) but twists at the last moment when Francine's children and friends return to her side and help kill her husband, his mistress, her evil mother and Todd Tomorrow, and they all live happily ever after. This departure from the usual melodramatic mode of story resolution makes the key intervention of having the Unruly Woman, the fat loud imperfect picture of femininity, win. Though a comedic spoof, *Polyester* still follows most of the generic convention of melodrama including mirroring the lighting and shooting techniques of Sirk (Waters, 2003). The use of comedy here may be what facilitates a more transgressive ending for the unruly woman but it is still within the context of melodrama as well – thus making an intervention in the genre that allows for a new subversive element, one made not only by a female character, but by a gay man in drag.

UNRULY DRAG QUEEN

Divine's unique positioning as female characters creates a different kind of unruly woman⁴³. Harries quotes Elaine Showalter when he writes "Laughter is generated when the male character dresses as a woman yet accidentally slips back into his original male role. The shifting in and out of masculine and feminine roles, in order to exert a 'masculine power disguised and veiled by the feminine costume ... [promotes] the notion of masculine power while masking it'" (16). Harries argues that Divine diffuses this problematic because s/he is not playing a drag queen/transvestite but actual female characters: "Thus, Divine's persona operates less as a male 'discovery' of woman's weaker position, and more as a direct, female, assault on patriarchal structure, using the medium of a (parodied) woman as a strong vehicle of attack. Divine thereby engenders a view that recognizes and attempts to dispel the myth of the weakness of women's roles" (16). By playing female characters who may have some tinges of the supposed masculine (aggressiveness, violence, etc), but keeping these acts such as ripping off car doors (*Female Trouble*) contained within a female character rather than being seen as the masculine glimmering behind a clear façade creates a broader view of acceptable femininity – at least within the plot of the film.

Karen C. Krahulik quotes Matthew Tinkcom in her article "A Class Act: Ryan Landry and the politics of Booger Drag" when she writes, "Matthew Tinkcom suggests that this is exactly where the drag performer's power resides, in the 'ability to offend virtually everyone, including other drag queens'" (2009: 9). When Divine first came on the scene she did just this (according to John Waters in the documentary *Divine Trash*). At a time when most drag was female impersonation, Divine was not even trying to impersonate but to parody and offend. Waters said,

⁴³ It is important to note that I am by no means arguing that all drag queens function in this way, and definitely not all drag queens in cinema.

“I wanted other drag queens to run in tears. And other drag queens were so square then, they wanted to be Miss American and they wanted to be Donald Trump, basically that were their values. And they hated Divine.” (*Divine Trash*). Within the drag realm of the 1970s Divine was still seen as grotesque. Reviled as offending everyone – including other drag queens – Divine refused to hold sacred the female impersonation popular in the 1960s and 1970s. With her half-shaved head, grotesque makeup, head thrown back with gaping open mouth laughing, Divine performed female characters that were way outside of “acceptable” femininity as well as disgusting publicity stunts like pushing a shopping cart full of dead fish on stage (*Shock Value* 72), revolting drag queens and censors alike. Divine portrayed not only Unruly Women characters but was herself a modified version of this unruliness – she was an Unruly Drag Queen (unrulier than most at least). Performing drag outside the norm facilitated a performance of femininities outside the norm as well – unruliness becoming the tie between the two.

CLASS, WOMEN, QUEERS AND ABJECTION

Berressem argues in “On the Matter Abjection” that *Pink Flamingos* is “an introduction to a material logic of *abjects|abjections*. Like many other works of abject art, it links the abject directly to the corporeal realm” (20). He defines abjection as “the cultural marking of *events|objects* as disgusting” (19). The abject is many times connected to bodily fluids and the flow of such fluids, particularly from the female body and other marginalized groups. But Divine and the whole of Waters’ early films embraces the abject as normal within the diegetic worlds of his films. Aimed at disgusting prudish audience members and delighting those in-the-know – Divine in the early Waters’ films is an abject heroine. This status is enabled not only by the use of warped signs of femininity but also through the utilization and celebration of signs of

trashiness, particularly signs associated with “white trash.” Traditionally a derogatory term for white people in the lower classes (one also related to the term “trailer trash”), Waters and Divine embraced the camp value of such signs as pink flamingos, trailers, polyester, etc. which are markers of stereotyped white working-class identity. Rhyne argues that the deployment of white trash was a way of using class to denaturalize whiteness. But in the *mise-en-scene* of *Pink Flamingos* these icons are celebrated, not denigrated – thus reformulating a whiteness that is made more visible through the demarcation of class. Constance Penley argues that “it becomes particularly unseemly when they appear to shamelessly flaunt their trashiness, which, after all, is nothing but an aggressively in-your-face reminder of stark class differences, a fierce fuck-you to anyone trying to maintain a belief in an America whose only class demarcations run along the seemingly obvious ones of race” (2004: 310). This is capitalized on by Waters and Divine, whose passing as lower-class women is at once grotesque but also valued – drawing attention to different possible value structures as well as the hypocrisy of the middle classes (such as her role in *Polyester* addressed earlier). And the world constructed by Waters’ in which Divine passes is dependent on this deployment of a white trash aesthetic which can transgressively draw attention to the construction of whiteness of which Penley argues, “The work of distinction in white trash can be deployed downward, across, but also up, to challenge the assumed social and moral superiority of the middle and professional classes” (Penley 311). In the films where Divine plays working- and/or lower-class women (*Pink Flamingos*, *Female Trouble*, *Hairspray*), her class distinction is created to a certain extent through abjection. This abjection and its corresponding liminality lends itself well to establishing the challenges to the middle and upper classes that Penley discusses, in turn supporting the pass-in-drag that Divine embodies by utilizing class and gender markers associated with the abject and grotesque. Divine is a drag queen outside the

traditional (and innocuous) ideal of a female impersonator. Weighing at over 300 pounds and routinely dressed to accentuate this fact, on film Divine embraces what is typically thrown out as acceptably feminine: fatness, lower-class status, bodily functions, voracious sexual desires and actions, and violence.

The place of fat here is important as it connects the abject with the working class. The main targets of abjection have been women (Russo), in particular working-class women, and homosexuals (Fuss, 1991; Butler, 1993), particularly gay men. The abject in itself may be the link that allows a gay man to play working-class female roles. Divine's rotund persona, usually wrapped in skin-tight polyester that accentuates this aspect of the character, is literally an excess femininity. Rhyne argues that "The fat female body is specifically classed. Indeed, Divine's performance of fatness disrupts codes of femininity as much as, if not more than, her performance of gender and further lays bare the 'work' of embodiment of all of these categories. ... representations of *white* fat femininity serve as a sort of repository for the excess of whiteness itself" (190, italics in original). But where the abject is usually devalued, Divine embraces and celebrates the abject. Divine and Waters were both products of middle-class white upbringings, a position vilified in *Hairspray* by Tracy's materialistic rival, but in keeping with the trash aesthetic they aimed at giving value to what is traditionally devalued as well as most abject – "this camp project of reassigning value to the valueless is achieved primarily through the performance of whiteness, or of 'white trash' more specifically" (Rhyne 190).

It is important to juxtapose these images of abject white trash with the images we are given in other Waters/Divine films of the middle classes in order to show how the representations of working class identity embraced by Waters and Divine are not just stereotypes laughed at by their supposed betters, but really are valued in a particular way. While the Von

Tussle family in *Hairspray* is one such example – providing the racist and materialist element in contrast to the Turnblads’ much more enlightened working-class ethic and views. Of interest as well is the abjection of the middle class that Waters and Divine display in *Polyester*. In *Polyester*, the Fishpaws live in a middle-class suburban neighborhood with all the accoutrement that marks this lifestyle. But the Fishpaws’ place in this middle-class world is through the means of Elmer’s XXX pornography theater. Middle-class status is achieved here literally through scenes of abjection, most notably the use of Odorama and the fixation on Francine’s overactive sense of smell but also in the promiscuity of her daughter and husband, and the actions of her neighbors. The upper class is also lampooned in *Polyester* through the absurdity of Edith Massey’s character Cuddles, a maid who inherits her employer’s fortune and is able to buy all the fetishized objects and actions of her new class status. Modeled after melodramas of the 1950s and 1960s, *Polyester*’s tragic heroine is the victim of the middle class and it is the trash aesthetic and abject excess that punishes and conversely saves her. As opposed to her parts in *Pink Flamingos* and *Female Trouble* where her fatness is celebrated and she is the beautiful character in the plot, in *Polyester* she is routinely called fat and ugly. Because fat is a class marker, she is punished for this excess when she is a middle-class character. But since she is the heroine we are to sympathize with, this has an effect not of vilifying Francine for being overweight but of revealing the cruelty of the middle class who rejects her because of it. While the joke of the Fishpaws is their middle-class status achieved through abject pornography, the abject as it connects to Divine is still celebrated. She literally sniffs out those plotting against her and this abject action connects her physically to audiences who were/are given Odorama cards to scratch-n-sniff with coinciding numbers throughout the films. The abject bodily sense of smell (and all but the first example on the card are quite gross, ranging from roses to gasoline to old shoes to

feces) brings the audience into the film by having them smell what Francine smells. Berressem argues that, “One might think of the encounter with an *abject* as a ‘direct encounter with the real’ – as|in an unbearable nearness that does not allow for the distancing|separation that is the prerequisite of *objectification*” (21). The female character resists traditional objectification through the abject, and the audience participates in the refusal through its participation in Odorama which physically connects it to Francine and the abject.

FROM ABJECT TO GROTESQUE – THE PLACE OF FAT IN *HAIRSPRAY*

Pink Flamingos utilized filth and disgust (not to mention a fair amount of feces) to create an abject world in which to situate Divine’s passing and *Female Trouble* focused on the grotesque relation of crime and beauty to create a liminal space for passing-in-drag. But as Waters’ films began to hit the mainstream, they became less passing-in-drag and more simply passing. *Polyester* functions in the language of melodrama and includes a much more toned-down Divine and the use of Odorama exploits the abject yet again to this time connect the audience in this ambivalent borderland of abjection to the heroine by also breaking down the border between spectator and film to make the spectator a participant (a favorite tactic of Waters). All openly employ camp and a knowing camp audience to create Divine’s passing-in-drag. Babuscio writes:

To appreciate camp in things or persons is to perceive the notion of life-as-theater, being versus role-playing, reality and appearance. If “role” is defined as the appropriate behavior associated with a given position in society, then gays do not conform to socially expected ways of behaving as men and women. Camp, by focusing on the outward appearances of role, implies that roles, and, in particular, sex roles, are superficial – a matter of style. Indeed, life itself is role and theater, appearance and impersonation. (Babuscio 125)

Waters' early films were aimed at a specific audience which knew and appreciated camp, making the camp theatrics of Divine's drag able to pass. This tactic necessarily changed some with the mainstream attempt (and success) of *Hairspray*, shifting the focus away from grotesque and abject camp drag and towards a focus on fat as the abject status the enables Divine's passing as passing with much fewer drag or grotesque elements.

With 1988's *Hairspray*, John Waters hit the mainstream – and so did Divine. While the likes of Tyler Perry's *Medea* films (2005, 2006, 2009, 2011) and Eddie Murphy's *Norbit* (2007) more recently have popularized male actors playing female character (usually in a fat suit – which will be addressed more below), Divine's character Edna Turnblad⁴⁴ was a first for mainstream cinema – whose only precursor was her role in Waters' sort-of-mainstream film *Polyester*. These two films, and particularly *Hairspray* marked a new departure of Waters' films as well as Divine's parts in them. *Polyester* was Waters' first non-independent film – funded by New Line Cinema – and was also the first time Divine appeared in what could be termed passing drag (rather than passing-in-terrorist-drag via the diegetic world). Lacking the shaved hairline and giant eye make-up of *Pink Flamingos* or the similar effects of *Female Trouble* as well as the shocking actions she takes in either of those films, the shock value shifts in the mainstream from what Divine does to who she is. This shift may be a response to the widening audience of these films where a man playing a woman challenges social norms as much as the “trash aesthetic” of Waters' earlier films shocked their specified midnight movie audiences. And this mainstreaming was taken even further with the *Hairspray* Broadway musical (2002-2009) and later film remake starring John Travolta as Edna (2007) – creating an entirely different controversy in terms of

⁴⁴ The difference being performances of female characters as opposed to previous drag movies where male actors were still men within the diegetic world even if they were passing to some extent.

which men can play women in a subversive way, with many arguing Travolta in a fat suit is not one of them (Jennie Yabroff, 2007).

John Waters and Divine entered the midnight movie scene in Baltimore with *Roman Candles* in 1966, followed by *Eat Your Makeup* (a 1968 reenactment of the Kennedy assassination with Divine playing Jackie), *Mondo Trasho* (1969), *Multiple Maniacs* (1970), and *The Diane Linkletter Story* (1970) before *Pink Flamingos* was picked up for wider release in midnight movie theaters across the country in 1972 - on the tail end of the midnight movie cult phenomena. Of course there are still art house cinemas, but they don't function in the same way as the midnight movies which created a community of viewers. In this way we see a unique shift out of the midnight movie craze of the 1960s and '70s with *Pink Flamingos* and *Female Trouble* into the slightly more staid though still thoroughly "trashy" *Polyester* and *Hairspray*. This shift coincided with a move away from violent heroines and towards more stereotypically and less drag-like feminine roles for Divine. But the constant across these films is always Divine's passing.

Unfortunately, Waters' and Divine's early films are not released and therefore a discussion of cult cinema must focus here on the nationally released *Pink Flamingos* and *Female Trouble*. The specified audience for all these films contributed to their subversive potential in ways that had to be modified for the PG audience of *Hairspray* in order to still get some sort of subversive effect. Midnight movies attracted a particular audience that was expecting to be shocked – this enabled Waters' early films to go to the extreme in order to increase the camp value and trash aesthetic of their films. Studlar argues, "Excess defines the midnight movie, a cult phenomenon that seems to catalogue perverse acts with the same enthusiasm as nineteenth-century sexologists ... Encompassing everything from the coprophagic antics of Divine in *Pink*

Flamingos (1973) to the gender-bending generic pastiche of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (1975), these films often use perversion as a means of shocking their audience. ... the sexual excess of the midnight movie also marks their preoccupation with a culturally ubiquitous problem – that of defining the meaning of sexual difference” (117). This defining of sexual difference required something different for midnight movies than it did for the mainstream. Whereas midnight movies were made to shock and thus embrace “a revolutionary excess of desire unhinged from accepted values and celebrated as social deviance” (Studlar 119-120), what would shock the mainstream was significantly less – where a drag queen playing a female character performing fellatio on her son and eating dog excrement was raucously celebrated in *Pink Flamingos*, just a drag queen playing a female character seems enough for *Hairspray*’s PG audiences. Kleinhans argues, “Camp in its expression of social and aesthetic offensiveness can, with a prepared audience, attain a certain transcendence, providing a significant comment on art and society through a combination of parody and sincerity” (196). This prepared audience was there for the midnight movies, and I’m sure for the mainstream ones as well. But this audience grew with each film and where trash for the sake of trash as upending high and low culture worked in the early films, it is possible that trash would just be seen as trash by these larger audiences – evacuating the subversive elements intended. Thus toning down the trash and the drag, creating sympathetic working class characters, trashing the upper-class ones – all still within a camp aesthetic – created a different atmosphere in *Hairspray* that was perhaps still shocking to mainstream audiences. Tinkcom writes:

The potential of Water’s films to upset viewers with their own perverse investments derives from the anticipation that audiences will not necessarily have shown up ready for a shock, and Waters has redirected his energies toward spectators who may have little acquaintance with his cult status of the 1970s. Not knowing of Waters’s past career as the director of *Pink Flamingos*, such viewers will perhaps not sit down attuned to what they will see as camp or cult cinema. In this sense, Waters’s later career has been less

concerned with accommodating ‘hip,’ knowing urban spectators than with smuggling a camp reading of the melodrama into the venue of the melodrama itself; Waters distances himself from camp to install it before his unsuspecting viewers in the new formations of the Hollywood cinema. (159)

This is partially accomplished through the much more obvious focus on “fat” in *Hairspray*. The excess of drag in the earlier movies where fat was not paid as much attention (though it still functioned within the grotesque/object/carnavalesque motifs of these movies) is replaced in *Hairspray* with a primary attention to the excess of fat. Possibly the previous connection between object homosexuality and object working-class femininity is replaced for the mainstream audience with a connection to fat in both categories. As Tinkcom argues:

The fat woman inhabits a position alongside conventionally sanctioned notions of desirable femininity that produces a discomfort in her refusal to inhabit her body in the ‘right’ way, in that the fat-phobic imagination can only see her as a disavowal of the labor required to shape herself as a normatively embodied subject. Sedgwick and Moon proffer that this disavowal allows for political alliances between fat women and queer men in that queers endure a similar demand to labor in the reformation of themselves for a heteronormative world. (174)

Where the entire worlds of previous Waters and Divine films centered on the object and grotesque and situated passing-in-drag within these worlds, *Hairspray* makes a different connection, creating passing on the common ground of object fatness. To be sure, the object and grotesque are still present in *Hairspray*, but they become mostly part of the world of the upper-middle class with such scenes as Tracy’s rival Amber having her mom pop a giant pimple (with great sound effects to boot). Fat and working-class identity become noble as they are aligned with the fight for civil rights as the working-class Turnblads and others fight to integrate a local dance show. Rowe writes that “Our culture stigmatizes all fat people by psychologizing or moralizing their obesity. For *women*, body size and bearing are governed by especially far-reaching standards of normalization and aestheticization, which forbid both looseness and

fatness” (62, italics in original). This is the starting point for *Hairspray* but it ends differently – fatness and its associated working-class femininity are celebrated.

Part of the (granted, mild) uproar over John Travolta playing Edna in the recent remake of *Hairspray* had to do as much with the fat suit as with his straight identity. It has been established over the years of the musical version on Broadway following from the original that Edna is played by a (usually gay) man in drag – but why did this get turned into a straight man in a fat suit? I argue that it is an attempt to normalize and contain the man-in-drag as the man-in-fat-suit, detracting from not only the meaning of drag but also the meaning of fat and the abject correlation of homosexuality and working-class femininity – drag and fat become another gag co-opted by straight culture to laugh at women rather than the means through which unruly women and drag queens laugh at straight culture. As so many other incarnations of men-playing-women have been so apt to do (*Medea*, *Norbit*, etc.). men can play women to the mainstream audience only if they are flawed and denigrated women. The main difference from the original *Hairspray* is the lack of a camp context and a gay subtext which in the original positioned Divine’s Edna Turnblad not as a flawed woman but as a good woman within a flawed society.

CONCLUSION

In *Power of Horror* Kristeva asks, “In short, who, I ask you, would agree to call himself abject, subject of or subject to abjection?” (209). The answer is John Waters and Divine. The use of abjection as well as the grotesque in the camp context of their films opens space for redefining passing and its relation to identity because abjection and the grotesque are themselves about open borders and erasing boundaries. The ability of Divine to pass-in-drag facilitated through these means reveals the fiction of gender by making even the most garish drag that in any other

context would appear not only as clownish and fake but possibly misogynist as well – not to mention unpassable as a legitimate femininity – flourish within the world of these films not only as a reasonable picture of femininity but of femaleness as well. Divine’s passing-in-drag functions uniquely in conjunction with Waters’ filmic worlds to not only point to the fiction of gender but to the hierarchies of traits within femininity as valued or devalued as well. When the abject, grotesque, camp, and carnivalesque elements overlap and combine within these films to produce a filmic reality that is simultaneously fantastical and rooted in “the real” the pass in drag becomes part of this reality and is able to construct a revalued femininity and femaleness within this context that can challenge the construction of both as well as the valuations supposedly inherent in them.

CHAPTER FOUR

PASSING TRUTHS: JOURNALISM, EDUCATION, TRUTH. AND

THE EXPERIENCE OF AUTHENTICITY

Journalism has long been hailed as and held up to the standard of “the truth.” Wikipedia defines journalism as “the investigation and reporting of events, issues, and trends to a broad audience. Although there is much variation within journalism, the ideal is to inform the citizenry.”⁴⁵ One need look no further than recent controversies over photoshopped news picture of the Iraq war or the BP oil spill response to see the push for journalism and news media to report the goings-on of the world truthfully and with an adherence to what “really” happened – straying from this goal (and being found out) results in swift reactions such as Brian Walski losing his job at *The LA Times* in 2003 after combining two pictures from Iraq and publishing them as a single picture of what “really” happened. Documentary filmmaking is closely related to journalism in its quest to present documentation of actual events, of reality as it is. Until the advent of Michael Moore documentaries, this type of media was assumed to strive towards unbiased presentation (and the debate over whether Moore’s films “count” as documentary or not reinforces this ideal to some extent as well). The addition to television of reality TV supposedly follows in the footsteps of documentary in its capture of “authentic” human happenings (trivial though they may be) and the unmediated re-presentation of these to the audience.

Regardless of whether one believes journalism, news media, documentary, or reality TV actually succeeds (or even really tries) to present an unfiltered reality; this is what each professes to do. These purported factual representations for the viewing, listening, or reading pleasure of

⁴⁵ I’ve used Wikipedia here as representative of a definitional consensus on news media.

audiences rely in many instances on a presentation of an authentic reality. In the cases of journalistic and documentary accounts of passing, this authenticity holds a key role. Books such as John Howard Griffin's *Black Like Me* (1961), Grace Halsell's *Soul Sister* (1969) and *Bessie Yellowhair* (1973), Barbara Ehrenreich's *Nicked and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America* (2001), and Norah Vincent's *Self-Made Man: One Woman's Year Disguised as a Man* (2006) as well as the self-styled documentary reality TV series *Black. White.* (2006) strive for authentic imitation in order to acquire the "real" experiences of an/Other person and thus be able to write about (or film) the realities of this Other. This stress on authenticity as a gateway to experience otherness may produce a new reality of how the audience and the participants view such differences as race, gender, and class but they ultimately reinforce the boundaries that construct these differences as "opposites" and "Others" to begin with⁴⁶. In this chapter I delve into the production of authentic experience and the "real" by journalistic passing texts. I interrogate how and why they utilize ideals of authenticity and education, how they produce "authentic" passing experiences, how this production of authenticity is reinforced by the affect of the participants in such aspects as the "reveal" in order to ascribe to a goal of truth and honesty, and how they construct Other identities that separate an/Other Self from their "true" selves. Throughout, I will address what knowledges and education these factors construct and how they work together to partially lean towards fluid or multiple identity construction before ultimately buttressing dominant ideological ideals of Truth, identity, authenticity, and the "real."

JOURNALISM, DOCUMENTARY, AND PASSING

⁴⁶ This cult of authentic experience is challenged by another journalistic source that doesn't claim itself to be passing or drag but when looked at as such reveals an inroad into how to view reality through a lens other than authenticity and experience: *The Colbert Report*. Stephen Colbert's character (performed at almost all times when he is in public) can be termed a sort of pundit passing-in-drag. This will be addressed in depth in Chapter 5.

All the texts that are subjects of this chapter's study deem themselves serious inquiries into the lives of "Others" – be this whites, blacks, Native Americans, men, or blue-collar workers – in order to educate readers or viewers about what these "Others" experience and possibly create a situation of empathy. The first of these journalist passing texts was 1961's *Black Like Me* by John Howard Griffin and almost all of the subsequent accounts have had to at the very least pay lip-service to the experiment/experience of this white-man-turned-black. In 1959 the African-American magazine *Sepia* offered to pay Griffin's expenses in exchange for the rights to print his experience in a series of articles in 1960 titled "Journey into Shame" (Wald, 1996: 152) that eventually became Griffin's book (Griffin, 1961: 2-3). According to Griffin, at a time of racism and strife in both the North and South accompanied by little interaction between the races, his goal was to experience the life of a "Negro" in order to share this experience with other whites and educate them about the plight of black people in the South. Presumably (and also one of the critiques of his book), because of racism even within the northern states, whites would not believe the words of a black man who might tell them of his experiences in the South and thus Griffin, a journalist with a reputation of unbiased truth-seeking and truth-telling, could experience the life of an African-American man and be able to convey its truth to other white people. This work made Griffin something of a celebrity and an expert quite quickly, as well as a pariah. He was burned in effigy in the South and in his home state of Texas and received death threats (Griffin, 185; Wald, 1996), but also went on the lecture circuit and became a sort-of spokesman in the civil rights movement as an expert on the black experience of racism. But he at some point realized the problematics of this and stepped down and away from this expert position (Wald, 1996).

Black Like Me was followed in the late 1960s and the 1970s by Grace Halsell's multiple attempts to authentically experience the lives of other races. Starting with *Soul Sister* (1969) – which she writes openly was an attempt to redo Griffin's experiment through the eyes of a woman – Halsell then proceeded to go “undercover” as a Native American in *Bessie Yellowhair* (1973), and as an illegal immigrant in *The Illegals* (1978). This line of journalists going “undercover” as an Other was continued in the new millennium by Barbara Ehrenreich's *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America* (2001), in which she attempts to live off of minimum wage for a year, and Norah Vincent's *Self-Made Man: One's Women's Year Disguised as a Man* (2006). The reality TV market followed this trend with the 2006 FX series *Black. White.* in which a white family from Santa Monica, California, and a black family from Atlanta, Georgia, lived together in a house in Southern California's San Fernando Valley for six weeks while going out in the world with makeup on that made them appear to be the Other race. This show was billed by producers as a documentary and as educational. In 2005, 2006, and 2008 Morgan Spurlock (of *Fast Food Nation* fame) employed his 30-day technique as a television series. The first episode of *30 Days* has Spurlock and his girlfriend attempt to live off of minimum wage for a month (sound familiar?) and following episodes, while not specifically labeled as passing, document individuals' experiences living with people from different backgrounds or with different viewpoints. These include an anti-homosexual Christian living with a gay man in San Francisco, a pro-choice woman living with a pro-life family, a Christian living with Muslim family in Dearborn Michigan, and Spurlock living with Native Americans (which mirrored in some ways Halsell's *Bessie Yellowhair*). While not aiming to pass, in many instances these *30 Days* episodes did just this – in one particular instance, because he is wearing

Muslim dress, the Christian living with the Muslim family experiences profiling at an airport as well as anti-Muslim sentiment while passing out fliers (June 29, 2005).

How individuals are able to pass and the difficulties of such passes are a major focus for the texts on race and sex passing. As Gwendolyn Foster writes in *Class Passing: Social Mobility in Film and Popular Culture* (2005) this is because in American culture class is not seen so much as an identity but as a merit-based situation. There are now more and more instances of attention to class-passing as passing, particularly in reality TV with such shows as *Joe Millionaire* (2003), *Secret Millionaire* (2008), *My Big Fat Obnoxious Fiancé* (2004), and *Undercover Boss* (2009). All of these become a competition of some sort, in a way reinforcing the idea that the very accumulation (or loss) of money determines class. Foster argues that this is not really the case because of ideas about new versus old money and the things like etiquette (and its training) that influence class perception, even though within the popular imagination this correlation between amount of money possessed and class status is how it works. For this reason the texts such as *Nickel and Dimed* and Spurlock's experiment frame class passing as a matter of money and the results of living poor are viscerally felt – proving that living off minimum wage is hard and nearly impossible. As with most of the other passing texts contained in this journalist genre, this serves to validate what poor people/African-Americans/Muslims/men have been saying all along, but of course we couldn't just take their word for it.....

While all of these texts represent different time periods and modes of boundary crossings across lines of race, sex, religion, sexuality, and class, there are many threads that connect them together. All these texts position themselves as experiments, attempting to gain “true” knowledge about people different from themselves and reveal more about the society we all live in. With the

exception of *30 Days*⁴⁷, all these texts are concerned with passing authentically, almost all create separate identities to some extent for the Other they become, and almost all involve important emotionally-fraught scenes where the passer reveals him/her Self to those s/he is passing to. That each strives for authenticity in order to access the reality of an Other is closely related to their belief that experience can in itself open this reality for them: if they pass authentically enough then the experiences they have must be what someone from another sex/race/religion/class/etc. would experience. As we will see, this becomes problematic for many participants – but not all. All are intimately involved with an idea that experience equals Truth. The premise is that “living in another’s skin” (*Black. White.*) gives one access to their realities, their thoughts, actions, feelings, and lives. Also intertwined with this idea is that all believe they are experiencing what someone of another race/sex/class/sexuality/religion experiences and all define these experiences through the emotional. I will first address how authenticity is attempted before analyzing how this influences what the resulting experiences are and what picture of identity and its possible malleability are presented.

THEORIES OF AUTHENTICITY

Authenticity is a key tenet within our social world as well as that of journalism, documentary, and reality TV, but its definition is slippery at best. In *Sincerity and Authenticity*, Lionel Trilling argues that before the 1900s western culture had a preoccupation with “sincerity” which refers “primarily to a congruence between avowal and actual feeling” (1971: 2) but this was replaced in modern times by an ideal of authenticity: “A very considerable originaive power

⁴⁷ This text – though fascinating in its own right particularly in terms of the critical application of terms like passing outside their traditional use – will not be addressed in this chapter because it does not express to pass as the Other, already numerous, texts do and therefore – though it is related – would detract from the central inquiries of this chapter.

had once been claimed for sincerity, but nothing to match the marvelous generative force that our modern judgment assigns to authenticity” (12). But the term itself has a slippery nature and while Trilling uses multiple literary sources to explain authenticity and its place in our culture, he seems to never really define it. In *Culture and Authenticity* (2008), Charles Lindholm comes closest to a definition in a chain of synonyms and relations of the term: “At minimum, it [authenticity] is the leading member of a set of values that includes sincere, essential, natural, original, and real. ... Unlike its cousins, authenticity stands alone; it has higher, more spiritual claims to make” (1-2). These higher spiritual claims are to that of Truth – objective, experiential, and emotional. Lindholm argues that there are two basic overlapping modes through which we identify “authenticity”: “genealogical or historical (*origin*) and identity or correspondence (*content*). Authentic objects, persons, and collectives are original, real, and pure; they are what they purport to be, their roots are known and verified, their essence and appearance are one. ... These two forms of authenticity are not always compatible nor are both invoked equally in every context, but both stand in contrast to whatever is fake, unreal, or false, and both are in great demand” (2, italics in original). “Their essence and appearance are one” can mean that an object, person, place, etc. can be deemed authentic if his/her/its genealogical roots can be traced back scientifically or objectively to the correct corresponding identity/time period/artist. This is exemplified by Lindholm as well as Trilling as the authentication of art works at museums or in auctions. Through scientific data on the paint or techniques used, or solid proof of a genealogy of ownership, a work of art is deemed as authentic and thus worthy of display in a museum or sale at a certain amount. (Lindholm 15, Trilling 93) A similar authentication process is used in Native American and aboriginal groups to determine tribal membership through DNA tests – thus irrefutably confirming the truth of a person’s real origins (134). The other type of

confirming authenticity is not dependent on objectivity but is much more closely related to Trilling's sincerity: emotional authenticity. A person or event is authentic if "their essence and appearance are one," if what they purport to be/feel and what they really are/feel correspond. Lindholm argues that "the dominant trope for personal authenticity in modern America is emotivism – the notion that feeling is the most potent and real aspect of the self." (65) Obviously this is much harder to prove and in many of the passing texts below what is felt becomes the authenticity of the experience that excuses that portrayal of an "inauthentic" identity. Both types of authenticity, objective and emotional, are utilized in tandem by passing texts to create a believable reality of authentic passing.

The ideal of authenticity is complicated not only by the tricky business of authenticating a person's "true" emotions but by the very quest itself for the authentic in Western Culture as well. Authenticity and its pursuit are related to a drive for "the real thing" (Lindholm 44, 53) and a person is authentic if they are "true" to themselves and presumably whatever a priori identity they are assumed to possess. Charles Taylor argues in *The Ethics of Authenticity* (1992) that "Being true to myself means being true to my own originality, and that is something only I can articulate and discover. In articulating it, I am also defining myself. ... This is the background understanding to the modern ideal of authenticity, and to the goals of self-fulfillment or self-realization in which it is usually couched. This is the background that gives moral force to the culture of authenticity" (29). Authenticity in contemporary America is attached to this ideal of being "true" to yourself in matters of both emotion and identity. This ideal of authentic personal identity is, according to Taylor, "a facet of modern individualism" (44) that is developed against a background horizon which creates modern understanding of authenticity through difference, diversity, and originality from this horizon (37).

Authenticity is deeply intertwined with our cultural sense of reality – and particularly a monolithic cultural sense of “reality” and “the real” even though, as many theorists argue, there can be multiple “realities” or representations of reality and what is “real” is often contested and contestable. Nancy Wang Yuen argues, “Authenticity can refer to how well a person, place, or object conforms to an idealized representation of reality . . . , or to a person’s self-values central to *who I really am*” (2008: 1, italics in original) and “not some objective standard” (46). Yuen’s reference to “representation” and not just an idea of objective “reality” gives insight into how authenticity is constructed and then revered. She argues that “What makes a cultural product or performance authentic arises from a set of socially constructed, not inherent, characteristics” (46). But there is also much effort in institutions and mainstream culture to deny the constructed nature of these characteristics and label them instead as inherent and/or objective contributors to authenticity – whether the subject is a person’s race or gender or a product’s origins and production. This makes authenticity a contested terrain within culture – at once argued to be subjective and objective, inherent and constructed – that sometimes creates contradictory meanings and deployments. Lindholm argues that the drive for “the real thing” is paradoxically appropriated by consumerism such that products strive for a constructed authenticity (Coke) that can then be sold as such to consumers who live in a media-saturated world where “the American imagination demands the real thing and, to attain it, must fabricate the absolute fake” (Lindholm, quoting Umberto Eco, 44). Lindholm argues that this “hunger” for the absolute fake as the standard of “the real” is fed by media representation and exemplified by people’s statements that a particular event was just “like a movie,” “Evidently, the most powerful references available today are images from the cinema” (53). This contested nature leads a drive for the “really real” within non-fiction writing as well as reality TV, where emphasis is placed both on the

“objective” elements that make something authentic, true, and real as well as the experiential and emotive ones that situate the human and individual identifications as authentic and “real” as well.

This cultural drive for authentic and “real” representations of reality has found a home in the proliferation of reality TV shows that strive for (and depend on in order to achieve maximum viewership) a presentation of “real” events, “real” people, and “real” experiences. With a savvy viewership that knows the tricks of the trade, reality TV must work hard in order to achieve this – and multiple generic conventions have become standard in the quest to (re)present authentic reality and experience (*The Spectacle of the Real*, 2005)⁴⁸. Both modes of authenticity explained above (objective/scientific and emotive/experiential) are employed in reality TV to produce authentically “real” televisual representations. In “Caught on Tape: a Legacy of Low-Tech Reality,” Amy West argues that use of amateur video or surveillance camera footage is the epitome of the “real” used in reality TV: “the intersection of amateur and accident made a special promise of authenticity” (2005: 84) and “The mechanism of the am-cam [amateur camera work] ethos are reworked to suit the purposes of this character-driven realism and to serve the sophisticated palette of a new generation of reality television viewers” (89) such that the cues of authentic reality established by this type of camera work (as well as the confessional format, which West also discusses) are used in a lot of reality TV formats in order to reinforce that their product is in fact “real” and authentic as well. But, of course, this too is contested terrain (one only needs think of 1999’s *The Blair Witch Project* and the hype and confusion surrounding its release to realize this) that is constantly being reinforced or challenged by different corners (including by viewers themselves) and thus reality TV shows are always pressed to prove their assertions of authenticity and the real. A combination of multiple elements that have previous

⁴⁸ For example: the use of handcam, participant confessionals, and cuts that leave some of the production aspects visible (*The Spectacle of the Real*).

claims to authentic or objective reality presentation is used by reality TV shows to make similar claims. These techniques include but are not limited to the use of am-cam and confessionals, as well as documentary conventions such as the ‘fly-on-the-wall’ technique (Flynn, 2005; West; Fetveit, 2002: 123).

Reality TV stresses, and constantly reiterates, its use of “real” people as participants whose “real” and authentic experience and emotions are then caught on tape by the ‘fly-on-the-wall’ documentary style. The emotional content is a key element of reality programming – it is what connects the viewer to the people on screen. Lindholm argues that “the dominant trope for personal authenticity in modern America is emotivism – the notion that feeling is the most potent and real aspect of the self” (65). The really real in modern culture is partly defined by the felt real. Misha Kavka writes that “the reality of the televisual world ... comes down to a matter of feeling” (2005: 93). The authenticity of emotional experience is used to shore up any doubts about the authenticity of the objectivity of reality TV and vice versa. Authenticity in reality TV is represented through the objective capture of subjective experience and feeling. James Friedman argues

the industry’s reliance on “reality” as a promotional marketing tool is unprecedented. What separates the spate of contemporary reality-based television from its predecessors is not the form or content of these programs ... but the open and explicit sale of television programming as a representation of reality. ... What is new and fresh about these programs is not their allegiance to reality but the marriage of reality conventions with dramatic structure. (2002: 7-8)

Friedman also cites personal interviews with producer of *COPS* and *LAPD* to argue that authenticity is of the utmost importance in the creation of reality TV. He argues that with the changes in perception of photographic discourse in the digital age where authenticity was once assumed and photography was seen as somewhat scientific, now savvy viewers do not assume this authenticity and reality TV must constantly reassert this in order to sell itself as “real.”

Shows do this through visual evidence paired with verbal explanation (Fetveit 125) or dramatic structure – pairing through narrative the objective authenticity of the visible with the subjective authenticity of emotional connection between the “real” people on screen and viewers that is achieved through narrative.

THE PARADOX OF AUTHENTIC PASSING

These same constructs that reality TV uses to effect authenticity are used in journalistic passing texts – those written as well as reality TV texts. Passing is a unique case in which to interrogate the construction of authenticity because it is expressly the performance of a non-authentic identity. Linda Schlossberg argues that “the passing subject’s ability to transcend or abandon his or her ‘authentic’ identity calls into question the very notion of authenticity itself. Passing, it seems, threatens to call attention to the performative and contingent nature of all seemingly ‘natural’ or ‘obvious’ identities” (2001: 2). But as outlined above, both journalism and reality TV depend on presenting what is “real,” “authentic,” and “true.” All the texts examined in this chapter subscribe to essentialized notions of identity – particularly of race and gender. Marion Ruse argues that “Passing also mocks our melancholy, ridiculing essentialist notions of a ‘true’ Self preceding, and corrupted by, its subsequent enactments. In a sense, passing foregrounds what is *between* – between origin and enactment, body and gesture – calling into question all such fixed ways of determining identity” (1996: 22-23). Passing creates a unique paradox for mainstream journalism and reality TV such that while passing might challenge the very idea of authenticity, these texts do everything they can to negate this challenge and create authentic passing. They do this through a commitment to presenting both kinds of authentication – objective and emotive. This includes an emphasis on the objective nature of these

“experiments,” the science/expertise necessary for passing and the difficulty in such passes, the proof of feelings, scenes of revelation, and the reinforcing of binaries through the creation of alternate identities for the passing self.

Objectivity

All the texts in question here focus at least initially on the scientific/objective/truth-seeking nature of their projects. In *Black Like Me*, Griffin begins in the preface by writing, “This began as a scientific research study of the Negro in the South, with careful compilation of data for analysis when a so-called first-class citizen is cast on the junkheap of second-class citizenship” (preface). Griffin later refers to his “experiment” (122) as do all of the other authors. Halsell refers to *Soul Sister* in her memoir and writes that she wondered what “this experiment” would do to her body and mind (124). Ehrenreich references her book as an experiment and writes, “In the end, the only way to overcome my hesitation was by thinking of myself as a scientist, which is, in fact, what I was educated to be” (3) and that “In the spirit of science, [she] first decided on certain rules and parameters” much like any scientific experiment, though she freely then writes that she broke all her rules at some point (4). In the beginning of her book Ehrenreich authenticates herself as a scientist with an experiment and also writes that her aim was “straightforward and objective” in her attempt to match income to expenses at a minimum-wage job (6). In all these cases, the impetus for the project, its value, and its authenticity hinge on verifiable objective aims in some way. Though not all of the writers/participants viewed their work as scientific truth-seeking, some instead (or also) espoused a similar notion of objective journalistic recording and truth-seeking. In the *Black. White.* series, multiple participants as well as producer R.J. Cutler refer to the “project” as an “experiment” aimed at teaching and learning,

though in this particular case the attachment is more to educational documentary-making than scientific knowledge. Vincent argues in *Self-Made Man* that hers was a personal knowledge-seeking quest of journalistic import where her observations as a journalist are what makes her experiment valid, if only for her: “But to say that I conducted and recorded the results of an experiment is not to say that this book pretends to be a scientific or objective study. Not even close. Nothing I say here will have any value except as one person’s observations about her own experience” (16-17). She articulates that hers is an experiment, but draws a line between science and journalism such that “This is, therefore, not a confessional memoir. I am not resolving a sexual identity crisis. There is intimate territory being explored here. No question. ... What’s more, I did partake in my own experiment, live it and internalize its effects. Being Ned changed me and the people around me, and I have attempted to record those changes.” (16).

Academics have found this supposition of scientific study problematic in its assumption of non-biased access to an/Other’s lived reality. In addressing Griffin’s text, Gayle Wald argues his “experiment” and “methodology” are troubling because of

his implicit perception that as a white male intellectual he is entitled to the cultural knowledge of others; his assumption that he can willfully transcend the conditions of his own social formation; his conviction that passing affords the only means of authenticating racial oppression; and his belief that he can better convey the meaning of this oppression to other whites than can African Americans (2000: 255-6).

This problem arises in all the journalistic passing texts addressed here – with the possible exception of *Black. White.* whose reality TV format broadcast a quirky experience rather than an anthropological one. This was the largest critique of Griffin’s work and one that he eventually acknowledged, taking himself off the lecture circuit and arguing that he cannot be a voice for African Americans any longer in the 1970s (Wald). All of the written texts after Griffin’s try to get around this problematic by stating as Vincent does that it is just one person’s experience, that

one cannot ever get the full experience of an/Other because of the built-in escape hatch of returning to one's "real" identity as well as the fact of not being raised with a lifetime of that Other's experience. But they all also rather quickly dismiss these limitations in favor of the altruistic intent of journalistically reporting "the facts" or going in search of "the Truth." The attempt to authenticate their "research" lies in the power of authenticity itself, which, as Lindholm argues is "a form of symbolic capital, to be used in asserting power" (91). The authors and texts mitigate the power-grab authenticity allows by arguing that it is done for the greater good, to seek out the real truth of Others – which apparently can't be found (for authors or for their audiences) through simply talking with those "Others" about their experiences. This is one of the primary differences enacted by the reality TV series *Black. White.* which situates "both" [sic] races in juxtaposition and interaction with each other.

Journalistic Truth

The "real" associated with journalistic reporting is utilized by Vincent, Ehrenreich, Halsell, Griffin and the producers of *Black. White.* to authenticate their passing experiences and all cite a quest for knowledge, learning, and the education of those who read or watch their experiments as what makes it not only okay but necessary for them to pass and write about it "objectively." On the first page of his book Griffin argues that it is in the pursuit of knowledge and truth that he does this: "How else except by becoming a Negro could a white man hope to learn the truth? ...The Southern Negro will not tell the white man the truth. He long ago learned that if he speaks a truth unpleasing to the white, the white will make life miserable for him" (1-2). The holy quest for knowledge drives all these passing texts. In her memoir, *In Their Shoes*, Halsell writes of meeting one of the first female editorial writers for *The New York Times* that "I

felt she was doing what I would one day like to do: get the facts of a situation and use them in a manner that would go beyond mere data to some kind of ‘truth’” (68), and in both *Soul Sister* and *Bessie Yellowhair* she asserts this journalistic search for “truth” in multiple ways including reference to herself as listening to stories about the atrocities in Mississippi as an “interested yet *detached* observer” (*Soul Sister* 153, italics in original) but also as more than this, “I want to be more than a professional journalist observing and writing with detachment. I want to immerse myself in Navajo ways, customs, attitudes. Travel to learn, my father always urged, not to teach” (*Bessie Yellowhair* 34). Like Griffin’s, her experience is problematic because of her assertion to be a “empty vessel” in which to receive (take?) all that the Navajo teach her (210). Vincent and Ehrenreich also assert their intentions of journalistic inquest and a desire to learn, but temper the problematics associated with Griffin’s and Halsell’s assertion of “becoming” black or “Indian” with emphasis on “being treated as” or “received as” rather than “being,” something Halsell embraces in her memoir as well (which was written in the 1990s). Ehrenreich posits in the beginning of her book how she came to attempt to live on minimum wage: “How does anyone live on the wages available to the unskilled? ... Then I said something that I have since had many opportunities to regret: ‘Someone ought to do the old-fashioned kind of journalism – you know, go out there and try it for themselves’” (1) and later writes of an encounter with a woman who in “real life” did what she is doing “only in the service of journalism” (131).

The journalistic and scientific nature of these projects espoused by their writers and creators not only lends authenticity but also an altruistic aim of discovering and disseminating knowledge. All the authors, producers, and participants express guilt about the deception associated with what they are doing (which will be addressed in itself shortly) but all also excuse this deception with the educational pursuits of their experiments. The search for truth,

knowledge, learning, and what is “real” seems to be used to both give these texts an aura of authenticity because of their attachment to journalistic standards of objectivity but also to excuse any problematics associated with their inquests as all in the name of the altruistic quest for knowledge. Vincent writes of her experience “disguised as a man” as well as the many “lessons” she learns about male culture and sexuality and, after dating a woman decides to reveal herself because “I was, after all, doing research, and if I was going to take abuse, I wanted to search it for what it could teach me” (125). In *Black. White.*, education and the pursuit of knowledge are always in the forefront for both the participants and the producers. In the first episode, Rose (white, 17-year-old daughter) says she wants “to know what its like to be black,” and all the participants at some point relate what they are doing to a desire to “know” or “learn” about the experiences and/or culture of the “Other” race, though for the two African-American parents the desire to learn is directed more at learning what white people say and do when black people are not around. *Black. White.* even includes a CD-ROM with sample tutorials for use in high school classrooms, explaining how teachers can use *Black. White.* to teach about race and race relations. In the commentary for Episode 3, Rose discusses with Producer R.J. Cutler visiting her old high school and using these episodes in a sociology class which she deems “so amazing. ... everyone was full of questions, full of experiences. ... everyone was either inspired or provoked.” Carmen (white, mother) says she did this project partly “to be of service” but also for “personal transformation.” And at the end of each experience in the books as well as the reality show, everyone professes that they will never be the same because of the experience, that they have learned so much, and now are driven to disseminate their newly-gained knowledge as a public service ... which just happens to also have professional, financial, or popularity benefits as well.

Where the written accounts attach themselves to a kind of journalistic integrity, the reality TV show embraces an aura of documentary status in order to effect the same kind of authentic access to the real and an educational goal. Producer R.J. Cutler routinely refers to the show in the commentary as both a reality show AND a documentary. Documentary filmmaking has a history of having an objective nature, a journalistic standard, of recording “real” life and events without intruding into how they play out. Until Michael Moore’s “documentaries” this was widely accepted and rarely challenged. Even with his recent works, there is much debate over whether they “count” as documentaries precisely because his views are overtly included. It is now accepted by film theorists at least, if not the general public, that even though documentary filmmaking is never truly free of authorial intent and bias, it at least must work towards objective presentation (even if this is impossible). Fetveit writes that

Increased camera access allied with an epistemological optimism to establish a new documentary aesthetic, strongly based upon observation and interviews, often documenting events as they unfolded through an “objective,” “fly on the wall” technique. On the face of it, much of today’s reality TV seems to embody aspirations both from Vertov’s *Kino Pravda* to catch life ‘unawares’ and from the *verité* movements of the 1960s to give an objective view of life as it unfolds. The evidential aspirations of photographic discourse is powerfully carried on – if not stretched to its limits – in reality TV. (123)

Cutler’s overt labeling of his show as “documentary” latches onto this objective aim and evidentiary element of shooting.

A logic of visibility is utilized to reinforce the “truth” of these “experiments” as well. Passing’s most basic element is visible believability to what Amy Robinson deems the “dupe” of the pass – an outsider who believes the passing identity is “real.” But part of passing’s paradox is that while it on one level utilizes the ideal of visible truth it also refutes it because the passing identity is not in fact the passer’s “true” identity. Schlossberg writes:

Theories and practices of identity and subject formation in Western culture are largely structured around a logic of visibility At the most basic level, we are subjects constituted by our visions of ourselves and others, and we trust that our ability to see and read carries with it a certain degree of epistemological certainty. For instance, we commonly use a vocabulary of vision to signify cognition, understanding, and truth Because of this seemingly intimate relationship between the visual and the known, passing becomes a highly charged site for anxieties regarding visibility, invisibility, classification, and social demarcation. It disrupts the logics and conceits around which identity categories are established and maintained – even as it may seem to result in the disappearance or denial of a range of “minoritized” or queer identities. (1)

In order for each account to verify that the knowledge they seek is attainable, each text explains the believability of their pass as seen through others eyes. This is done in the written works through “proof” that other people see them and “believe” the pass and use their educational focus to dismiss passing’s disruption of visible truth, *Black. White.* in particular attempts to nullify the disruption by emphasizes the truth of the visible through documentary conventions. In *Black. White.* this believability is effected partially through the use of “undercover” cameras, a “fly-on-the-wall” perspective that historically lends credibility and authenticity. Bernadette Flynn, West, and Freidman all address the use of “fly-on-the-wall” footage as a documentary tactic routinely used by reality TV to convey the sense of objective visual evidence or truth. The use of hidden cameras, though rarely used exclusively in reality TV, gives an aura of evidentiary truth. This tactic is utilized by the producers of *Black. White.* in multiple ways to call attention to the visual authenticity of their experiment. Though there are many instances where hidden camera are NOT used and the viewer is left to guess what impact the camera crew had on the reality of the experiment, the instances where they are used act to reinforce and hold up the overall reality effect.

Authenticating Emotion

There is much overlap between the “scientific”/“objective” and “emotional” authenticity of each text that work together to create “the real” of the participants’ experiences. Following Griffin’s assertion that his experience “began as a scientific research study” he immediately writes, “But I filed the data, and here publish the journal of my own experience living as a Negro. I offer it in all its crudity and rawness. It traces the changes that occur to heart and body and intelligence” (preface). Vincent as well writes that the emotional and experience took precedence over the scientific. But beginning in the language of science lent credibility at the start and she sticks with the language of experimentation throughout her work even though she also writes that “Nothing I say here will have any value except as one person’s observations about her own experience” (17). Both of these examples follow and try to please both venues of authenticity, which, Lindholm writes, is a perpetual problem for anthropologists, and we may conclude all experiments dealing with human interaction:

Anthropologists are particularly concerned with authenticity because of the contradiction between their roles as observers and participants. ...all anthropologists have been torn between these two positions: the empiricist observer and the romantic participant. Empiricists have tried to maintain detachment and scientific objectivity. ... Romantic anthropologists then could envision themselves as transmitters of authentic spiritual wisdom to a decadent and fragmented Western civilization (141).

All these texts utilize confessional or diary/journal entry formats to create emotional authenticity in addition to the scientific/objective authenticity addressed above. The particular use of diary or journal entries works to make both emotional and objective claims to authenticity. These entries convey the emotional truths of the writers but in the objective form of daily records – like an anthropologist. Griffin’s and Vincent’s works consist entirely of journal entries, Halsell’s works typically start in an journal-entry fashion before transitioning to more story-telling type writing which still partially follows the entry-type of writing with introductions such as “the next

morning” “Saturday afternoon” etc., and Ehrenreich’s work also loosely follows this trend. Vincent writes, “I did partake in my own experiment, live it and internalize its effects. Being Ned changed me and the people around me, and I have attempted to record those changes” (16). Her “experiment” resulted in emotional/personal change, which she then “records.”

The confessional/diary aspect of *Black. White.* is perhaps most telling. West writes that “personal journey or diary format reality television shows ... use confession cam or diary cam sequences to heighten the desired affect of intimacy and authenticity” (89). In every episode of *Black. White.* the participants are shown talking directly to the camera about that day’s or week’s events and experiments in their realistic makeup or as families living together. These confessional interjections often contain the participants espousing about the emotional difficulty of the experiment, how they are scared, worried, excited, hurt, etc. Interestingly – and this aspect will be discussed in more detail later – these confessionals are also the primary place in which participants voice their worries about deceiving the people around them and inevitably include their decisions to tell people they have become close to “the truth” about their race. What is most telling about these confessional instances in which the participants speak directly to the camera is that they are in fact not confessional diary entries as they look but excerpts of interviews done at the direction of the producers after the daily footage has been transcribed and interesting directions identified (commentary, episodes 2 and 5). The fact that the interviewer has in almost every instance been excised from these scenes (there is only one exception in which a camera crew person’s voice is included asking what sounds like a follow-up question) points to a very intentional change between what was shot and what was included. By making these scenes appear to be confessional or diary-type entries of the participants’ thoughts and emotions gives a

sense of intimacy and authenticity not as available to the viewer if they had been shown as interview conversations rather than a direct address to the audience.

This personal intimacy that reinforces the authenticity of these texts is utilized in all of them – most often to emphasize the difficulty of the experiment. Passing itself questions and is concerned with the construction of identities and many argue it refutes the very idea of authenticity (Schlossberg), but Western hegemonic ideology still holds to an essentialist ideal of static authentic identity. The passing texts addressed here therefore work to rectify this dissonance. One way they do this is through asserting the difficulty and enormous effort of passing. They all do this within both fields of authentication: scientific/objective and emotional.

DIFFICULT PASSAGE

In the case of both race- and sex-passing much emphasis is placed on the difficulty of making the pass believable, and thus, authentic. It is significant that no mainstream journalist or documentary-style racial passing text or visual media focuses on mixed-race individuals who need no technological miracles to successfully “pass” one way or the other in a society that, until recently (and arguably not even then), demanded singular identification. While there are many memoirs written by such individuals they do not purport to be experiments that prove through experience but subjective accounts of a person’s life. These are valuable in their own right but are not part of this journalistic/documentary genre. Valerie Rohy writes:

In matters of race as well as sexuality, passing both invokes and unravels the logic of primary and secondary, authenticity and inauthenticity, candor and duplicity, by placing in question the priority of what is claimed as “true” identity. The discourse of racial passing reveals the arbitrary foundation of the categories “black” and “white,” just as passing across gender and sexuality places in question the meaning of “masculine” and “feminine,” “straight” and “gay.” Racial passing is thus subject to an epistemological ambiguity. (1996: 227)

Mainstream representations of passing seem terrified of this epistemological ambiguity and strive to nullify it – primarily through ignoring mixed-race people and the history of passing that required no makeup, no medicines, and no experts. In *Black. White.*, entire sections of commentary and a large part of the introductory episode focus on how hard it is to make black people look white and vice versa. At least a third of the first episode focuses on the difficulty, time, and expertise involved in the transformation and every episode includes footage of each participant in the make-up chair. Episode Four’s commentary is given over entirely to the make-up artists who speak for an hour on the complex trial-and-error process of changing the color of the participants’ skins believably (including listing the myriad elements used such as prosthetic facial pieces and teeth, wardrobe, hair, up to 23 different airbrush colors, seven artists working on a person at one time) and all of the participants in their own commentaries record the large number of hours spent in the make-up chair for each changeover, which was anywhere between a standard five hours for Rose’s hair and makeup and eight hours for Brian’s first makeup experience.

In *Black. White.* the focus on the transformation process becomes part of every episode as well as a large focus in the commentary. Where previous journalistic passing texts used doctors as the experts necessary for race change, *Black. White.* uses make-up artists. The DVD commentary for Episode Four is given over entirely to Producer/Makeup Effect Creator Keith Vanderlaan and Special Effects Makeup Designer Brian Sipe who talk with Producer R.J. Cutler about the vast amount of time (up to a month to just figure out one person’s looks) and technology (photoshop models, plaster casts, prosthetics), not to mention expertise (of up to seven artists at a time) to change the visual race of these two families. Every time one of the Sparks goes out in white makeup or one of the Wurgels goes out in black makeup the scene starts

with shots of them in the makeup chair. Stress is placed on the process of change, not just on the effects of it. In the first episode much of the first five minutes of introduction to the participants and their commentary on starting the experiment is voiced over scenes of each person's makeup transformation. Of the complex process, Brian Sparks says in the first episode while in the makeup chair, "I'm still amazed that all these colors make me white. I see browns and blues and greens and reds but the finished product – I look like a white guy." While the effort put into these changes makes for good television, it also reinforces the supposed sharp divide between the races. Even though this show purports to explore the similarities and differences between the races and the liberal white participants constantly insist that they "just see people" (Carmen Episode One) This colorblind attitude belies the overall reinforcement of the binary system already in place with its rigid uncrossable colorline by instead pretending to erase it – all the while keeping the line in place through all the other means within the series. This combination of a rigid colorline crossable only through makeup technology and a feel-good colorblind ideology serve to placate the anxieties over the possibility of fluid and changing identification which would have resulted had it been a show more focused on individuals who might cross over the colorline in their daily lives without the aid of makeup technology. The particular anxieties of mixed-raced individuals and the fraught experience with passing that they have experienced exist and are compelling⁴⁹, but this was expressly not the topic of this reality show⁵⁰ where authenticity is dependent on stagnant identity categories and the process of changing over with great effort. The possibility of passing without makeup or medical technology is ignored by all

⁴⁹ This is evidenced by such memoirs and accounts as *Black, White, and Jewish* and *More Than Black?: Multiracial Identity and the New Racial Order* as well as in the edited volumes *Passing: Identity and Interpretation in Sexuality, Race, and Religion*; *Nobody Passes: Rejecting the Rules of Gender and Conformity*; and *Crossing Lines: Race and Mixed Race Across the Geohistorical Divide*. And there are many others.

⁵⁰ Nor is it even mentioned with the show.

these texts, reinforcing the idea of completely separate races⁵¹ with boundaries that are not – and should not – be easily crossed.

Emphasis on how the magic of makeup technology allows for the *Black. White.* experiment has its precursors in *Black Like Me*'s and *Soul Sister*'s passages on the long and tedious course of doctor visits, skin pigment-changing pills, and long tanning sessions that were necessary to become black. In *Self-Made Man*, Norah Vincent's first chapter is on the process and difficulty of changing her visible sex/gender to male: making realistic facial hair, creating a penis, hiding her breasts, changing her demeanor, walk, voice, etc. When major visual changes are (supposedly) not required much text is sometimes given over to the process of changing vocabulary, accent, and clothes such as in *Bessie Yellowhair*. The emphasis on the large efforts needed to pass as another race and specifically between black and white – the ultimate binary, followed closely by male/female – works to reinforce the idea of a great chasm between the races that is only crossable with the help of experts such as doctors or movie make-up artists.

In order to begin his “scientific research study” for *Black Like Me*, Griffin contacted “prominent dermatologists” who consulted together and decided to use the oral drug used for vitiligo treatment which “could be dangerous to use” (7). Griffin didn't want to take the usual six weeks to eight months it usually took to darken the skin and they decided to “try accelerated treatments, with constant blood tests to see how [his] system tolerated the medication” (7). Griffin also exposed himself to ultraviolet sun lamps and, while he was quite glad the frequent blood tests showed no damage to his liver, the medication caused nausea. After four days of this the treatment hadn't worked as well as he had wanted but gave him a “dark undercoating of

⁵¹ This is also mostly true for the sex-passing case of *Self-Made Man*, as addressed earlier, and even in class-passing media texts like *Joe Millionaire* much airtime is given over to the time and special training involved in making a regular Joe able to pass as a millionaire.

pigment” which he touched up with stain before going out into New Orleans as a black man. The emphasis here on the role of doctors and medications indicates to the reader that this took great effort and danger – not something someone could do easily. *Soul Sister* has a similar drawn out attention to the participation of doctors. In *Self-Made Man* Norah Vincent uses seven pages to describe how much time and effort she spent figuring out how to fake a five o’clock shadow, bulking up at the gym, and shop for a prosthetic penis (9-15). Again reinforcing the idea that the “switch” from one side of an identity binary to another is not done easily, even though the book starts with her coming to the idea of passing as a man after going out in male drag for a night with a friend on a lark – she is quick to argue that passing on a daily basis and interacting closely with other men would take a lot more effort than walking around in the dark on the street at night. This may be true, but it also points to anxieties about passing that do not circulate around drag – that it *should* be hard, because the sexes are so different from each other.

The preceding paragraphs in this section speak to the quest for objective/scientific proof of authentic identity performance – but all these examples also simultaneously strive for emotive authenticity as well in order to further rectify the disconnect that occurs when attempting the (oxymoronic) authentic pass. As addressed earlier, authenticity in modern times is often based upon showing “true” emotions because, as Lindholm writes, “the notion that feeling is the most potent and real aspect of the self” (65) is a major tenet of authenticity. This is reiterated among all our passing texts where authenticity is constantly threatened by the taking on of inauthentic identity and emotion is used to shore up authenticity in multiple ways: showing the writers or participants experiences are “real” and difficult and lending them authenticity through guilt about their inauthenticity. In all the texts, what the writers or participants “feel” throughout the process is foregrounded as what makes their experiences “real.” Griffin writes of bussing into

Hattiesburg, Mississippi, and encountering hatred by whites and how he “felt the insane terror of it” (68) and later “felt disaster” (73). Both he and Halsell both write of “feeling” black in certain instances. Halsell writes, “I feel myself most black when I see white cops cruising by” (90) and Griffin writes that he “felt more profoundly than ever before the totality of my Negro-ness, the immensity of its isolating effects” (109). Vincent as well writes of how wearing the mask of masculinity made her feel like it was an uneasy fit but that this, in the end, is what men experience.

The authors seem to argue that when perceived as a black person or as a man they reacted with genuine feeling, and thus their experience is authentic. But they all also seem to argue that this came with a very high price – also emotional. In a scene previewed at least six times throughout *Black. White.*'s episodes Rose in black makeup is seen from a distance, shot through the door of her trailer, with her hand to her head crying almost hysterically and saying “I don’t want to be in makeup anymore!” The repetition of this emotional scene is used to show the toll that playing another race takes on an individual. It is echoed (or precursored) by Halsell and Vincent’s respective breakdowns at the close of their experiments including Vincent’s explanation of her “mental collapse” before checking into a mental hospital (267) because disguising herself as a man has opened a “fault line” in her mind (270). Halsell writes of being “terror-stricken” (156) while staying in Mississippi disguised as a black woman. Throughout all their experiences, what they felt in the experience was focused on. In many cases, this was also documented as what was physically felt – and the physical toll is paired with the emotional one to further reinforce the difficulty of passing. Griffin’s first experiences as a black man are authenticated through the physical pain he feels after walking all day, Halsell’s as well is marked by multiple medical emergencies including infected feet, and Ehrenreich’s experiences focus

much attention on the physical toll of working for minimum wage. Ehrenreich's experience is marked by economics in a way unremarked upon by other authors (who are often effectively class-passing as well but never address this aspect), and she alone does not feel some sort of mental break after her experience – this can be attributed to the myth of meritocracy and the blindness of Western culture to class passing in any sense as addressed by Foster. Class becomes for Western culture and for Ehrenreich a matter purely of money and she addresses it as such and thus does not usually address her experience as taking on another identity but as a work experience. But she too focuses on the pain she experiences, still creating an aura of difficulty in the passing experience not to be taken lightly. To be sure, I am not questioning these writers feelings or ailments, but find that these emotions and physically felt experiences work in two ways to both authenticate their passing experiences while simultaneously maintaining that these experiences were extremely difficult to withstand and continue such that Vincent ultimately argues at the end of her book:

If I'd known then what I know now, I could never have embarked on the project. Yet, all the same, I wouldn't trade the experience for anything. The knowledge was absolutely worth the pain[.] ...The lesson I can apply to my next project is that I can never again try to be someone else, someone that I'm not. I can and will immerse myself in situations and environments in order to write about them, but I will never again do so as another person. (5)

The message is clear – only in the search of knowledge is such passing a good thing, but it is so difficult and harrowing that no one should or could do it for long periods of time. Identities are kept in their appropriate boxes and boundary crossings remain dangerous if not impossible to enact and sustain.

DECEPTION AND THE REVEAL

Part of the emotional difficulty for all the authors and reality TV participants is associated with the deception necessary when passing. Feelings of guilt plague them all as they fret about not presenting their “true” selves. A significant part of all these texts is given to not only their feelings of guilt at “lying,” but also to when their passes are revealed to a select few. This results in reifying the status quo ideology that is invested in refuting the possibility of passing by simultaneously reaffirming both their emotive authenticity (being true to themselves) and their “authentic” identity (by revealing themselves). While all the authors and participants at certain points express fear at being found out, they all also at some point express guilt at their supposed deception and feel the need to reveal their “real” identity. In an excerpt that reiterates all of the above arguments as well as the toll of “lying,” Vincent writes:

I thought that passing was going to be the hardest part. But it wasn't at all. I did that far more easily than I thought I would. The difficulty lay in the consequences of passing, and that I had not even considered. As I lived snippets of a male life, one part of my brain was duly taking notes and making observations, intellectualizing the raw material of Ned's experience, but another part of my brain, the subconscious part, was taking blows to the head, and eventually those injuries caught up with me. . . . In that sense I can say with relative surety that in the end I paid a higher emotional price for my circumstantial deceptions than any of my subjects did. And that is, I think, penalty enough for meddling. (19)

Vincent reinforces both the objective and emotional authenticity of her experiment and while she admits that physically passing was easier than she thought it would be, she immediately negates this by saying the emotional toll was extremely hard on her, that she was punished for it, and that it was not being true to herself – authentic – that led to this punishment in particular. In an interesting gendered dynamic that quite possibly shows another hegemonic angle of the *Black. White.* TV series, all three women but none of the men express guilt and regret about their deception once they become close to a particular person or persons. Rose, the white daughter, is

the first in the show to make connections with other people while in black makeup and the first to express this regret at deceiving the members of a poetry group she has joined. While getting into makeup one day during the second episode Rose's interview/confessional material is voiced over close-ups of the makeup process with one cut to her interview/confessional before returning to the makeup shot as she says, "the hardest part about this is keeping the lie. The poetry classes are so honest. I just cannot stand lying to them anymore. I am not going back there pretending anymore. These are the people I wanna be real with. I really need to tell them the truth." The use of close-ups here, both of the make-up process and of her facing the camera at home, cue the viewer in to the emotional content and authenticity of this statement by showing her facial expressions in detail and literally getting closer to her. She wants to "be real" and feels bad about deceiving them and being inauthentic. This is conveyed to the audience in a way tries to connect emotionally them to the scene as well. Brooke Kroeger writes:

Deception and lying can make passing much harder on the passer than on the people the passer has to dupe. Anthony Appiah explained that the source of the anxiety is both ethical and moral in nature. The ethical anxiety is about authenticity, about the deception of presenting yourself as other than who you understand yourself to be, and the moral anxiety is about lying. Lying is troubling because it is about betraying others, and inauthenticity is troubling because it is about betraying the self. (2003: 75)

This is exemplified not only by Vincent and Rose but also by Carmen and Renee (the two moms) in *Black. White*. By episode Five, Renee has struck up a friendship with a white woman named Debra and says in her interview/confessional:

I really want to keep our relationship and I just feel kind of bad deceiving her. I feel like I'm lying to her every time that I go to her house or we do things. I'm just frustrated because I don't know what to do. I don't know. Do I tell her? Do I just keep continuing on? I feel like we've really made a connection here and I could have a friend after this project is over with. ... The whole time that I'm with her I keep thinking "this is not right, it's not fair" I can't keep going on like this. I feel like I need her to know who I really am.

Renee feels she is deceiving her friend, not being true to herself, and thus must reveal herself because passing (at least in this situation) is just “not right.”

And just as quickly as the participants feel guilt at lying about their true authentic selves, they then reveal themselves – bringing the story back into the fold and authenticating their true identities, their true feeling, and thus lending authenticity to the pass through the “truth” of the revelation. The “inauthenticity” of passing is resolved by the interpersonal authenticity of the reveal. Hence, in all of the texts examined here, scenes of revelation are documented in great detail including the lead-up (see above), the actual reveal done by the passer, and the minutia of the passed-to person’s reaction. For example, Rose’s revelation to her poetry class is fraught with emotion as she tells them, “I’m actually a white girl in black makeup. I live in Santa Monica, I’ve told you the truth from the beginning except for the fact that I’ve walked in here in makeup, and that is the lie.” This is quickly followed by multiple reaction shots of the poetry club members and three different people commenting on it, two of whom are supportive because of the education aspect of the project and her truthfulness. One says, “I appreciate that you take this opportunity not as entertainment, but that you truly appreciate what you can get out of it and what anybody else who sees this can get out of it. So I do appreciate that and that you are genuine.” The third commenter refuses to accept that she is genuine and says,

I feel like throwing up. And right now, looking at you, I am disgusted. I’m afraid, cause I cannot see you. I cannot see who you are. ... You sound like the most rehearsed person I’ve ever met, out of all the people in this class. ... Everybody’s like, “we’re cool, we’re here for you” ... They are not speaking for me at all. So cry [cuts to a shot of her crying] so I can see part of your white skin, because I don’t know who you are. I don’t know who you are. I don’t know who you are.

This one student’s disgust is rooted in an inability to “see” Rose’s true Self and thus an inability (reiterated three times) that he does not know who she is. She responds that she appreciates his honesty (his authenticity). This is all followed on the episode by a party at Rose’s house where

the first shot is of her opening the door without black makeup and the student from the poetry class literally jumps back in surprise. Of course, the other student who felt he didn't know who she was and was disgusted by it, makes peace with her – presumably because now he know who she “really” is – i.e. a white girl.

The reveal is an essential part of any passing narrative (Foster) – every passing story has some sort of reveal, whether within the diegesis or to the audience in the know. Robinson argues that any passing story includes a triangular relation between the passer, the dupe, and the in-group clairvoyant such that while there is someone who only sees the passing identity as the true identity there is also always someone who sees the pass as a pass. A large part of passing is contained in the reveal – because successful passing can remain unremarkable because it is unseen. Foster argues that in reality TV the finale of such passing shows as *Joe Millionaire* and *My Big Fat Obnoxious Fiancé* is the only episode worth watching because of the inevitable reveal, they “would hold no interest” otherwise (114). The reveal is not only necessary for the audience, but for those within the shows as well – the “truth” must be outed and original/“real”/“authentic” identities are always reinstated. In *Soul Sister*, Halsell has one interaction in particular that is telling of this process. She reveals herself to Jim Hamilton, a black man in Harlem whom she met earlier: “I told him everything, adding ‘I need your help.’ Just as frankly he replied that I would not get it” because he could not “condone such romantic notions” and let her go “poking her nose into his friends’ lives” (58). She seems dumbfounded because she has been truthful and therefore expects him (as many others within her narrative do) to accept her because of her revelation of her “true” identity and her noble project, she says to him, ““But you have raised the huge Off Limits sign only because I was frank with you, only because I have told you I want to educate myself, and *to write* about it” (59). He still refuses.

This, however, is the exception to the rule – and many many others accept her truths and help her in the name of truth and education. In any case her “authentic” identity is reinstated even if the pass is not made acceptable.

The only text where this is NOT the case is Ehrenreich’s *Nickel and Dimed*. This, though, in fact only further reinforces hegemonic ideology about identities – some are unchangeable, but class (if only mythically) is. Ehrenreich’s deception is presented as less severe, though she still enacts the usual guilt and inevitable reveal of the passing story. She writes,

In each setting, toward the end of my stay and after much anxious forethought, I “came out” to a few chosen coworkers. The result was always stunningly anticlimactic, my favorite response being, “Does this mean you’re not going to be back on the evening shift next week?” ... [A]s I realized very late in this project, it may also be that I was exaggerating the extent of the “deception” to myself. There’s no way, for example, to pretend to be a waitress: the food either gets to the table or not. People knew me as a waitress, a cleaning person, a nursing home aide, or a retail clerk not because I acted like one but because that’s what I *was*, at least for the time I was with them. (9)

It is important to note that Ehrenreich authenticates her own class experience here by emphasizing that she really “was” a working-class person because she really “was” a waitress, clerk, etc. – negating the fact that she had also built in multiple escape hatches such as always having a car, using money she already had to pay security deposits, running home at the threat of homelessness, etc. (which she writes about in the introduction to her book). So even though she “was” a waitress, this did not necessarily mean she was “really” living off of minimum wage. This notwithstanding, her claims here are completely instep with hegemonic ideology of meritocracy and class becomes the one passable border – the reveal becomes unnecessary because class is supposedly the only permeable boundary, but the reveal is still enacted as a necessary part of the passing scene anyway.

BECOMING OTHER – SPLITTING THE SELF

While all these texts attempt to make inroads in understanding, getting along with, and making connections with “Othered” people through the utilization of passing as this Other, they all stop short of allowing for actual changing of identity, or residing in-between identities, and adamantly refuse these possibilities – effectively making the liberal argument that we are all the same, we can all get along, but try to change how you are seen and there will be major negative consequences. This works to reinforce hegemonic ideologies of static binary identities whose borders are a no-man’s land one should enter only at his/her own peril. This is made wholly apparent by how all the writers and participants deal with their passing. With the possible exception of Nick (the 17-year-old black son) in *Black. White.* who rebels by basically refusing to participate, all of these passers create alter-egos or alternate identities for their passing selves and disassociate with this “opposite” Other within the Self. This results in reifying the essentialized binaries that keep races, classes, and genders in opposing fields with a gulf between them.

The stage is set for these writers’ and participants’ Other-selves by their labeling of the Other as opposite and completely different. Though there are of course calls in many of these texts that voice the purpose of the projects to understand and get along with other people who we are to realize are just like us. Halsell makes this sentiment the last line of her memoir: “Strangers became just like me – when I walked in their shoes” (252). And Rose says in episode 5, “I’m realizing that perhaps we are just human beings, and I am just a girl. Or even more so, I’m just Rose, and everybody is just who they are.” But even with the overt expression of this liberal pluralist melting-pot ideal, the strains of seeing these Others-who-are-really-just-like-us but also most-definitely-not-like-us shines through in both Halsell’s reference to strangers and Rose’s

assertion directly before she says the above line that the experience is one of “trying to enter a world that isn’t yours.” This split is exemplified by the title of the reality TV show: *Black. White.* Periods separate the two terms, not slashes, commas, or any other punctuation that might have bridged the two terms or connected them together. In this title each term stands on its own as a declarative statement. Full stops separate the two in the same way that passers deem each as its own world. Vincent and the two mothers in *Black. White.* refer to their experiences as that of their “opposite” (Vincent, 130; Carmen in Episodes One and Three; Renee in Episode Five). In the Sparks’ casting video included in the DVD extras, Brian Sparks (the black father) speaks of being intrigued by “the other side,” and many of the authors and participants at times also refer to their experience as Rose does above – as in an entirely different “world” (Griffin 8; *Bessie Yellowhair* 213; *Soul Sister* 50, 123; Vincent 285; Ehrenreich 89; Carmen and Rose in episode 1, Bruno in episode 5). These representations as well as ones about the gulf (Halsell 142), barrier (Rose episode 5), or wall (Griffin 8; Rose episode 5) between the races, classes, or sexes reinforce the separation. In line with Foster’s argument about the invisibility of class-passing, the one text that is much less invested in seeing the Other as completely different, opposite, or “alien” (*Bessie Yellowhair* 206) is Ehrenreich who writes about class in primarily economic terms. But she as much as any other author or participant falls into separating off that part of her that is passing.

All of these passing texts contain instances of the passers seeing themselves as entirely different entities when passing, separating their “real” selves from their opposite/Other/double incarnation and in many cases “erasing” or damaging their authentic identity. In *Black Like Me*, Griffin’s oft-quoted first vision of his passing Self is jarring and worth quoting at length:

In the flood of light against white tile, the face and shoulders of a stranger – a fierce, bald, very dark Negro – glared at me from the glass. *He in no way resembled me.*

The transformation was total and shocking. I had expected to see myself disguised. But this was something else. I was imprisoned in the flesh of *an utter stranger*, an unsympathetic one with whom I felt no kinship. All traces of the John Griffin I had been were wiped from existence. . . . I was a newly created Negro who must go out that door and live in a world unfamiliar to me.

The completeness of this transformation appalled me. It was unlike anything I had imagined. *I became two men*, the observing one and the one who panicked, who felt Negroid even into the depths of his entrails.

I felt the beginnings of great loneliness not because I was Negro but because the man I had been, the self I knew, was hidden in the flesh of another. . . .

I had tampered with the mystery of existence and *I had lost the sense of my own being*. This is what devastated me. The Griffin that was had become invisible.

The worst of it was that I could feel no companionship with the new person. (11-12, emphasis added)

Griffin is shocked by his passing Self so much so that he feels he is now two people and has lost his sense of being because of it. This is reiterated in Halsell's writing as well where she says "I will no longer be the person I've always been" (50), "I see myself as two persons" (95), and most dramatically after an episode of her "tan" peeling after too much sun exposure (which she says she's never experienced before and did not know what was happening), "As I sit looking at that face with pale, accusing eyes – self-indicted as miserable, ugly, unloving, and unlovable, not myself, not another, a no-body, a no-thing – the eyes condemn me, no longer able to see the person I have destroyed, only the unraveled, molting monster I have created" (45). The very act of changing her skin tone prompts her to see her Self and personhood as destroyed by the process. And even when no physical change to the body occurs, Halsell feels disembodied and destroyed by passing as an/Other in *Bessie Yellowhair*: "I realize I am no longer *me*; I do not exist at all. I am now existing – *as an Indian* – but *only in the mind* of this woman. I turn over enormous powers to her: my psychic self. I have, in a way, gotten rid of myself" (174, italics in original). The act of passing causes her to exist only as she is seen and treated by others and has thus done away with her "real" authentic Self – at least temporarily until the pass has ended. She writes later that "the real 'me' has ceased to exist" (199) and near the end of the book, "I had

temporarily, though perhaps dangerously, lost my sense of self” (206). This is again seen in Vincent’s book as well when she writes that being “Ned” “drove the slim edge of a wedge into my sense of self ... a fault line opened in my mind” (270). Passing as a man has done nothing less to Vincent than cause a geological catastrophe in her head.

All of these instances do two things: they reinforce the idea of passing as not only difficult but possibly dangerous, and they reify the gap between Self and Other, the essentialized binaries of our hegemonic ideology. By separating the Self from the Self-passing-as-Other, these authors effectively argue that there is no Self without its authentic race/sex/class. Changing one of these elements attempts to leap over that fault line that separates them and causes the Self to fall into the chasm. So while many theorists argue that passing in and of itself challenges these binaries’ presumed essential nature and the idea of authenticity itself (for example, Schlossberg) these cases show that while the idea of passing may do this in the minds of progressive feminist, critical race, and cultural studies theorists, the actual examples work very hard to reinscribe this ideal of singular rigid identity-based authenticity and essentialist binaries.

This is further reinforced and revealed by other points in these works. In the passage above, Griffin refers to his black Self in the third person. This is repeated by other authors as well, but particularly by Vincent who employs the third person consistently throughout the entire book in reference to “Ned’s” experiences. She writes, “Before I could build this man I was to become, I had to think of an identity for him. I needed a name” (5), and “In Ned I had my new name and a starting point for a male identity” (9). The taking on of a new name for the “Other” identity is mirrored in many of these passing texts as a way to further separate the “Self” from the “Other” that the Self becomes. This happens for Halsell when she takes on the name *Bessie Yellowhair* (“As ‘Bessie Yellowhair’ I feel I am permanently abandoning myself; that I have to

submerge, if not eradicate, all that I have been” (175-6)), as well as Ehrenreich who is adamant that class is economic and changeable but still manages to create an alter-ego named “Barb” of whom she writes:

What I have to face is that ‘Barb,’ the name on my ID tag, is not exactly the same person as Barbara. ‘Barb’ is what I was called as a child, and still am by my siblings, and I sense that at some level I’m regressing. Take away the career and the higher education, and maybe what you’re left with is this original Barb, the one who might have ended up working at Wal-Mart for real if her father hadn’t managed to climb out of the mines. So it’s interesting, and more than a little disturbing, to see how Barb turned out – that she’s meaner and slyer than I am, more cherishing of grudges, and not quite as smart as I’d hoped. (169)

Even in an “experiment” that she seems to think is not a kind of passing but only an attempt to work and live on minimum wage, her “former self” (41, 101) becomes “distant,” “exotic,” and “strange” (41) and is replaced by this regressed and childlike working-class “Barb.” Though most of her book makes the argument that those in the working class are just like everyone else, that it is not their fault that they can’t match income to expenses, this excerpt on “Barb” contradicts these arguments and replaces them with the Other who is not as good as, not as smart as, Barbara Ehrenreich who left behind her “home and identity” to become Barb (17). This also happens for the majority of participants on *Black. White*. Brian Sparks refers to his white-makeup persona as “Brian White,” Bruno Wurgel took on the alter-ego “Billy Ray” after deciding he looks like Bill Cosby in his black makeup, and Renee Sparks names her white persona “Barbara.” All these participants and authors create new names for themselves when one aspect of them changed – becoming an/Other named identity. This bolsters the idea that being a different race, sex, or class is so wholly Other that it requires its own name and identity. This reifies not only the essentialized notion of these binaries but also the strict boundaries between them such that a change in how one or others sees oneself effects a separate identity even though

all of them also professed to be exactly the same except for changing the color of their skin, their gender, or their class.

THE INVISIBILITY OF CLASS PASSING

This last category, class, is particularly important because other than Ehrenreich's traversal of class boundaries all the other texts completely ignore the effects of it in their experiments. Halsell uncritically weds blackness with lower-class status such that she feels she is not getting the "real" black experience because her job at the Harlem hospital is exposing her to a middle-class African-American experience. Vincent makes judgments about how men are different from women based on her participation in a bowling league, at strip clubs, and as a salesman with mostly working-class men. And, in true Hollywood fashion, based on the information about where they are from and the pictures of their homes the audience is shown, both *Black. White.* families are upper-middle class as are almost all the people they interact with. black and white poverty in Southern California is completely ignored, as are the regional differences of race and racism. Foster writes:

By omitting class from the discussions about race, gender, sexuality, age, and other issues, we have obfuscated all the ways in which class enters into the identity equation. In fact we need to rethink identity politics with class and class-passing in mind. We must return to basic questions. We must rethink traditional notions of class and their hierarchies. We must ask tough questions. Is race a form of class? Is gender treated as class? Is nationality and ethnicity class-based? ... What are we to make of class-passing, and how are we to underscore enough that, indeed, *class matters?* (116, italics in original)

The participants' and authors' ignorance of the intersectionalities they are experiencing contributes to their conclusions. All the writers and participants claim to enter another world with no other pretences than changing the color of their skin, their gender, or their class standing, and purport to otherwise present themselves as they really are. All but Ehrenreich (who writes

about changing class) thoroughly ignore the class aspects of their challenges. Both Griffin and Halsell purport to change nothing about themselves other than their skin color yet then proceed to insert themselves solely into poverty-stricken black communities – effectively class-passing as well but ignoring it and then making conclusions about an overarching African-American experience. The plight of African-Americans for both Griffin and Halsell is directly related to elements associated with poverty but because they only look at race and not class this becomes not another facet of intersectional identity that can also be linked to the plight of poor whites but something that makes blacks even more different and Other. This is similar for Vincent who chooses to focus on the oppositions between men and women, yet routinely inserts herself into working-class male environments. Conversely, for the participants of *Black. White.* who conclude that we are all just people and embrace the melting-pot mentality, being exposed to only those people of the “Other” race who share their own class standing underpins this conclusion by refusing to interrogate any other differences that intersect with race. All of these texts simultaneously aim to educate and draw together the great divide between identity categories and then fortify this very divide through their interpretations of their experiences.

CONCLUSION

Though produced over the span of half a century, the commonalities among these texts reflect what has and has not changed in Western ideologies about identity – and particularly in supposed inherent identities. In attempting to produce new knowledges that they all profess can only be learned by becoming the Other (and thus justify the pass), they all in effect only reinforce hegemonic knowledges already in place. Passing for education is their expressed aim to bridge gaps, understand each other, and change to way we see our “Others” with different

race/sex/class identities, but the potential of their projects is subsumed by their inability to escape or even acknowledge the other cultural constructs that inform their experiments such as those of authenticity, the “real,” and intersectionality. I will argue in the next chapter that this is due to these texts’ solid location in the realm of passing. While drag elements can be seen in some of these texts (most notably Vincent’s and the makeup process of *Black. White.*), they are buried under the drive for authenticity and believability. These texts fail to challenge ideologies of essentialized identity because they fail to address the constructed nature of both their original and taken on identities. This attention to the construction of identity is one of the hallmarks of drag. These texts all follow the generic conventions that allow passing experiences to still be the experiences of an Other, even when this Other is the Self. In the next chapter I will examine how this has been done differently in the persona of Stephen Colbert who almost seamlessly combines passing and drag and flouts conventions of both to challenge to very idea of authenticity through performance and performativity.

CHAPTER FIVE

CELEBRIPUNDITICIAN: TRUTHINESS IN THE LANGUAGE OF PASSING AND DRAG

The election season of November 2010 was unique for many reasons, not least among them the media insurgence on both democratic and republican sides which hailed a new era of the blurred lines between politics, celebrity, and visual media with Fox News and MSNBC incorporating possible candidates into their pundit and expert arsenals. The Tea Party phenomenon – though (hopefully) short-lived – brought ultra-conservative and libertarian values to the forefront of politics once again, with Fox News pundit Glenn Beck at their media helm and Fox News itself hiring multiple republican contenders from Sarah Palin to Mike Huckabee to run their own shows on the “fair and balanced” cable network. These celebripunditicians⁵² mark the widening terrain of what counts as news, politics, and entertainment. The brief entrance of Donald Trump into the presidential candidate ring in April of 2011 only served to reinforce this new trend as he used public appearances to simultaneously challenge President Obama’s legitimacy and plug his recent series of “Celebrity Apprentice.” While the left has yet to mirror the Tea Party media circus that for all intents and purposes worked rather well⁵³ – at least for the 2010 midterm election and continuing on through the buildup to the presidential election of 2012 – certain other aspects with as-yet-to-be-determined effects have come to the fore: most noteworthy here is the emergence in the mainstream of influential satirists who straddle the boundaries between journalism, comedy, and punditry primarily in the persons of Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert. Their joint rally in Washington D.C. on October 30, 2010 drew over

⁵² I have coined this term in order to draw attention to the many roles played by candidates, celebrities, news personalities, and pundits. Combining the positions of celebrity, politician, and news pundit, it connotes the blurred space in which Stephen Colbert functions and satirizes the media.

⁵³ Though the belated coverage of the Occupy Movements in late 2011 seem to be similar, the fact that they had to become too big to be ignored before they were “newsworthy” can be juxtaposed to the immediate coverage of the rather small Tea Party movement which arguably was helped greatly to become bigger because of its wide coverage.

200,000 people, was followed by all the major news outlets, and was preceded that week by an exclusive interview with President Obama by Jon Stewart. Since his start at *The Daily Show* in 1996, Stewart's journey can be seen as one from newscaster drag, to passing as pundit, to quite possibly a "real" pundit. But as this chapter will show – while interesting – Stewart's transitions in terms of drag and passing follow a conventional route and are partially enabled by his partner-in-crime/self-described frenemy Stephen Colbert. While decidedly sillier than Stewart, Colbert's on-going performance on *The Colbert Report* since 2005 has opened space in which to challenge ideals of truth, reality, and authenticity. Addressing his assent in the language of drag and passing reveals how and why these new in-roads have succeeded in challenging the traditional landscape of media as well as that of authenticity, reality, an identity formation.

While Stewart's place as the outsider-within whose critiques of politics, media, and punditry has been fortified in the recent past – marking him as a serious and trusted progressive voice who is well-respected even by the likes of Fox News' Bill O'Reilly – Colbert has flouted efforts to mark him, hold him in place, or cement his position at every turn. His resolve to stay in character has lasted over seven years, and – with a few noteworthy exceptions that will be addressed throughout this chapter – this has served to make him the insider-without in such a way that, while labeled as simple comedy by some, his doublespeak (and sometimes triplespeak) challenges how media, punditry, and satire are usually consumed and used in the services of ideals of truth, reality, and authenticity. Albeit, this is definitely facilitated by his positioning within privileged categories of whiteness, maleness, heterosexuality, and Christianity, but he utilizes and critiques these positionalities with a difference such that he simultaneously enacts and challenges the power that is supposedly inherent within them.

In this chapter I will first explain the relationship between satire, news, politics, and education as it relates to the concepts of the previous chapters on journalistic passing, passing-in-drag, and authenticity. I will then delve into Colbert's unique positionality created through an untraditional passing-in-drag story that blurs the lines between genres as well as those between passing and drag to create a postmodern and/or queer persona that manages to not only blur the boundaries between real and fake, authentic and inauthentic, but show these borders and categories to be unnecessary and quite possibly completely beside the point – thus participating in an entirely different queer and/or postmodern conversation that gets outside of ideals of authenticity and singular truth all together. Expanding drag and passing in this way creates connections across supposedly disparate fields such as cultural studies, media studies, queer theory, critical race theory, and feminism. If we can connect parody, satire, mimicry, drag, passing, and performance we can draw these critiques together into a more collective front to better challenge ruling conservative ideologies about authenticity, identity, and the “real.”

Mirroring the previous chapter, I will explain how Colbert creates a different kind of education that challenges the reverence for “Truth” and “Authenticity” produced in previous examples. I will address how Colbert creates multiple selves that while in opposition to each other do not become “othered” from a primary original self. I will argue that by refusing a “reveal” that has in all other cases been required in passing stories, Colbert refuses a return to any sense of a prior reality, shifting the ground of authenticity and truth through disavowals and a commitment to the creation of knowledge that incorporates drag “realness” as “truthiness.” I will end by returning to the relationship between Colbert and Stewart and the Rally to Restore Sanity/March to Keep Fear Alive in order to place both Colbert and Stewart on a continuum of drag, passing, and punditry that shows how each supports the other in their mutual creation. By

addressing Colbert and Stewart through the theoretical optics of drag and passing, I will show how the addition of comedy and/or satire to the realms of education and politics in these particular cases does something revolutionary to the state of politics and media that cannot be dismissed as just entertainment and this shift is due in part to a different kind of utilization of tropes of passing and drag.

SATIRE, POLITICS, AND EDUCATION

Both *The Colbert Report* and *The Daily Show* function in the vicinity of “Reality TV.” Though they do not fit into the generic conventions explained in the previous chapter, they do both fit within the broad framework of live TV, “real” people, and journalism addressed within the context of journalistic passing in Chapter Four. Both Colbert and Stewart cover the big headlines of the day (as well as some of the smaller ones), comment upon them, and interview celebrities, authors, and politicians with questions about current events just as journalists and newscasters on the network and cable news shows do. But the defining characteristic that makes them different is the injection of comedy – and more specifically satire and parody – into their coverage of what is happening in the world, disavowing the fixed nature of facts and lies that is employed in traditional news. As many authors such as Amber Day (2001; 2009), Joanne Morreale (2009), and Heather Osborne-Thompson (2009) have pointed out, this use of satire and parody in comedy about news events is in itself unique to Stewart and Colbert and a few others because it is almost wholly grounded in the “real” where other satire and comedy such as *Saturday Night Live*’s “Weekend Update” and *The Onion* make up news stories. They are political in a way different from previous spoofs such as most presidential *SNL* skits which rely on impersonation of idiosyncrasies in address and mannerism that ignore the politics (Amber Day, *Satire and*

Dissent: Interventions in Contemporary Political Debate, 2009). Day argues that one critical exception that generally proves the rule is Tina Fey's *SNL* Sarah Palin impersonation which utilizes actual phrases used by the former vice presidential candidate (and one of the best example of what I've phrased a "celebripunditician") in order to critique her politics and abilities rather than just make fun of a public person as many previous examples did. Before delving into how this key difference of satire and parody used by Colbert and Stewart creates different kinds of challenges to the production of the "real" and "authenticity" than explained in the previous chapter, it is first necessary to outline the meanings, uses, and effects of satire and parody and their relation to drag, passing, and passing-in-drag.

Satire has a long history as a political form used to critique the people, policies, and ideologies in power. Serra Tinic argues that "Satire is often defined as a moralistic mode of address that critiques the missteps and hypocrisies of those who wield cultural and political authority" (2009: 168). For this reason, it is directly linked not only to politics but also "real" events. Examples such as Colbert and Stewart are unique because their satire is also linked to the 20th and 21st century phenomena of a media-saturated society and the 24-hour news cycle perpetuated on cable TV.

The lines between satire, parody, and irony often overlap in their meanings as well as their deployment, though they differ in meaningful ways as well. Their basic definitions are as follows: irony draws attention to incongruities through the use of words, phrases, or actions to imply their opposite; parody is the use of mimicry, imitation, and/or impersonation for comic effect; and satire is the use of comedic effects including irony, parody, sarcasm, and ridicule to expose and/or denounce vice and folly within what Gray et al term "historical reality" (2009: 12). While much satire (including Colbert's and Stewart's) utilizes irony and parody, much

parody and irony is not satiric. Satire's basic purpose of exposing vice and folly de facto is concerned with "the real" of society and politics. Its incorporation of parody – in effect, imitation – utilizes the "fake" to challenge the "real," exposing cracks and flaws in its façade that can serve to change it, possibly creating new and different realities. As these definitions show, satire, parody, and irony all share certain aspects and purposes with drag. Indeed, drag explanations often include references to these terms, but explanations of these terms rarely include reference to drag. This chapter uses drag and passing-in-drag on equal footing with these terms in order to reveal aspects of satire/parody that often are ignored. I argue that employing drag in relation to standard parody and passing in reference to certain kinds of impersonation work to draw ideas of queerness and the construction of reality and identity into a discussion where parody, irony, and satire tend to alone only allow critique of politics and culture that leave ruling ideologies about authenticity and the real intact. Using drag in this nontraditional way allows for a more nuanced investigation of the meanings produced by texts that are usually labeled as satire, parody, etc. while also expanding the meaning and application of drag theory through close attention to satire.

The disputed critical possibilities of satire have almost as long a history as satire itself. In recent literature on the subject of satire, authors have argued both that satire necessarily evokes critical thinking and conversely that it is politically useless because it does not spur action. In her argument in *Satire and Dissent*, Day brings to the fore Freud's oft-repeated "safety-valve" theory (also noted by Stallybrass and White in terms of carnival) that argues satire is ultimately a conservative force that releases societies' angst in a controlled entertainment environment with no "real" repercussions (2011: 11). This argument that satire is for entertainment only is echoed by Tiboris and Schaff who say that the main point of *The Colbert Report* is comedy and

therefore, though the audience laughs at the “status quo,” they are “not improving political dialogue” (2009: 129-130). And Mark Ralkowski argues that Colbert’s audience is “persuaded in theory, but not in practice. The jokes go down easy, and nothing *really* changes” (2009: 158, italics in original). Since none of these authors provide any kind of audience research to support their claims, they are dubious at best, and outright false if we consider the Colbert/Stewart March/Rally in Washington DC as well as Colbert’s political action committee that show their satire can in fact lead to direct action (this will be addressed in much more detail later in this chapter). But even if we don’t take the Rally or Super PAC into account, Day argues that many of these authors’ assertions are meant to address all satire across history and ignore the specificity of the current state of satire (2011: 12). She writes that even those directly addressing Colbert and Stewart rest “on a conceptualization of political effect as a one-to-one relationship between the consumption of satire and action. . . . They give little consideration, however, to either the slow process of shifting perceptions or the crucial work of creating a unified opposition to offending policies” (2011: 13) or indeed to the fact that Stewart and Colbert (whom all these authors are specifically writing about) blatantly make calls to action to their audience on such subjects as the 9/11 First Responders bill by Stewart (whose unrelenting attention to the matter helped keep it in the limelight and pass the House and Senate⁵⁴) as well as Colbert’s multiple cries to action that are regularly answered en masse by his “Colbert Nation.” Colbert’s calls to action might on the surface seem to reinforce the satire-as-entertainment-only/safety-valve argument because they routinely involve seemingly innocuous requests such as his green screen challenges and calls to change meanings in Wikipedia. But once one digs deeper, his actions such as the drive for Colbert Super PAC proceeded to not only mock the system that

⁵⁴ Most notably an entire show devoted to the topic on December 16, 2010, but also significant coverage on December 9 and 13, 2010, and January 4, 2011.

allows for these PACs but teach his audience about the legal ins and outs of the Supreme Court Citizens United decision and monetary political contributions as speech (this also will be addressed in more detail in the following sections). Authors such as Matthew Peirlott, Day, and Gray et al, argue that satire in general *can* and Stewart and Colbert in particular *do* foster critical thinking and a dialogic atmosphere that “invite us to reflect on the issues, and not merely take the satirist’s side” (Pierlott, 2009: 78). This critical thinking and dialogic nature place Colbert and Stewart’s satire squarely within the realm of the educational such that they do “what the straight news cannot, which is stage an ongoing dialogue with itself. ... parodic news shows are dialogic, playing multiple voices against each other” (Pierlott, 73-74). The dialogue and critical thinking spurred by satire is pushed further by the incorporation of elements of drag and passing as well as the application of theories about them. Addressing Colbert as pundit passing-in-drag draws critiques not only of politics and media into discussion but challenges their constructions as well. K. Bradford writes of drag kings, “the tools of drag (the accoutrements, the body language, the attitudes) are the very ‘flaws’ of the straight gender system, and the performance of drag proves what a farce that system is” (2002: 25). This is almost identical to arguments about the function of satire, but the difference that bringing drag into the conversation adds is to illuminate not only that the system is a farce, but that this farce has no origin, no underlying truth, is entirely constructed and constantly reinforced, but thus also constantly open to attack and challenges. Applying drag outside of gender creates a space in which to critique not only the systems of gender but the systems of truth an authenticity that overall direct our socio-cultural situation. Ellen Weinauer writes that “in drag, the very notions of truth and illusion are caught up in an intimate and endlessly mirroring relation” (1996: 37). Where satire theory argues that it invites dialogue and reflection on issues, applying theories about drag and passing shifts this dialogue

and reflection back on itself to reveal the way truth and illusion are always already working together to construct the systems of reality in which the issues satire critiques function.

Stewart and Colbert are uniquely situated as satirists not only of politics but of the media as well. Playing against what many term the “straight news”, Colbert and Stewart parody and satirize not only news but news coverage and journalism in a way that makes them, as Day terms it in her work “not not newscasters”⁵⁵. Indeed, Colbert won a Peabody Award in 2007 and Jon Stewart and *The Daily Show* have won multiple Television Critics Association awards for “Outstanding Achievement in News and Information,” two Peabody Awards for their election coverage (which Colbert took part in), and Stewart was named one of *Time* magazine’s 100 most influential people in 2005. Their shows function in much the same way as journalism in general does (as discussed in the previous chapter) as an educational form. As a much (mis)quoted Pew Research Center Survey shows, a large percentage of 18-to-29-year-olds regularly learned something from these comedy news shows. This eventually became – ironically enough – fodder for such “real” news personas as Bill O’Reilly who regularly cited the survey as proving young people chose *The Daily Show* as their preferred election news source (Geoff Boucher, “Television and Radio: Stewart. Comedy Central Sign Deal,” *LA Times* 16 Feb 2005, E1). Because of their dialogic form Stewart and Colbert’s satiric journalism doesn’t just serve to educate about facts, but inspire critical thinking about the facts one learns either on the “real” news or through Stewart and Colbert’s coverage. The Pew Research Center study as well as a National Annenberg Election Survey used by O’Reilly and others to malign the way youth “learn” about politics, also “suggest *Daily Show* viewers, in particular, are a more politically knowledgeable bunch than nonwatchers” (Gray et al 7). While these series function in a similar

⁵⁵ A drag corollary can be seen here with Chapter Three on Divine whose roles could be termed “not not female.”

way to journalism to inform viewers, the critical thinking their satire inspires is a different kind of education. Gray et al argue that “Satire’s lessons often enable people – as an audience, a community, a polity – to recognize the naked emperor and, through their laughter, begin to see realities that have been obscured” (16-17). And Henry Jenkins argues that these shows even “foster a kind of literacy, teaching viewers to ask skeptical questions about core political values and the rhetorical process that embody them” (2009: 202). Satire within this journalistic context not only educates viewers about what is happening (as journalism does) but also how to think critically about what is happening. *The Colbert Report* in particular is able to make this critical dialogic step partially because it is situated in a murky postmodern zone between genres where it questions not only the news media but the reality and authenticity on which the genre depends through deployment of passing-in-drag that draws attention to the construction of these as well as the possibility of deconstructing them.

POSTMODERN BOUNDARY PLAY

The Daily Show and *The Colbert Report* emerged in a very particular historical moment and the convergence in the contemporary time of what Steven Best and Douglas Kellner term the “postmodern mediascape” where “boundaries between information and entertainment, images and politics, implode. ... The result is what has been called ‘infotainment’ in which boundaries between information and entertainment collapse” (1991: 120) and the advent of cable television which created space for “narrowcasting” of everything from 24-hour news stations, networks devoted entirely to cooking, animal channels, and, of course, an entire channel devoted to comedy: Comedy Central on which both *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* air. The postmodern mediascape Best and Kellner define has infiltrated almost all of the above

narrowcasting channels which seek to give you the news with flashy graphics and emotive music; teach you a new recipe while you root for your favorite chef in an elimination competition; terrify you with images of alligator attacks while also telling you where these gators live, what they eat, how big they get, etc; and, on Comedy Central, breach the boundaries between news and comedy, advertising and contempt for it, and “real” and “fake” news four times a weeks on *The Colbert Report* and *The Daily Show*. I will argue throughout this chapter that the conscious play between these categories and in particular Colbert’s multiple opposing performative selves as well as his almost constant refusal to delineate between them has made queer and/or postmodern inroads in the purpose, outcome, and possibilities of combinatory passing and drag to a mainstream audience in ways not seen before (though hinted at in the likes of Divine), bringing to the fore and changing the focus of critiques of identity, reality, and authenticity to one of obliterating them and their power and making a new critical dialogue that can function in different realms of performativity and multiple changing selves, realities, and becomings rather beings.

The “fake” news genre of comedy has a long history in television dating back to variety shows in the ’50s and ’60s, as well as throughout *Saturday Night Live*’s tenure since the 1970s. But multiple authors in the edited volumes *Satire TV: Politics and Comedy in the Post-Network Era* and *Stephen Colbert and Philosophy* argue that Colbert and Stewart’s shows do something different. Where their predecessors focused on impersonations and made-up headlines loosely based on “real” news, Colbert and Stewart deliver satiric commentary on the “real” news itself, buffered by parody of the media (which also functions as satiric commentary on the medium as well). Colbert and, to a certain extent, Stewart create a hybrid of the fake and the real, reality and mimicry (Day 57). I argue that Colbert is passing-in-drag rather than impersonation because he

employs elements of passing and drag not used in impersonation such as hyperbole and excess (drag) and deployment of his passing self to enact an ongoing story within “reality” that refuses to let itself be labeled as “fake” as impersonation often does.

In alignment with the quote from Best and Kellner used above determining a postmodern turn of “infotainment” seen in “straight” news, Stewart and Colbert participate in this trend by embracing and reformulating it, and they are perhaps enabled by its space of slippage and the blurring of genres. Joanne Morreale defines *The Daily Show* as “part talk show, news, and comedy. In a larger sense, it exemplifies the merging of politics, entertainment, news, and marketing in contemporary American culture” (104). Both Colbert and Stewart’s shows do exemplify this merging of genres, but they are also always simultaneously critiquing them. A similar effect has been seen in other Comedy Central ventures where there is a push for self-reflexive action that does something while also mocking what is being done. Day calls attention to Sarah Silverman’s (another comedian with a show on Comedy Central) “Great Shlep” campaign to get young liberal Jews to call their grandparents in the battleground state of Florida and talk to them about voting for Obama in the 2008 election. Day writes: “What is particularly interesting about the piece is that it simultaneously acts as a parody of typical advocacy advertisements while also earnestly functioning as one of these ads itself” (2011: 34). This is mirrored in the Rally to Restore Sanity/March to Keep Fear Alive put on by Stewart and Colbert. At this rally, the point was multifaceted: to bring moderates together, mock Glenn Beck’s Restoring Honor Rally that took place earlier that year, reveal the ridiculousness of the media’s culture of fear, boost Comedy Central’s ratings and advertisement revenue, and put on an entertaining show. The combination of Stewart’s sanity plea and Colbert’s push for fear worked to play both straight and satiric angles simultaneously.

The week of the rally, which featured a lengthy serious speech from Stewart at the end of the rally as well as a special *Daily Show* in DC featuring an interview with President Obama, can be marked as the turning point for Stewart from newscaster drag to “real” pundit who has a “real” effect on mainstream political discourse. Stewart’s transition is meaningful and interesting in itself but it also mirrors a traditional route between real and fake. His career is the example that refutes attempts to label satire as entertainment only with no “real” effects, but in a discussion of the construction of identity and authenticity he is much less interesting than Colbert, who’s refusal to participate in this reification of a proper way to be a pundit or when and where it’s “appropriate” to be one’s “real” self marks a deeper critique not only of news and media but their audiences, the ideal of reality itself, and the possibilities presented by creating an alternate one. But Colbert’s place of difference is of course enabled by his predecessor – the two of them play against one another such that each reinforces the other’s critique, performance, and legitimacy. I will argue in the following pages that Colbert does this through a new kind of deployment of a combinatory passing and drag.

The hybridization of real/fake has been partially enabled by technological advances which make it much easier to daily surf the offerings of the news networks, and reproduce clips in montage form. So while Colbert and Stewart are routinely lumped into the concept of “fake” news, in reality they are actually re-airing the “real” news broadcasts of “respected” sources, with major re-editing – thus creating an atmosphere where the “real” news is dissected and in many cases revealed as fake through new juxtapositions ignored by “real” news. This is seen when Colbert or Stewart use old and new footage together to reveal a governmental figure denying he ever made a particular remark and immediately following it with footage of him saying exactly the words he has just denied. The fact that the “real” news shows don’t do this

reveals glaring omissions and complicity on their part. Day comments on this construction of “real” versus “fake” news when she writes, “this is not to overlook the fact that the real officials at the press conference are also, in a sense, actors playing their roles, wearing the appropriate wardrobe, speaking in the expected tone of voice, and often mouthing memorized (or teleprompted) lines that have been scripted for them. Real most certainly does not refer to an essential authenticity or lack of artifice. Rather, it is precisely the importation of the real or nonfictional into the mimetic frame of these parodic programs that can serve to call attention to the way in which the real is itself constructed” (45). Seeing Colbert as passing-in-drag brings this to the forefront and helps flesh out its function. Elements of passing create an aura of believability that is then torn down by the drag apparatus that is simultaneously deployed. Passing introduces the “real” as a technique that can be exploited and drag explicitly deconstructs this technique. Drag performance recycles elements of supposedly “real” and objective identity to excess in order to draw attention to their construction and repetition and passing used simultaneously creates an aura of believability that is constantly being torn down even as it is always already being built up. The two used together, as Colbert does, creates a constant reinvention of the “real” that is fake, news that is comedy, and reality that cannot be linked to an authentic singular identification system.

PARODY AND PASSING-IN-DRAG

There are at least four books devoted almost entirely to the interrogation, interpretation, and critique of Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert (*Stephen Colbert and Philosophy*, *The Daily Show and Philosophy*, *Satire and Dissent*, and *Satire TV: Politics and Comedy in the Post-Network Era*), but not one places either Colbert or Stewart in the context of drag or passing. This

is excused by the fact that all these sources take either philosophy, television, or satire as their theoretical basis, but the lack of connection between parody and drag, as explicated by Judith Butler, in these sources leaves broad holes in the arguments and resultant conclusions. I will here try to rectify this by interrogating Colbert within the context of passing and drag in order to illuminate more about Colbert and the challenges to modern ideologies of reality and authenticity he makes by looking at him through the lens of passing and drag, but also to reveal new possibilities for passing and drag theory and their combination by critiquing and modifying them through the lens of Colbert and satire.

Throughout this dissertation parody has been couched in terms of Butler's famous notion of gender parody and performativity. She writes:

Parody by itself is not subversive, and there must be a way to understand what makes certain kinds of parodic repetitions effectively disruptive, truly troubling, and which repetitions become domesticated and recirculated as instruments of cultural hegemony. A typology of actions would clearly not suffice, for parodic displacement, indeed, parodic laughter, depends on a context and reception in which subversive confusions can be fostered. What performance where will invert the inner/outer distinction and compel a radical rethinking of the psychological presuppositions of gender identity and sexuality? (1990: 176-177).

Butler argues that gender drag is gender parody, and that only certain kinds of parody challenge and disrupt standard ideals and notions of gender and sex. Appropriating her concept of drag/parody in the political realm yields a corollary political parody as political drag that, through application of drag theory to this field of comedy not typically seen as drag, reveals inversions and ideological challenges not otherwise seen in the concepts not only of satire, but also of drag and passing and their possibilities. The something special she requires "in which subversive confusions can be fostered" is provided by satire in the political realm. Just as not all gender parody is subversive, not all mainstream parody is either. But I argue here the particular combination of irony, parody, and satire performed by Colbert (and to some extent Stewart)

creates this political space through tropes of passing and drag. But it is Colbert in particular who not only creates subversion through satire and parody but effectively changes the conversation about reality and authenticity through his uniquely different deployment of drag and passing.

While authors such as Day, Tiboris and Schaff, Brad Frazier (2009), Geoffrey Baym (2009), and others nonchalantly point to Colbert's "obvious" (Day) satiric personage – this was definitely not always the case. Indeed, while Colbert's persona is routinely referenced as an "obvious" parody of conservative "blowhard" pundits, when Colbert first came on the air what he was doing was not as clear as these authors seem to think in hindsight. In "The Irony of Satire: Political Ideology and the Motivation to See What You Want to See," Heather L. LaMarre, Kiristen D. Landreville, and Michael A. Beam (2009) did an empirical study of "biased processing" using clips from *The Colbert Report* on self-described liberals and conservatives in 2006. Their results showed numerically that "both liberals and conservatives recognized the comedy, but see something totally different in terms of intended message and source. ... There are marked differences in who conservatives and liberals perceive as joke targets and how they perceive Colbert's political affiliation, ideology, and attitudes" (226). Their study showed that conservatives saw Colbert as sincere where liberals did not. Both saw him as funny, but thought he was not making fun of them⁵⁶. This could be seen as situating him within Amy Robinson's triangular passing matrix such that he passes to a "dupe" (conservative viewers) and an "in-group clairvoyant" sees drag (here, liberals seeing satire of conservatives). However it is also possible that particularly the early episodes just did not make it clear whom Colbert was making fun of.

This was made more difficult to decipher by Colbert's refusal to break character – something

⁵⁶ It is important to note, however, that this study was not based on long-time fans or viewers of the show, but a random sampling of college students who may or may not have routinely watched *The Colbert Report* and were shown clips in a clinical setting which they were asked to respond to. Informally, though, it is important to note that this viewer at least was definitely skeptical watching the first episodes of the show of whom Colbert was "really" targeting in his jokes.

that has now become more of a running joke but at the time of his first years doing the show simply made it near impossible to “tell” who the “real” Colbert was – was he acting a part or was he “really” the conservative counterpart to Stewart’s liberal bent. Colbert did, at least for a time, pass as a conservative pundit (at least to some), and his commitment to pass is quite possibly one of the most impressive for a public figure. To this day there are only a couple of instances in which Colbert has broken character (in a Charlie Rose interview done almost entirely out of character and a couple popular magazine articles where he briefly breaks character) – and one of these instances was *not* when Colbert testified before Congress on illegal immigrant labor practices nor when he attempted to form a “real” PAC.

It must be noted that his upper-class, white, straight, male, identity makes this pass one that does not involve any sense of danger as many other passes do. Gayle Wald writes in “‘A Most Disagreeable Mirror’: Reflections on White Identity in *Black Like Me*” that “much of the apprehension around white appropriations of qualities romantically ascribed to blacks descends from the fact that white people (especially white men) traditionally have enjoyed a greater liberty than others to play with racial identities and *to do so in safety, without permanent loss or costs*” (162, my emphasis added). This is echoed by Butler in *Bodies that Matter* when she writes that “Willi Ninja can pass as straight; his voguing becomes foregrounded in her video productions with Madonna et al., and he achieves post-legendary status on an international scale. There is passing and then there is passing and it is – as we used to say – ‘no accident’ that Willi Ninja ascends and Venus Xtravaganza dies” (130). A very important part of the Colbert story is his whiteness and maleness and the safety afforded him not only by this but also by the media situation he functions in. It is, as Butler points out, no accident that it is a straight, white, Christian (Catholic) male who is allowed to mimic, mock, and sometimes pass within the

conservative media and political establishment as well as the whole of modern identificatory systems of authentication, truth, and reality. But taking the danger out of passing here may serve to illuminate other possibilities for a passing story in the postmodern era. And Colbert does not shy away from the privileges his whiteness, maleness, heterosexuality, or wealth affords him, using them and his position to draw attention to issues of race, class, gender, and sexuality in complex ways.

MIMICRY, PUNDIT TRUTHINESS, AND DRAG REALNESS

Authors including Day and Jeffrey P. Jones (2009) link Colbert and Stewart with the idea of mimicry based entirely in the realm of imitation but none bring up postcolonial theorist Homi Bhabha's work on the matter, which here proves crucial to an understanding of Colbert in particular as an ambivalent figure. Day references Tracy Davis' definition of mimesis within theatre: "a mimetic act refers to an ideal 'real' which can never quite be successfully invoked: theatre is doomed (or blessed) by this failure'" (2011: 57). But Bhabha's theory of mimicry is crucial to an understanding of the kind of mimicry that Colbert performs. Karen McCarthy Brown uses Bhabha's theory in her article "Mimesis in the Face of Fear" in an edited volume on passing:

Bhabha suggests that 'colonial mimicry is the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, *as a subject of difference that is almost the same, but not quite.*['] He further explains that 'the discourse of mimicry is constructed around an *ambivalence*; in order to be effective, mimicry must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference. ... It is in the area of slippage that the colonized found space for resistance. Where there is slippage, there also exist possibilities for irony, satire, and other forms of social leveraging. (2001: 217-218)

Where Stewart can be squarely located in the realm of liberal/progressive politics and indeed has been seen to lend authenticity to his guests, Colbert is much more slippery and in effect refutes

any permanent marking of his meanings. Just as Butler marks drag parody as inherently ambivalent and Bhabha labels mimicry in a similar way, Colbert's performative drag and passing has this same ambivalent effect – and he goes further than any before him to refuse to end this ambivalence – the ambivalence inherent in his never-ending performance is never-ending itself.

The very first “The Wørd” segment aired on the first episode of *The Colbert Report*⁵⁷.

Touted by Colbert in the Charlie Rose interview as the “thesis” of the series, Truthiness is truth you know/feel through your heart and your gut rather than through facts and information. Colbert endorses this practice and says, “The truthiness is, anyone can read then news to you, I promise to feel the news at you.” Colbert says of “Truthiness” in this first episode:

Now I'm sure some of the word police, the “wordinistas” over at Webster's are gonna say “hey, that's not a word.” Well anybody who knows me knows that I'm no fan of dictionaries or reference books. They're elitist, [-Reference Books High and Mighty] constantly telling us what is or isn't true, or what did or didn't happen, who's Britannica to tell me the Panama Canal was finished in 1914? If I want to say it happened in 1941, that's my right. I don't trust books. They're all fact, no heart. And that's exactly what's pulling our country apart today. (October 17, 2005)

Colbert says himself that the powers that be will say Truthiness is not a word, and it wasn't.....until it was named Merriam-Webster's Word of the Year and added to dictionaries in 2006. In a tongue-in-cheek segment on a satirical show, “truthiness” was coined on the very basis that it was not a word, that it didn't need to be “real” or “true” in order to be meaningful – and then it became a “real” word later that year. Though, obviously, this is how most words enter modern lexicon – increased usage begets legitimacy and eventually (if used enough) it enters official records as a “real” word – “truthiness” is unique in that was initially presented as NOT a “real” word, as not needing to be a “real” word, as dependent only on one person's usage to

⁵⁷ “The Wørd” segments appear periodically on the show and consist of a split-screen with Colbert speaking on the left side of the screen and under the heading “The Wørd” on the right side commentary in writing and/or pictures is given that juxtaposes and/or refutes what Colbert is saying. In this chapter when addressing this segment I have placed the written parts in brackets at the points in Colbert monologue at which they appear on-screen.

become meaningful (and that meaningfulness itself dependent on the double-speak of satire). Its creation announces unbegrudgingly that it is a fake, acknowledged as being made up for the sake of making it up, and it has become real, sanctioned, and meaningful.

In Colbert's interview space on the set, the mantle above the fireplace sports the Latin phrase "Videri Quam Esse." This is a play on the motto of North Carolina (as well as many schools, companies, and sports teams): "esse quam videri" means "To be, rather than to seem to be" (Wikipedia) and is also translated as "to be, rather than seem" (http://www.netstate.com/states/mottoes/nc_motto.htm). Thus, Colbert's fireplace motto translates as "to seem, rather than be." This fits almost too perfectly in with the literature on both passing and drag and mirrors in a way an assertion by drag queen RuPaul in *Elle Magazine* (quoted in Ellen Weinauer's article "'A Most Respectable Looking Gentleman'"): "In a 1992 *Elle* article entitled 'Life's a Drag,' performance artist RuPaul asserted: 'The truth is that I'm a man. The illusion is I look like a woman. But the illusion is truer'" (1996: 33). Weinauer goes on to parse RuPaul's statement and explain:

RuPaul suggests that in drag, the very notions of truth and illusion are caught up in an intimate and endlessly mirroring relation. ... in asserting that the illusion of appearing like a woman is truer than the truth of being a man, she puts the ostensibly discrete categories of "man" and "woman" into play. RuPaul denaturalizes the naturalized essences called *sex* and *gender*, giving the lie to the notion that gender identity is a prediscursive truth grounded in clearly legible bodies. (37)

While drag traditionally is about challenging gender (and as explicated in Chapter One, sometime racial) norms, expanding how we see its implementation here reveals how, just as RuPaul sees drag as a possible avenue through which an illusion can be "truer," Colbert's drag places seeming over being in such a way that what "is" or is "real" is not important, but that an illusion can create new truths, different realities, and illuminates the postmodern multiplicities of

realities while also mocking this postmodern ideal as well – calling into question not only truth, the real, and authenticity, but their supposed opposites and alternatives as well.

Many drag theorists address the concept of drag “realness” and its relation to “the real,” authenticity, and performance. José Muñoz (1999) writes of the performative mimesis that is “realness,” Butler addresses “realness” as “the ability to compel belief, to produce the naturalized effect” (1993: 129) of gender, and Halberstam argues it is a form of active disidentification reliant on but also challenging to notions of authenticity and the real (1998: 248). Using “realness” to interrogate Colbert’s motto, overall performance, and the show’s “truthiness” thesis reveals the unique effects that the show can have on the construction of authenticity and reality. “Realness,” like “truthiness,” draws attention to construction of the real (or of Truth) by performing this originary ideal with a difference. By actively reproducing the real of gender in an alternative way, by consciously performing what is ideologically seen as innate or inherent, realness marks the real as lacking the originary nature it is assumed to have. Colbert’s truthiness does the same thing for truth. “Truthiness” marks Truth as constructable and malleable by creating alternatives to Truth that neither oppose nor assimilate the meaning and usages of Truth while drawing attention to how Truth’s objectivity is produced uncritically in mainstream culture. The real and the fake converge – what seems replaces what “is” as the marker of reality. “To be” is objective, singular. “To seem” has so many more possibilities, making truth and reality have the possibility of multiplicity. To have an illusion that is “truer,” as RuPaul says, is to open up the field of the real to alternatives to objective singular reality and draw attention to its construction. Colbert’s illusion, his drive to seem rather than be, works within this alternate reality of “realness” to draw attention to the construction of Truth in the same way that “realness” challenges and denaturalizes the real by utilizing and tweaking its

supposed inherent original or natural state in order to mark the real as just as constructed and performed as “realness.” Truthiness functions to mark “Truth” in mainstream media as just as actively produced, subjective, and multiple as the Truthiness Colbert uses to critique it.

Truthiness, like realness, draws the conversation away from the naturalized categories that depend on authenticity and the singular “real” so that a new dialogue outside of debates about authenticity that instead focusses on multiplicities and the performative quality of ideological constructions of identity and reality can begin.

QUEER PUNDITRY

Colbert is quick to give credit to “Papa Bear” Bill O’Reilly whom (in a 2007 interview on O’Reilly’s Fox News show) he says he “emulates” not “imitates” O’Reilly (because if he was imitating he would be required to pay royalties). This emulation places his passage not as O’Reilly, but as an O’Reilly emulator, another conservative pundit. This emulation is seamless at many points and exemplified by the frequent juxtapositions on *The Colbert Report* that place O’Reilly and Colbert in split-screen play with each other that shows their similarities. Though it is possible that due to his rising popularity Colbert no longer has the ability to actually pass as a conservative pundit, he refuses to admit it and continues to be in character at (almost) all times – indeed using this opportunity to possibly take advantage of the drag aspects of his shtick in order to push his critique even further. While Colbert may no longer pass as a conservative pundit, he is still using this persona to blur the lines between what is “fake” and what is “real,” using his position to muddle these lines through multiple competing personas on his show as well as constantly traversing the line between satire and reality in such stunts as his Super PAC formation that is at once satire and a “real” PAC.

While the ship of Colbert's passing may have sailed (of course with no acknowledgement by the man himself who is as much a conservative pundit as he ever was), his persona may be seen as staunchly situated in what can be termed "pundit passing-in-drag," replete with requisite drag props and hyperbole and – above all else – the necessary drag audience akin to that of Divine that allows for his drag to be read at points as passing (this in particular will be addressed much more later). His opening credits are a case in point – "parodying" O'Reilly and other "self-important" pundit show intros in what can definitely be seen as a drag format with added excess to the point of ridiculousness.

Just as drag queens reveal the artificiality of femininity by taking it to its extreme conclusion of giant fake eyelashes and evening gowns, Colbert's intro sequence reveals the artificiality of patriotism and 'merican values. In the first seasons this sequence consisted of a giant screeching eagle, much flag-waving, and powerful (though not always "real") words surrounding Colbert as he rips his glasses off and glares at the camera with one raised eyebrow in what is now his trademark look. This has evolved and expanding into a CGI star-spangled eagle that swoops across the screen as he runs forward surrounded by floating words, grabs a giant flag with both hands, leaps with what can only be described as an open-mouthed warrior battle-face to transcend over whatever the word of the month is (in April/May 2011 it was "word hurdler")⁵⁸ to land on one knee, planting the flag into a Colbert Official Seal that appears under him as columns emerge around him and he rises to a standing position as the camera shoots him

⁵⁸ Usually the multiple words around him don't change throughout a season but the one he leaps over changes monthly, weekly, or daily. These season words have included: HELL-BENT, GERRY-MANDERING, CARNIVOROUS, GRITTY, BIGNESS, CHOCKSURE, CRITICALY-ACCLAIMED (sic), INTEGRITY, BOLD, SPONSORED, HETEROSAPIEN, TALLISH, STRONG, STAR-SPANGLED, HIGH-FRUCTOSE, INDEPENDENT, FEARLESS, SANTIFIED. And the hurdled words have included: CINCO DE ME-O, LET FEARDOM RING, FEARNIX RISING, BATTER-FRIED, LAD LIBERTY, DOWNTRICKLER, THANKSTAKING, CHRISTMUST, VAN GOGH-GETTER, YAY-HOLE, STRONG SWIMMER, PACMAN, #HASHTAG, #ivebeenhacked, #iwasnthacked, YOUR AD HERE, TIGHTY RIGHTY, FREEBERTY, FROM C TO SILENT T, DIFFERENCE MAKER, UPTRODDEN.

from a low angle. Then the aforementioned eagle swoops back in with red, white, and blue stars raining from its wings and, head-on to the camera, it screeches and we enter the Colbert studio through its mouth. By taking the common themes of right-wing pundit shows (as well as cable news in general) and pushing them to the point of excess, Colbert here (and in many other cases) participates in what can be seen as “queering” the genre, or creating a campy drag of it where all the “props” are used to such a degree that they reveal their own construction. In a way similar to Divine’s high forehead and exaggerated eyebrows, Colbert’s display of patriotism through the (over)use of its symbols reveals the disconnect in the correlation of patriotism and eagles or flags, or perhaps that between a person’s patriotism and whether or not they wear a flag pin. Colbert’s exaggerated use of the props of patriotism and conservatism (also often linked in popular discourse) as well as media (such as his multiple parodies of news media’s use of technology for the sake of technology in his November 2010 Action Midterm Outcome Prediction Verifier 2010 5400 and the January 2011 Critique-a-Tron 7600 and Mantle Top Honor Zone 5400) uses their cultural currency while also subverting it⁵⁹. As Gust A. Yep and John P. Elia argue, queering, and in particular, camp as a form of queering, “attempts to make the familiar into something unfamiliar and strange so that analysis can reveal underlying relations of power” (2007: 30). Though many (as shown in Chapter One) argue that straight appropriation of camp is unproductive or not subversive because it depoliticizes it, I argue that Colbert may be an exception, because though he is straight, his brand of camp actually fits well within the traditional drag norms but with a twist – queering heterosexuality through his addresses to the “threat” of gay culture. In his re-occurring segment “Threat Down” (as well as

⁵⁹ A corollary can be seen here with the technological focus of journalistic passing texts addressed in Chapter 3 – with a difference of course. Where many of the texts in Chapter 3 were shown to rely on technology as a crutch that enabled passing while placating ideological fears about the possibility of changing identities, Colbert’s use of technology reveals the hyperbolic overuse and uselessness of it as it is usually deployed in media – including in such spaces as those addressed in Chapter 3.

in many other segments such as his “Fear For All” before the rally) he often points to the multiple things trying to turn him gay in such a way that flips the usual conservative argument and implies the possibility of fluid sexuality (and in particular HIS fluid sexuality) in which these “threats” are really threats from within the conservative mind trying to fight homosexual tendencies. It is important to note that Colbert does not do this in a way that vilifies homosexuality but rather embraces this fluidity and queers heterosexuality by using what can be seen as camp to imply there is no threat except the one created by ignoring this fluidity. For example, in a June 19, 2006, special Gay Pride Week “Threat Down” segment labeled “The Homo-Sexy Edition,” Colbert says “I am at the top of the homosexual agenda’s list of people they’re trying to make gay. Oh, I would be a notch in their belt.” This last phrase sounds both like they are trying to make him a notch in their “turning-people-gay” belt but also that he *would* in fact be “turned.” After listing the #5 and #4 threats (“Gay Superheroes” and “Cirque Du Soleil”) he goes on to say threat #3 is the World Cup’s “fit and well-muscled” players before turning to the 2(3) biggest threats to his heterosexuality:

Stop being so fit world cup players, that’s not how we do it in American. This is what athletes are supposed to look like [pictures of fat golf, baseball, and football players]. That summons up no unwanted feelings. Threat number two: the ex-gay movement. Now I know what you’re thinking, organizations like Exodus International who tell gays that Jesus cures homosexuality are heroes, and they are – but only when they are talking to gays. As a straight man, I should never be told that same-sex attraction can be cured. Because if it can, what’s stopping me from taking a dip in that end of the pool? The hot, salty end. And then when I’ve had enough, I can just read Leviticus and presto [snaps fingers] I’m cured. The idea that it’s temporary makes it all too tempting. The only thing holding me back is that I don’t desire men. Which brings me to threat number one: desirable men. Ok, for the sake of argument, let’s say there’s a gun to my head and I gotta pick somebody. I’ll say it, George Clooney, Denzel Washington, and Johnny Depp. Ok that’s three. I’ll throw in a fourth, a young Sean Connery. Lord help me if they ever build a time machine. But the worst offender? Brad Pitt. Specifically from the movie *Fight Club*. Look at these abs. that is beyond washboard. You could grate Reggiano Parmegian on that stomach. I have thrown out five copies of that DVD. But every Friday night somehow it’s back in my player. Congress, if you want to preserve marriage you will ban that movie! And make Brad put on some weight. I’m not gay, but come on, I’m

human. And the other number one threat? Bears. [picture of gay man “bear” appears on screen].

The homosexual agenda’s biggest efforts to turn Colbert gay...is straight culture and Colbert’s own desires. His performance here also fits as conservative pundit drag – exaggerating their overblown arguments to show how they are in fact entirely fabricated themselves. The connection here and in many other places of gayness and Colbert’s own fluid sexuality links it directly to gay camp and drag, almost like paying homage to the history of camp and drag within gay culture that Colbert is now using in a different way. Utilizing the hyperbole of drag and camp through satire, Colbert in fact shows that the only threat to his heterosexuality is other aspects of his sexuality.

QUEERING POSTMODERN PLAY: COLBERT’S DRAG AUDIENCE AND SIMULATING THE REAL

Colbert does not fit squarely into either passing or drag. Just as Colbert’s show lies in murky waters between real and fake, truth and truthiness, Colbert himself is in constant flux in the hazy area between passing and drag – using both opportunistically. The brilliance of his never-ending performance is that he is simultaneously both, but in a way that makes new inroads into their usage and possible results. Although the time may have passed in which Colbert actually passed, he refuses to drop the act or acknowledge a traditional “reveal” of the pass. Though there is much debate about whether or not we are in a postmodern moment, the ideas espoused about postmodernity by many theorists help to illuminate the workings of Colbert’s identity and, vice versa, Colbert’s performance and identity may be seen as proving the postmodern moment itself as well. Katrin Sieg writes of the passing-drag combo: “The coexistence of the constitutive elements of passing and drag, one concealing the act of

impersonation, the other foregrounding it, not only registers the expectation that someone will not get the joke but also stresses that the joke is contingent on someone's not getting it" (2002: 230). In this section I will argue that it is Colbert's use of the carnivalesque, and in particular the carnival participatory audience (or drag audience) that creates his specific postmodern hybridity of passing and drag as well as real and fake: ideals that are also turned topsy turvy by his Super PAC and his murky relationship with both corporate and "fake" product placements and endorsements, both of which will be addressed in the next sections.

The idea of "postmodernity" helps one to understand Colbert and his drag/carnival audience, and his drag audience enables the creation of his postmodern moment. *The Colbert Report* itself began in an interesting postmodern way: there was no show, Colbert – a correspondent for *The Daily Show* for five years – recorded and aired promo ads for a fake show called "*The Colbert Report*" on *The Daily Show*. It wasn't until after these promo ads aired that there was any discussion of actually creating the show. In one of the few instances where Colbert has broken character, Charlie Rose interviewed him in 2006 and Colbert said:

well, uh, *this is the only show I think that ever started as a promo for itself. We did something on The Daily Show called The Colbert Report, and it was a fake advertisement for a show that didn't exist.* And it was me trying to ape the "who is loudest is rightest" idea of late night cable news, or primetime cable news. And we just loved doing them, we did four or five of these bumpers essentially for the show ... he [Jon Stewart] was going to develop a show for Comedy Central, and Comedy Central wanted to know if I wanted to do a show and Ben Carlin, who was also working with Jon on *The Daily Show*, went through and said let's create this show together, and we can't think of a better idea than those bumpers. *So let's just make that real. Let's take the advertisement and make it actually advertise something.* (italics added)

An almost uncanny realization of Baudrillard's argument that models in the postmodern world precede the real – "A single *model*, whose efficacy is immediate, simultaneously generates the message, the medium, and the 'real.'" (82, italics in original), there is no difference between simulation and the real – *The Colbert Report* did not become "real" and there was no intention of

making it “real” until after a model was devised and aired. Fake advertisement for a fake show preceded the real and the real was based on the preceding model. Baudrillard also writes that “The field opened is that of simulation in the cybernetic sense, that is, of the manipulation of these models at every level (scenarios, the setting up of simulated situations, etc.) but then *nothing distinguishes this operation from the operation itself and the gestation of the real: there is no more fiction*” (122, italics in original). It may be a leap of faith to argue that Colbert has opened a postmodern field that makes fact and fiction indistinguishable, but while he probably has not single-handedly started a postmodern revolution, his show has opened some inroads to fantasize about what this field of simulation may look like: if there is no difference between a fake advertisement and the real show that precipitates after the fact, and the model precedes the actuality, how do we mark which is the “authentic” original starting point? The fake advertisement enacts the idea of a copy with no original a la Butler and performativity. If *The Colbert Report* starts with a promo for a show no one had any intention of creating at the time, the originary moment rests in a fiction and fact and fiction, fake and real, become indistinguishable and unimportant markers of realities.

While postmodern theory is itself highly contested and debated, some of the main ideas of it are crucial to an understanding of Colbert and his show. And there is a direct connection often ignored between postmodern theory’s attachment to recycling, appearances, and simulation and similar enactments and purposes of drag and camp. Celeste Olalquiaga writes that:

postmodernism successfully empties all present and former referential meanings (those that allude to a permanent and unequivocal signification), *fracturing the coherence of the discourses that contained them* (history, religion, science, etc.). ... *The challenge lies in how to take advantage of this suspension of disbelief in order to elicit an entirely different set of meaningful formations.* ... The breaking down of traditional referentiality is manifested in what have become the *postmodern trademarks, namely quotation, recycling, pastiche, and simulation.* These are indicative not only of *the loss of conventional boundaries between production and consumption, but also of an*

unprecedented mediation in our mode of consuming, which converts all elements of experience into mobile texts that can be transformed at random. (2001: 593, italics added).

While author Baym argues that Colbert in effect is against these postmodern ideals by saying his satire reinforces modernism through parodying the postmodern and actually returns to the idea of a higher, singular truth, I would beg to differ. Colbert's particular form of satire with its incorporation of a drag audience fits more squarely within Olalquiaga's argument about postmodernism. What she labels as postmodern trademarks are also trademarks of camp and drag and the loss of conventional boundaries between production and consumption is specifically enacted for Colbert by his audience.

The Colbert Nation functions as a drag audience, taking advantage of the suspension of disbelief in order to enact a fracture not only of the boundary between production and consumption but of traditional discourses of media, journalism, and the assumed authentic nature of both. While Colbert may be satirizing the politics of the right, his form of satire also works to disrupt "the coherence" of conservative discourse. He often does this through hyperbole (as well as other forms including those in the quote above such as recycling and simulation) – taking arguments to *his* "logical" conclusion that follows the vein of an (usually conservative) interviewee's own logic and argument. For example, in discussing the Federal Reserve with Libertarian Ron Paul, Colbert argues for the disbanding of the Reserve when Paul says the constitution did not allow for it to exist to begin with: "I think we should stop printing money altogether. ... we gotta go back to what the founding fathers intended which is we all wear necklaces of beads like Club Med and you snap off what you need to pay for things." Colbert then tackles the debt ceiling and "agrees" with Paul that we shouldn't raise the debt ceiling: "can I tell you what I think the answer might be? Don't raise the debt ceiling, let us default on all of

our loans, let the dollar become worthless, and then – what do we owe? 14 trillion dollars? It will take that much to buy a loaf of bread! Then we just send the Chinese a loaf of bread and say we’re square. And then the dollar’s number one again cause we’ll have no debt!” (April 25, 2011). This is echoed in Colbert’s constant pundit vigil to seek out threats we should all be afraid of that reaches its climax on April 4, 2011 when he is discussing the sale of Glenn Beck-endorsed emergency backpacks and urges viewers to buy it: “so Nation, keep your Backpack on hand at all times and we need never face our greatest fear – not knowing what to be afraid of.” By using the arguments already entrenched in conservative discourse and then taking them to their “logical” ridiculous conclusion he disrupts the coherence of the discourse itself.

While there may not be much suspension of disbelief within the general public and mainstream media about Colbert’s persona and show, the knowing suspension of disbelief of his audience is palpable and contributes to the creation of a “different set of meaningful formations” (Olalquiaga 153). In particular his audience, the “Colbert Nation,” is complicit in the shaky ground between satirical and actual PAC formation. This allows for the continuation of Colbert’s traversal between simulation and “real” as well as the postmodern play between which comes first. His audience bears witness to and participates in the formation of something that is at once pastiche and actual – creating the murky ground that Baudrillard addresses where simulacra precedes the real and contributes to the creation of a hyperreal. He writes, “this is where McLuhan’s formula [that the medium is the message] leads, pushed to its limit – there is not only an implosion of the message in the medium, there is, in the same movement, the implosion of the medium itself in the real, the implosion of *the medium and of the real* in a sort of hyperreal nebula, in which even the definition and distinct action of the medium can no longer be determined” (82, italics in original). In Colbert Super PAC, the distinct action of the medium is

obscured, and where it is not obscured in the obvious act of televising the process it becomes the very act where model precedes the actual, where the media and the message collide and it is unclear where satire and simulation end and the “real” actual Political Action Committee begins. And the Colbert Nation plays a large part in this disruption. The Colbert Nation is the epitome of Olalquiaga’s “loss of conventional boundaries between production and consumption.” This is in part due to the Colbert Nation’s function as a carnival or drag audience which participates in the performance, creating a space in which the consumption of the text and the audience’s interpretation and contribution to it becomes the media that is then broadcast back to them to be reconsumed and remodified.

Esther Newton writes in the seminal work *Mother Camp* that “In fact *the* distinguishing characteristic of drag, as opposed to heterosexual transvestism, is its group character; *all* drag, whether formal, informal, or professional, has a theatrical structure and style. There is no drag without an actor and his audience, and there is no drag without drama (or theatricality).”(1979: 37). This is reiterated by many writers on the topic of drag including K. Bradford who writes, “A lot of what makes a drag king show what it is, is the audience” (2002: 27). Part of what makes drag unique is its audience and how *they* participate in and view drag itself (a concept similar to the carnival participatory audience that helps create the spectacle (Russo, 1986: 78)) – this is mirrored by the Colbert Nation. Colbert and his Nation break down these boundaries with the many participatory events they construct. Whenever Colbert calls them to action, they jump – in force – and then Colbert in turn televises their efforts on his later shows. The “Art Me Up” challenge is one case in point. Colbert posted a large file of his portrait on his website www.colbertnation.com and invited his Nation to modify it however they want. He then changed the portrait over his fireplace almost weekly to a different viewer-generated work and put some

of these portraits as well as others modified by “real” artists up for auction. This is also seen in multiple “Green Screen Challenges” over the years where Colbert will, for example, perform in front of a green screen with a light saber, post the video on his website, invite viewers to put his light saber battle into whatever creative scene they see fit, and then airs the “best” ones on his show. While these two examples may seem more on the silly side, they are what primed his audience to participate in the production/consumption of what could be termed more important topics relating to politics and the media as well as reality.

A possible postmodern moment created by Colbert and his drag audience is his constant play with Wikipedia in what he calls “wikiality.” Since “reality has a liberal bias,” as Colbert has said on many occasions, he invites his viewers to participate in a new “wikiality” and “create a reality we can all agree on, the reality we just agreed on” through the use of Wikipedia where “any user can change any entry, and if enough other users agree with them, it becomes true.” Wikipedia is now famous for its user-generated encyclopedic reference database and, since its inception in 2001, has become more reputable and legitimate as a source with every passing year. In the “wikiality” “The Wørd” segment aired on July 31, 2006, Colbert calls on his nation to make a new reality by changing the Wikipedia entry on African Elephants so that they are no longer an endangered species but rather an abundant one. He then applauds his audience’s conservation efforts and tells them they have saved the elephants. In an interesting twist to this participatory drag action, some of Sarah Palin’s followers took a page from the Colbert Nation book after her cringe-worthy assertion in 2011 that Paul Revere rang bells and fired his gun to warn the British that America was strong and ready to fight. Wikipedia eventually locked the page against new user contributions after Palin supporters tried multiple times to change the Paul Revere page to reflect Palin’s version of events. This suggests a hyperreality in which the

simulation that Colbert performs is mimicked in the “real” political realm after his initial model. Of course, Colbert is not one to be outdone and beseeched his nation on June 6, 2011 to instead go to the entry on “bells” and change *that* reference to read “Used by Paul Revere to warn the British that hey, you’re not going to succeed in taking our guns. USA! USA!”

[<http://animalnewyork.com/2011/06/colbert-encourages-wikipedia-vandalism/>] Just as camp and drag focus on performance, excess, recycling, and hyperbole, Colbert’s Nation here enacts a ridiculous copy of a “serious” copy that is already a reproduction of a satiric joke by high-jacking Palin’s supporters efforts and taking them even further into the realm of camp in order to reveal their problematics as well as the ease with which new truths can be created in our instantaneous technological age.

Baym argues that these very examples prove Colbert is a modernist because he is in effect making fun of those in politics and the media who actually function this way, such as in the wikiality segment where he says the following (words in brackets are those that appear under the heading “The Wørd” on the right side of the screen):

As usual, as usual, folks, the Bush administration has been on the cutting edge of information management. While they’ve admitted that Saddam did not possess weapons of mass destructions, they’ve also insinuated he did possess weapons of mass destruction [-Have No Yellowcake and Eat It Too]. Insinuations that have been repeated over and over again on cable news for the past three and a half years. [-24,000 Hour News Cycle] and now the result is 18 months ago only 36% of Americans believed it, but 50% of Americans believe it now. Man, that number’s growing almost as fast as the population of African elephants. Which is exploding by the way, I heard it somewhere [-Hey, So Did I....] ... Now, the blame ignorance first crowd is going to say something is either true or it isn’t, and it doesn’t matter how many people agree. *But if you happen to take a class on astronomy before Galileo and you said the earth went around the sun, you would have been flunked.* [-Current Policy at Bob Jones University] See, if you go against what the majority of people perceive to be reality, you’re the one who’s crazy [-Crazy Like {image of the Fox News logo}] Nation, it’s time we used the power of our numbers for a real internet revolution [-The Revolution Will Not Be Verified]. (italics added)

It is in the nuance of this section where we can see a call to the revision of “truth” and thus how what is “true” can change. While Bush’s made-up weapons of mass destruction is one instance where modernists can argue Colbert is actually NOT endorsing wikiality, the mention of Galileo and astronomy seems to be a reference to the idea that, even if we don’t want reality to work this way, this really is how it has worked over time. At one point, modern science and technology said that the sun revolved around the earth, now it says the opposite. Whether or not one statement is “right” and the other “wrong” is not the point here – different historical moments have different and changing “truths” that ARE dependent on how many people (and which ones) agree something is true, whether or not it is a correct or incorrect “fact” does not affect the outcome: in one instance this is a failed astronomy test, in another it is war in Iraq. Here Colbert is pointing to the postmodern production of reality where it doesn’t matter if Colbert (or anyone else) thinks it’s wrong that the social and political world function in this way, what matters is that it *does* seem to function this way and Colbert is campily pointing to this very existence, making fun of it, yes, but pointing it out nonetheless while simultaneously encouraging his audience to contribute to it in a unique way.

Drawing the concept of the drag audience into our discussion of the Colbert Nation helps illuminate the function it performs and how it facilitates his postmodern moment. As noted above, there is no drag without the interplay of performer and an audience in-the-know. And, as Butler argues about performativity, it is the very enactment of gender that brings itself into being and the act of drag reveals this performativity. But, as others have also asserted, the performative act has no meaning without the social/official acceptance of it as a performative act (like the “I do” of marriage). The drag audience is a crucial part in the performative act of drag – without a conspiring audience the drag act does not have the desired effect. The Colbert Nation functions

in this way but the aim is not so much revealing the construction of gender (though he does at times do this as well) but that of media and politics. Michael F. Patton, Jr. and Samantha Webb argue in their article “Freedom Isn’t Free, but Freedom Is” that Colbert and his audience effect nothing, are in essence just another corporate pawn, playing a part that hints at subversion just enough to be edgy and then be used for corporate gain. They write that “When Colbert and his nation end up as news stories for a world-renowned news organization, that’s not just a slow news day, that’s the emperor’s new clothes becoming the latest fashion trend” (2009: 257). But just like the children’s story, there is someone who sees through the trend, in Colbert’s case it is the Colbert Nation. They also write:

On one hand, Colbert plays up his role as a culture warrior-pundit who’s every word on any subject is received as gospel; on the other, his viewers actively play the role of passively gobbling down what he’s selling. Faux-apologist for narrowly-defined American values that he is, Colbert celebrates that audience torpidity. What’s striking – and potentially new – about *The Colbert Report* is that the audience is in on the joke, performing the part of the torpid audience. (253-254)

But looked at through the lens of drag and passing, this is not in fact new at all, and applying the idea of the drag audience and Amy Robinson’s triangular passing narrative – where there is a passer, an in-group clairvoyant who sees drag, and a dupe who is unaware of the pass – to these concepts takes the argument to a new conclusion: while the emperor’s new clothes may be the latest fashion, and consumers of politics and media participate in a shell game where a satirist becomes serious political and media news, the drag audience is the little boy who sees that everyone is naked, revealing the media, politics, and their “straight” consumers as the dupes.

Just as the drag audience participates in the revelation of the performative act of gender that the drag queen or king performs, the Colbert Nation – which rancorously enjoys the show with the knowledge and zeal of a drag audience – fulfills a similar purpose. Without them Colbert *would* just be an act. With them fueling his act he becomes a force to be reckoned with,

he becomes the news. His empty blowhard ways and the simultaneous lack and obvious construction of authenticity, of the real, that he performs reveal the lack and production of it in the media and politics in which he (sort of) passes in the same way that passing and drag draw attention to the construction of authentic gender, sexuality, or race. The ambivalence of drag that reveals the construction of gender is mirrored in the ambivalence directed at Colbert and his Nation, Patton and Webb write: “when fans of the show post on the Colbert Nation website extolling the importance of the *WristStrong* bracelet, when the studio audience ironically cheers Stephen Colbert’s outrageous political positions, when they change *Wikipedia* entries at his behest, are they resisting the narcotic of a freem^[60] media or swallowing it wholesale? At what point does the parodic audience of a parodic television show cross the line and become simply another set of consumers of Viacom’s ‘product’? And the line has recently gotten even fuzzier” (256). Similar questions have been asked of drag – and are where part of its ambiguity are rooted – such as at what points do feminine drag become less about revealing the construction of gender and more about being misogynist? Like these questions for drag, it depends on the circumstance, on the mode of consumption, on the specifics of particular acts. The possible relation between politics and drag in a postmodern moment was even noted on one occasion by Baudrillard who, according to Kellner and Best, in a 1989 Montana lecture said, “just as everyone is now a transsexual, so too have ‘we suddenly become transpoliticals, that is to say beings politically indifferent and undifferentiated, politically androgynous and hermaphroditic, having digested and rejected the most contradictory ideologies and knowing only how to wear the mask. We even have become, without realizing it, perhaps, *political drag queens*’” (142, italics added). In order

⁶⁰ According to Patton and Webb (245), as well as the fan-started website wikiality.com, “freem” first appeared in the opening sequence of *The Colbert Report* on Jan. 9, 2007. Though Colbert has never defined it on his show, wikiality.com says he did at one point explain it to a studio audience and the accepted meaning (for Patton, Webb, and wikiality) is “freedom without the do.”

to delve more into the relation between drag, passing, satire, and postmodernism in terms of Colbert, I will address his unique performance of forming a political action committee before turning to the question of consumption and, in particular, Colbert's product placement, corporate sponsorship, and "fake" products as an important part of his political passing-in-drag.

WHO IS YOUR MONEY TALKING TO?: CITIZENS UNITED, PACs, AND AN EDUCATION OF FARCE

The preceding points about satire, infotainment, journalistic education, the "real," and Colbert's passing-in-drag place among them are deftly illustrated by an ongoing stunt started in 2011 by Colbert to create Colbert PAC/Colbert Super PAC. On March 10, 2011, Colbert announced the formation of Colbert PAC and instructed viewers to register at www.colbertpac.com, of which he says on March 30, 2011: "25 thousand of you did just that, without any idea of what you were getting into.now at this point some of you may be wondering what is Colbert PAC? Well get in line cause I have no idea. All I know is being a pundit these days is not enough anymore. If you want to be a political player in 20-12 you need a PAC. Look at my fellow pundits over at Fox News – Sarah Palin has Sarah PAC, Mike Huckabee has Huck PAC." Then Trevor Potter, former Federal Election Committee Chair and Colbert's "personal lawyer" comes on to explain what exactly a PAC is, telling Stephen it is a non-connected committee, that he can spend the money on something other than politics, and that he can use it to advertise for a candidate who doesn't want him to. Over the course of the next few months, Colbert hits a few snags with his Colbert PAC, including letters from Viacom (Comedy Central's parent company) that he can't have a PAC because his advertising of said PAC on his show can be seen as an in-kind donation from Viacom, which is illegal. Colbert is

very sad and Potter visits again to explain the legality of it all, saying it is indeed illegal for corporations to donate to PACs. But Potter goes on to explain that the Supreme Court Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission decision (January 21, 2010) made corporate donations a form of free speech, and it is not illegal if Colbert has a “Super PAC.” Colbert is intrigued and asks Potter how to make a Super PAC. Potter explains you use the exact same form, with a cover letter saying it’s a Super PAC. Colbert places the cover letter gently on top of the form and asks, “Now it’s a Super PAC?” and Potter responds. “That’s right.” Then, on May 5, 2011, Colbert is again seemingly thwarted by Viacom’s legal qualms. He says:

Everyone in DC is talking about my fundraising political action committee Colbert PAC, founded by me, so that this election, you – the Colbert Nation – could have a voice, in the form of my voice, shouted through a megaphone made of cash. ... Viacom freaked, because legally, it is illegal. Corporations cannot donate to PACs and they say using my show to talk about my PAC is a donation. So I did the right thing and I exploited a loophole.

He then cites the Citizens United case and says “there is a crucial legal distinction between a PAC and a Super PAC: *one* has the word ‘super’ in its name so I took Colbert PAC [‘Colbert PAC’ logo appears on top left of screen] and made it Colbert Super PAC [the word ‘SUPER’ in red appears over logo on left]. PAC. Super PAC. PAC. Super PAC. Clark Kent. Superman. Bruce Wayne. Batman. Gordita. Gordita Supreme.” Throughout this explanation the difference is punctuated by him pointing to the picture of the PAC/Super PAC logo switching with “super” added each time. He goes on to explain that this still wasn’t good enough for Viacom which was concerned about having to account for their donation and that he cannot talk about the Super PAC on air. Colbert says, in a whiney voice:

I just can’t believe it, I hate my parent company. They never let me do anything. Everyone else’s parent company lets them do it. Karl Rove is a paid employee of Fox News and he gets to talk about his super PAC American Crossroads all the time [he shows clips of Karl Rove talking about his PAC on Fox]. He can have his cake and eat it too. And imagine how much cake he eats. Fox also lets paid contributor Dick Morris do

it. ...and folks it's not just Fox, NBC Universal is fine with Donald Trump running his mouth off about his political ambitions on the *Celebrity Apprentice* [he shows a clip of trump asking celebrity apprentices if he should run for president] I will never never understand this. Here to help me understand this is the former chairman of the Federal Election Commission, general council for the McCain '08 campaign and my personal lawyer, Trevor Potter. ... how do the guys on Fox get away with it?

Potter then comes on the show and the following exchange occurs:

Potter: They are covered by the famous media exemption.

Colbert: what's the media exemption?

Potter: The media exemption says that if you are a broadcast station, you're not owned by a candidate or a party, [Colbert: I'm not] you're reporting the news in your normal way of going about business, then you're exempt, you're not making a corporate contribution when you talk about candidates and politics.

Colbert: so I couldn't talk about my PAC, but if I reported on my PAC, or made commentary on my PAC, or did analysis of my PAC then it would be covered under the news exemption?

Potter: you've got it.

Colbert [pulls out fedora with "press" sign stuck in bill and puts it on] so if I wear this hat, if I wore this hat the whole time, I'm free and clear! Would it help if I talked about my PAC in Tom Brokaw voice? ...ok so how do we get me that thing. I want the thing everybody else has. I want the shiny shiny candy-colored media exemption.

Potter: You can go to the Federal Election Commission and ask for what's called an advisory opinion. [Colbert: how do I do that?] your lawyers would draft a letter [Colbert: you're my lawyer] you would ask me to draft a letter [Colbert: Trevor, draft me a letter] I have done that.[Trevor hands him the letter] ...

Colbert: ...alright so this thing right here, we've got a letter, it's asking to give me the media exemption, and then I could talk about my Super PAC and do anything I wanted as long as I did it like news?

Potter: right.

Colbert attaches a five dollar bill to the letter and says "you know who else might argue for me? Mr. Lincoln, put that right up there. Because remember, according to Citizens United, that's not a bribe, that's free speech." This is all followed on March 12, 2011 with Colbert announcing he will file the request on Friday the 13th at 4 p.m. and invites viewers to meet him there. I have quoted the above at length because it illustrates multiple concepts important to the interrogation of Colbert as passing-in-drag as well as how his particular brand of satire is educational and muddles the ground between real and fake. Over the course of these episodes Colbert has

effectively educated his viewers about the politics of Politic Action Committees, how and why they are formed, who uses them, who contributes to them, the loopholes available for corporations to donate as well as the loopholes allowed media outlets.

He has also used this Super PAC to call his viewers to action that has the potential to influence the 2012 election process while using a drag enactment of PAC formation to reveal the underlying functions of a PAC and show that what they (and others who donate to PACs) are really doing is giving an even larger mouthpiece to a person whom they presumably agree with but simultaneously don't have any real knowledge of or control over the outcome and uses of the PAC. By initially calling viewers to commit to something undefined draws attention to the way pundits in general have used these PACs and are able blast their message across cable outlets (basically for free, and in fact they are being paid simultaneously as media personalities). Like gender drag that draws out the excesses of femininity in order to reveal its construction, here Colbert pays minute attention to the ins and outs of PAC formation in such a way that the functions and processes of PACs, Super PACs, and the Citizens United decision are revealed as farce because his performance of these processes is at once to the letter of the law and excessive in its enactment of simplicity and loopholes that are nonetheless how the system works.

The division between real and fake is blurred by Colbert's passing-in-drag which both satirizes and enacts the formation of a Super PAC. His actual creation of a "real" Super PAC is also a hyperbolic performance of one. He parodies people like Palin and Huckabee on Fox News and satirizes the process with the "Press" hat bit while also "really" doing the exact same thing as Palin and others – just with an added prop that draws attention to the performativity of journalism where credence is given based on a talisman of respectability and believability, on a hat in this case. Interpreting his Super PAC as part of a passing-in-drag act reveals how his satire

is educational (like the purposes of journalistic passing addressed in Chapter 3) while also revealing the excess already inherent in “actual” PACs through reperforming and exploiting it with drag-like actions such as the press hat bit and explicit acknowledgement that even he doesn’t know what his PAC will do – but he’ll take your money anyway.

Now that Colbert has his own Super PAC where does that leave him on the pundit continuum? While so many political, media, and satire experts quickly discount him as a comedian – this places him squarely in the same place as “real” pundits with PACs. This is only one instance in which Colbert traverses the fine line between real and fake, obliterating it by constantly refusing to delineate between the two by passing as, parodying, and enacting the “real” so that what is real can no longer be defined outside of its performative elements that can be manipulated to different ends. While parodying and satirizing pundits and what they do, he also actually does the exact same things as they do (albeit with some critical differences that will be addressed throughout this chapter). So, does this make him a drag pundit? Passing as a pundit? Or a “real” pundit himself? The critical difference Colbert and his persona makes is to never differentiate between these options and to constantly employ aspects of all three – challenging his viewers to question not only his own place within the political spectrum but the place of those he passes as, performs drag as, parodies, and satirizes as well.

The Advisory Opinion Request filed with the FEC illustrates this argument well: the very real document, filed with the real FEC, argues that Colbert already uses his show to inform the public about politics, campaign-finance reform, etc., and that Viacom and Colbert are “press entities” who are entitled to the media exemption; but also includes the following statement: “Colbert Super PAC will make only independent expenditures, advertisements that expressly advocate the election or defeat of a clearly identified candidate and that are not coordinated with

any candidate or political party. Colbert Super PAC will also pay the usual and normal administrative expenses, including but not limited to, luxury hotel stays, private jet travel, and PAC mementos from Saks Fifth Avenue and Neiman Marcus” before presenting and defending with legal precedent the reasons why Colbert should get a media exemption. So even in the realm of “real” forms submitted to the FEC, Colbert has inserted satirical remarks aimed at the dubious expenses incurred by other PACs which is at once probably the most truthful disclosure the FEC has seen on such forms and also (hopefully) entirely untrue for his particular circumstances. Regardless, it didn’t seem to be a problem for the FEC which approved not only his PAC and his Super PAC, but his media exemption as well.

CAMPING CONSUMPTION AND CONSUMING CAMP: AMBIVALENT

ADVERTISING AND THE SHAKEY GROUND OF SPONSORED SATIRE

The realm of advertisements and sponsorship is one of the many places where Colbert concurrently endorses and undermines part of our dominant social ideology: capitalist consumption. Returning to the above quote by Patton and Webb: when does Colbert’s satire of consumerism just turn into actual consumerism? Where is the line between making fun of advertisements and “real” ads? In line with his assertion of wikiality, something is true/real if enough people believe it is and it is shouted loud enough – this applies most heartily to the functions of the market and Colbert often changes his stance on topics based on what draws in the most money, stating that “the market has spoken”⁶¹. Multiple corporate products sponsor various Colbert segments, from his Nacho Cheesier Doritos-sponsored presidential bid to his Dr.

⁶¹ For example, after the huge success of Al Gore’s *An Inconvenient Truth* Colbert says, “The market has spoken, global warming is real” (originally in an 2007 episode but he repeats this often, including when Al Gore participates in Formidable Opponent on November 4, 2009).

Pepper Presents Stephest Colbchella '011 music-themed week. Those in marketing departments have obviously decided that *The Colbert Report* is an appropriate venue to shill their products to potential customers. Is it possible to participate in (and benefit from) a capitalist culture and still critique and challenge it? Butler writes that, “At best, it seems, drag is a site of a certain ambivalence, one which reflects the more general situation of being implicated in the regimes of power by which one is constituted and, hence, of being implicated in the very regimes of power that one opposes” (*Bodies That Matter* 125). There is a constant ambivalent pull in both directions for the drag act, and for Colbert’s drag act in particular. On one hand he is drawing attention to the shameless corporate shilling and the ridiculousness of vapid consumerism of media and politics, but on the other he is reinforcing it.

The exposure value apparently outweighs the satiric effect (or else he wouldn’t have so many clear product placements and sponsors). I suppose at the very least his antics are a small improvement – at least we are forced to acknowledge the ubiquity of advertising, sponsorship, and product placement because his in-you-face attitude towards them (even with corporate blessings) makes it impossible to not be aware of what’s going on. For example, on February 28, 2011, Colbert swears he was hacked by Anonymous⁶² and says, “The sanctity of my studio was compromised last week by an outside force. And not in a good way folks, like when a sponsor pays me to subtly insert their name into everything I Bud Light say.” While he is obviously satirizing corporate sponsorship, a product reference has still been made. In many references such as this one as well as others where he degrades a product such as Taco Bell’s Beefy Crunch Burrito which he says is “beefish” and is “all that and a bag of chips, in that it has a bag of chips

⁶² From the mid-2000s through 2011 (at least) Anonymous was a loose-knit group of internet hackers who wreaked havoc on the Church of Scientology website before, in 2011, becoming big news when they hacked the websites of PayPal, Mastercard, and Visa, (among others) in retaliation for these companies opposing the group Wikileaks.

in it” (January 31, 2011) it is unclear whether money has changed hands. But in many other instances it is more than obvious that it has, such as the entirely unmentioned upon sponsorship of The Rally to Restore Sanity/March to Keep Fear Alive, broadcast “commercial free” thanks to “Brought to you by” ads at the bottom of the screen by LG, Audi, Reese’s, and Volkswagen. But the ambivalence of it all becomes part of the main point – creating a dialogic consumerism where a product is endorsed (sort of) but corporate capitalism is also indicted. For example, with the subtitle “One Donation, Under God,” Colbert says, “Tonight: how is corporate spending affecting the election? That story and more from the Domino’s Pizza Piping Hot Extra Cheesy Update Corner” (October 20, 2010). A similar effect is seen in his 2008 presidential bid which he titled “The Hail to the Cheese Stephen Colbert Nacho Cheese Doritos 2008 Presidential Campaign” and said in a March 3, 2011 show that he was always careful to delineate between his many rolls: “whenever I reported on it, I just added the word ‘coverage’ to distinguish between when I was speaking as a candidate, speaking as a journalist, and speaking as a corporate shill.” Just as drag queens perform excess femininity to make its construction and performance obvious, so too does Colbert’s corporate sponsorship and his excessive references to it call attention to how it is functioning for the “real” candidates who take loads of corporate money – they may not have the product name in their slogan, but Colbert points out that, make no mistake, they are just as sponsored as he is.

His use of drag-like excess and exaggeration is also seen in his own line of products – items brought into being to mock real products’ ridiculousness. Much like he often takes conservative arguments to their “logical” conclusion and thus reveals their flaws, he also often follows a product placement with his own fake product that takes “improvements” to products to his “logical” next step, revealing the absurdity and blatant consumerism of the next best thing

through excess and parody. In a segment on October 26, 2010 he references Glenn Beck's "news advertisement" for Vivos underground bunkers and "food insurance," showing clips from Beck's Fox News show where Beck says "do the easy stuff now, prepare yourself for what we all hope won't happen, but probably will, if you're not prepared" to which Colbert adds, "of course, in a postapocalyptic dystopian hellscape where the living envy the dead, who could possibly think about food? Well, you could. Because food insurance products are delicious [shows excerpt from foodinsurance.com that says, 'Food Insurance products are delicious!']" before launching his own product: "Food Insurance Insurance." He says:

of course, even the best food insurance can't truly make you safe. What if it turns out that the virus that wipes out mankind is transmitted via stroganoff? That's why I've partnered with the Prescott Group^[63] to offer food insurance insurance that will cover any damage to your food insurance for a low low monthly premium of just 89.99. Should the apocalypse in any way affect your food insurance simply download and print form 609B, fill it out in ash or blood then mail one copy to each of our seven processing centers. In two to four moon cycles, a claims adjuster will arrive at your crater, assuming he can avoid the werejackals. Remember, with Glenn Beck's food insurance and Stephen Colbert's food insurance insurance, America as we know it may end, but at least Americans as we know it, will still be fat.

By taking the fearmongering products advertised by Beck and adding an additional absurd layer, Colbert utilizes a technique akin to camp, to reveal the excess and ridiculousness of the "real" product as well.

In *Epistemology of the Closet* Eve Sedgwick writes that "the sensibility of camp-recognition always sees that it is dealing in reader relations and is projective fantasy (projective though not infrequently true) about the spaces and practices of cultural production. Generous

⁶³ The Prescott Group is a fictitious entity Colbert "works" with to promote questionable pharmaceuticals, medical supplies, and forms of insurance. For example, Prescott Pharmaceuticals products promoted in the segment "Cheating Death with Dr. Stephen T. Colbert, DFA" include VaxaMime (a placebo modeled after a study that showed placebos work even when patients know it is a placebo) and Vacsas Not-Masturbating (a set of realistic prosthetic arms to wear when ...well, you get the picture). These segments are always in response to "real" medical and pharmaceutical issues or news and usually also include a long list of side effects that begin similarly to drug ad warnings but with added weirdness such as VaxaPrime, which may cause hoof neck, and Rorschach pattern baldness. (January 6, 2011, April 25, 2011)

because it acknowledges (unlike kitsch) that its perceptions are necessarily also creations, it's little wonder that camp can encompass effects of great delicacy and power in our highly sentimental-attributive culture" (156). Colbert's relationship with his viewers is the same, and his products and endorsements perform a similar doublespeak which hails actual products while calling attention to the fact that desire for them is entirely constructed. This postmodern dialogic enactment is noted by Patton and Webb who write, "Baudrillard's reading [of the 'careful balance' between news information and consumption] is uncannily prescient, especially if we consider that, nowadays, the news personality is part of the package we are consuming, from Anderson Cooper and Keith Olbermann to Sean Hannity and Bill O'Reilly. Visit *The O'Reilly Factor's* webpage, and you will be offered the opportunity to buy t-shirts, fleece and outerwear, coffee mugs, or signed copies of O'Reilly's latest book" (254-255). This is completely mirrored by Colbert – in particular in the run-up and aftermath to the Rally when hats, shirts, signs, and a multitude of other products could be purchased on Colbert's and Stewart's respective Comedy Central websites – the only difference being Colbert and Stewart actively pointing out the blatant consumerism they were participating in. So we return to Patton and Webb's question posed earlier: at what point does it stop being drag parody of consumerism and become just consumerism? Part of Colbert's staying power is his (and his audience's) refusal to ever definitively differentiate between the two. They remain resolutely rooted in double contradictory truths, as Patton and Webb write of Colbert's *Wriststrong* campaign to raise wrist health awareness after breaking his wrist in a fall on the set, he and his audience occupy a "liminal" space where products such as the *Wriststrong* bracelets "simultaneously signified ironic awareness of the vapidness of the issue, and blind acquiescence to corporate manipulation" (255). They are, in effect, asking the wrong question because the main result of these and other

instances on *The Colbert Report* is precisely that you can never tell which it is because it is always multiple conflicting truths all at once. This becomes important in a discussion of Colbert's drag and passing itself, which we return to now, because the same is enacted in his persona(s) such that a significant change is made to the traditional drag and passing narratives which always juxtapose a self to its Other (see chapter 4). Colbert performs passing-in-drag that creates multiple selves and refuses to ever reveal which is the "real" one – making multiple overlapping fictions and realities that suggest the possibility of a postmodern milieu that might subvert the singular ideologies of modern Truth, Authenticity, and Reality.

PASSING DRAG AND DRAGGING OUT THE PASS

After a typical introduction sequence followed by the usual audience chanting of his name, Colbert once responded, "Folks, who am I to fight that? I'm only one man" (May 16, 2011). Chapter 4 of this dissertation investigated in depth how journalists who pass separate themselves from the "other" they are passing as. A similar phenomenon occurs with drag queens and kings who create a drag persona whom they often differentiate from their "real" self. As discussed previously, while these enactments may create subversions that question the construction of identity or at the very least work towards pointing it out, they often – because of the Self/Other distinction – reinscribe oppositional binaries that enforce sharp boundaries between categories such as male and female, black and white, straight and gay, rich and poor, etc. Colbert's passing-in-drag creates a different juxtaposition that allows for multiple simultaneous selves. This paradox works in a way similar to that discussed in Chapter 3 producing an internal reality for the show that challenges the demarcation of Self versus Other and through the Colbert Nation and its activities, this reality begins to seep out into the world

external to the show. Granted, it must be said that this is in part made possible by Colbert's privileged position as a white, straight, Christian, male as well as the fact that he is often traversing less rigid categories than race and sex, but he does still construct "opposing" selves without boxing one or the other (or another) in as his "real" self or his passing/drag "other."

On October 9, 2007, Colbert's interview guest at the end of the show is the author of *I Am America (And So Can You!)*: Stephen Colbert (2007). Using the decades-old gag seen in movies like *Parent Trap* (1961), Colbert interviews himself as if he were two different people. Colbert asks himself questions about writing the book, argues with his second self, and each signs the other's book before it turns ugly and interviewer Colbert cuts off interviewee Colbert's mike, whom we then see mouthing obscenities. In this segment – silly and self-promotional as it may be – we see something interesting: Colbert is two distinct persons here who are at once different and the same. There are literally two selves who, unlike previous passing and drag examples, do not see an "Other" in the mirror. This is taken even further by his recurring segment "Formidable Opponent."

Although Colbert does not often traverse categories seen in mainstream culture as biologically distinct such as race and sex (though it must be noted his address of sexuality is interesting in this respect), he does navigate the troubled cultural gulf separating Liberal and Conservative. He does this primarily in his recurring segment "Formidable Opponent." In this segment Colbert will take on a pressing socio-political problem for debate with his only worthy opponent: himself. Shot with two (sometimes three) Colberts who seem to face each other in profile as the screen alternates between shots of each, topics for "Formidable Opponent" include: stem cell research (July 25, 2006), torture (November 15, 2005), Don't Ask Don't Tell (June 9, 2009), health care (August 12, 2009), offshore drilling (August 12, 2008), Khalid Sheikh

Mohammed's trial (February 4, 2010), and many others. Each "Formidable Opponent" has two Colberts: Red-tie Colbert and Blue-tie Colbert. The color of his tie does not correspond to "conservative" Colbert and "liberal" Colbert, it is not always "conservative" Colbert who "wins" the debate, nor does either of these things correspond with which Stephen is right-facing and which left. Both Colberts use equally diluted logic and fearmongering to make their arguments. Debates often begin with Colbert saying something like "here to debate this difficult subject is a man who never shies away from controversy" before it cuts to a second Colbert who yells "ME! Stephen Colbert. This is formidable opponent" (November 15, 2005) and, as in the Guantanamo Bay segment, one Colbert says "Welcome Stephen," to which the second Colbert responds, "Welcome yourself," and the first Colbert replies, "I just did." (June 15, 2006). A typical exchange takes place on August 13, 2007 when Colbert debates himself on the topic of offshore drilling:

Red-tie Colbert: There's no real reason for oil to be expensive. We've actually got a lot of it right now.

Blue-tie Colbert: So, supply and demand says it should be cheap.

Red-tie Colbert: Should be, but speculators buy and sell today's oil based on what they guess it's going to cost later.

Blue-tie Colbert: So my expensive gas is actually cheap right now? But I have to pay a lot more for it because later it might cost a lot more?

Red-tie Colbert: Yes. But, if we say we're going to drill off shore, the speculators won't pay a lot of money for oil now because there might be a lot of it later.

Blue-tie Colbert: Like there is now.

Red-tie Colbert: Exactly.

Blue-tie Colbert: So, by that logic we should drill everywhere.

Red-tie Colbert: Yes.

This is followed by a Three-Card Monty game to demonstrate Red-tie Colbert's argument where, in order to see the card to see if Blue-tie Colbert won, Red-tie Colbert drills through card and table but says we won't know if he won for 8-10 years. Then, the following ensues:

Red-tie Colbert: You know what, I've actually been investing in an alternative game. All you have to do is find the pea under the shell.

Blue-tie Colbert: So where are the shells?

Red-tie Colbert: We haven't fully developed the shell technology yet, and unfortunately creating that pea could cost billions of dollars, but we should have it up and running by 2050.

Blue-tie Colbert: What?!?!

Red-tie Colbert: Hey, it's your choice: the game that doesn't exist yet, or the one that destroyed your furniture.

Blue-tie Colbert: Well, I, I, guess I'll go with destroying my furniture, at least that way I get to play.

Red-tie Colbert: You sir, are a player.

Blue-tie Colbert: And you, are a

Both together in split screen: formidable opponent.

In this exchange, as in many others, the complexity of a problem is actually illustrated through the two Colberts' simplistic arguments. What is also of great interest to me in these segments though is a technical detail: whenever Colbert debates himself (as well as in the interview noted above), one of him is projected as a mirror image such that his hair part is on the left instead of the right, his wedding band on his right hand, etc. There is no technical reason for this: he just as easily (more easily perhaps) could have debated himself without flipping the image. But he doesn't. This creates the passing mirror scene discussed in Chapter Four – but Colbert does not see an “other” in the mirror, his “opposite” liberal self is still a self, just a different one. Colbert's use of his mirror image harkens back to the passing mirror scene but with a difference. The fact that he uses it at all, when he doesn't have to, brings together “liberal” and “conservative” punditry as mirroring each other, but since both are his selves, he positions them not as opposites but as the same. This imbedded commentary of the mirror scene reveals the “truthiness” utilized by both democrats and conservatives in the representational field to win votes (and money) through fear, feeling, and gut reactions rather than through facts and rational compromise. These instances change the passing narrative on two levels. First, the mirror scene is used to show how two selves reflect each other rather than a self and an other being separated on either side of the mirror. And second, the passing narrative of oppositional binary identities is refuted by

ultimately showing that the mirror doesn't separate the different selves but brings them together. The reflection here does not separate a self from an other that is being passed as but instead shows both selves to be interrelated images that function in the same way even if they have different aims. This illuminates passing, and Colbert's passing-in-drag in particular, as a strategy not for revelation of a true self but revelation that there is no one true self and supposedly opposing identities can be similar, intertwined with each other, and inseparable in their socio-cultural relation to each other.

Colbert's production of multiple selves is illustrated by his periodic introduction and use of other alter egos, where they are somewhat "othered" but do not utilize a mirror image, hence creating almost-the-same-but-not-quite (and also almost-the-same-but-not-white) copies with a difference. Copies that, of course, lack an original since Colbert himself is always already a construction. These alter egos always have a name derivative of "Stephen Colbert" and manifest the same louder-than-thou logic. In the two main cases I will go into here, their main difference is one of race/ethnicity/nationality. These alter egos generally appear to land more safely in the "drag" category because of their obvious parody and excess, but since the first Colbert is himself located somewhere between passing and drag and utilizes stereotypes, these alter egos and their resultant messages remain unclear. Since he uses gross stereotypes, but within the context of his satiric personage, are these stereotypical derogative alter egos subversive of the stereotypes or reinforcing?

One alter ego that makes his appearance periodically on *The Colbert Report* is Estaban Colberto. Estaban Colberto is Colbert's mustachioed Mexican counterpart whose show *El Colberto Reporto Gigante* parodies not only *The Colbert Report*, but the Spanish-language Univision show *Sabado Gigante* (1962-2011). We meet Estaban Colberto on an April 5, 2006

“Formidable Opponent” segment taking on illegal immigration. Red-tie Colbert and Blue-tie Colbert are debating in their usual form with Red-tie Colbert asking how, even if we wanted to, we could get 11 million illegal aliens to leave the country and Blue-tie Colbert suggesting a waterpark ride that we invite all the immigrants to that starts in San Diego with a catchpool in Juarez.

Red-tie Colbert: But don't we want to have cheap labor for all the jobs we don't want to do?

Blue-tie Colbert: Yeah, unless you're an American landscaper or an American construction worker.

Red-tie Colbert: But I'm an American TV host, my job is safe.

Blue-tie Colbert: Is it?

The shot cuts to Estaban directly facing the camera: *Hola muchachos!*

Blue-tie Colbert: Estaban! Como esta? He'll do your job for *half* your salary.

Red-tie Colbert: But he can't do what I do!

Blue-tie Colbert: Can't he?

Estaban: [in Spanish with English subtitles] I am the eagle of truth. This is *The Colbert Report Gigante!*

Red-tie Colbert: NOOOOOOOOOOO!

Estaban: [in Spanish] This is the threatdown! Watch out for bears! Tonight's Wørd is Salsa!

Red-tie Colbert: This guy's gonna take my job! Do something!

Blue-tie Colbert: Ok. Hey Estaban, look! A waterslide!

Estaban [to dancing women who are on either side of him]: Oh, chicas! To the waterslide!

Red-tie Colbert [wipes forehead]: Wow, that was a close one, we've gotta get rid of these people.

Blue-tie Colbert: You're a smart man.

Red-tie Colbert: And you, sir, are

Estaban: [in Spanish] A formidable opponent. We'll be right back after these messages.

We are introduced in similar fashion on June 30, 2011 to Stephen Al-bert – a Muslim with long beard, stereotypical accent and dress, and a thirst to kill his enemies – in a “Formidable Opponent” tackling aid to Pakistan. In both these segments, through their series of cuts and camera angles the racialized Colbert always appears positioned between the two facing white Colberts and faces the camera directly. This creates a sort of paradox for the viewer: within the satiric context, a derogatory stereotype akin to those used regularly in “straight” media is utilized

– does this then parody the use of it in other places, or just uncritically reuse it? The answer is, as usual, somewhere in between. What Colbert is doing with his two white Colberts seems to do something new by creating two selves who are different from one another yet not each other’s “Other.” The insertion of another Colbert with added racialized stereotypes produces Colbert in triplicate, but it is a mimicry that is almost the same but not quite.

A clue can be found in the closing of these “Formidable Opponent” segments where all three Colberts in the June 30 segment say the final “a formidable opponent” together, and it is the third Colbert in the preceding example, Estaban, who closes the segment with this line. This aligns the racialized Colbert (and his overblown stereotype) with the two white Colberts (and theirs). But as noted in the introductory section on the ambiguity of satire – it is all in how these characters are viewed, and there are multiple different viewpoints accessible through satire as well as drag (as addressed in previous sections). Comments online on the June 30, 2011 segment on Pakistan show viewers who argue the segment endorses multiple different viewpoints on Pakistan/U.S. relations as well as Muslim people in general – with one commenter arguing the segment showing “the truth” about Muslims as haters of Western ways (Ignota1978, accessed on 7/6/11) and others eschewing him for this view and commenting on a more nuanced interpretation of the segment and what it is saying about U.S./Pakistan relations. Colbert’s multiple selves are akin to a drag act: dependent on a knowing audience to interpret them in a particular way, but also available to other interpretations. So while he may be producing multiple selves at any one moment, this does not preclude some of these selves possibly reinforcing stereotypes. However, these multiple selves created through a combination of drag and passing are paired with another key difference to the passing/drag narrative produced by Colbert: the refusal of a revelation.

COLBERT IN THE “REAL” WORLD

As noted throughout this dissertation, drag and passing both usually depend on a “tell” and/or a reveal. In feminine drag, a “tell” such as a deep voice, hairy chest, or obvious genitalia (or oversized, obviously fake genitalia in the case of drag kings), is presented in order to show the seams in the façade. Donna Troka argues that “[t]he tools of drag (the accoutrements, the body language, the attitudes) are the very ‘flaws’ of the straight gender system, and the performance of drag proves what a farce that system is” (2002: 25). In passing, the penultimate moment is when a passing subject’s “real” identity and the fact that they passed so seamlessly is revealed. As Gwendolyn Foster writes, “Part of any ‘passing’ narrative is the reveal. Gender-passing narratives, such as *The Ballad of Little Jo* (Maggie Greenwald, 1993), ask the viewer simply to wait until the cowgirl who has been passing as a man is found out, even in death. Similarly, the passing story of *The Human Stain* (Robert Benton, 2003) *would hold no interest without the inevitable ‘reveal.’*” (2005: 114, emphasis added). But this does not hold true for Colbert – who refuses, even when testifying before Congress, to reveal a “real” identity. All his televised interviews on other shows from *The Today Show* to the *The O’Reilly Factor* have been as Pundit Colbert. There have been a few exceptions – the interview in 2006 with Charlie Rose which he does almost wholly as the actor Stephen Colbert. Though even here he seamlessly slips into character at the end of the interview as well as print interviews with *The Daily Telegraph* and *Rolling Stone* where he partially breaks character. He says, “I say exactly the same thing to everyone before the interview: ‘I’m not an assassin, I do the show in character – and he’s an idiot; he’s willfully ignorant of everything we’re going to talk about. Disabuse me of my ignorance. Don’t let me put words in your mouth’” (*The Daily Telegraph* May 18, 2008). But

even here, it is only partial – he switches between referring to his *Colbert Report* character as “he” and “me.” The same is true in interviews such as one on October 11, 2007 with Larry King where he constantly switches into and out of character – at times confusing King as they both try (unsuccessfully) to label and fully differentiate between the multiple Colberts.

With one possible exception of an in-show example that I will address shortly, most of Colbert’s character shifts and out-of-character enunciations occur outside the show itself, in print and in interviews as already mentioned, but most interestingly before Congress. At the invitation of Representative Zoe Lofgren (D-CA), Chairman of House Judiciary Subcommittee on Immigration, Citizenship and Border Security, Colbert appeared as an “expert witness” on the topic of immigrant farm workers on September 24, 2010. Colbert and Lofgren were part of a very small handful of participants in the United Farm Workers “Take Our Jobs” campaign which was organized to publicize the hardships of migrant workers as well as the lack of Americans willing to do this hard work. Colbert and Lofgren both spent one day in upstate New York picking and packing beans and corn. Broadcast on C-SPAN 3 (of which Colbert joked in his testimony that he hoped his star-power would bump it “all the way up to C-SPAN 1”), Colbert and three other witnesses including the president of UFW, Arturo Rodriguez, testified and answered questioned from various Democrat and Republican representatives on the committee. While, as many representatives as well as those in the media who covered the hearing noted, celebrities often make appearances such as these to raise awareness about various issues, Colbert’s participation was unique because he took an official situation and managed to both participate sincerely and satirize it at the same time – performing both his actor self and his character self simultaneously to convey his concerns and experiences. Widely covered (and disparaged) on the cable news networks – particularly Fox News (as covered on *The Colbert*

Report on September 27, 2010) – Colbert switches multiple times between Pundit Colbert and Actor Colbert with the line often being blurred, such as when Rep. Lamar Smith asks him if he thinks one day of farm work qualifies him as an expert witness and Colbert responds “I believe I was invited here today by the congresswoman because I was one of the 16 people who took the United Farm Workers up on the experience of having migrant farm work for a single day. And if there are other members of the committee who did that than there’s no purpose of me being here.” He is then pressed further by Smith:

Smith: Does one day working in the field make you an expert witness?

Colbert: I believe one day of me studying anything makes me an expert in something.

Smith: It’s more work than you’ve ever done before?

Colbert: It’s certainly more work than this.

Possibly one of the few to openly mock Congress in a hearing they were invited to, Colbert’s testimony refuses to let either Congress or the public force him to be either his “real” self or his “pundit” self. His testimony even became dual testimony of two selves with his written testimony submitted beforehand being quite straightforward and uncomical and his spoken testimony being quite the opposite and fully in pundit drag. In the first moments of his testimony he says, “America’s farms are presently far too dependent upon immigrant labor to pick our fruits and vegetables. Now the obvious answer is for all of us to stop eating fruits and vegetables. And if you look at the recent obesity statistics, you’ll see that many Americans have already started,” before later stating:

As part of my ongoing series, “Stephen Colbert’s Fall-back Position” where I try other jobs and realize that mine is way better, I participated in the UFW’s “Take our Jobs” Campaign – one of only 16 Americans to take up the challenge. Though that number may increase in the near future, as I understand many Democrats may be looking for work come November. Now I, I’ll admit, I started my work day with preconceived notions about migrant labor. But after working with these men and women, picking beans, packing corn for hours on end, side-by-side, in the unforgiving sun, I have to say – and I do mean this sincerely – please don’t make me do this again. [With a sob in his voice] It is really, really hard. (www.youtube.com)

This last comment in particular traverses a fine line between acting and sincerity and he also includes seemingly completely “straight” pronouncements such as that in response to a question by Rep. Judy Chu (D-CA) about why he’s chosen this particular issue to speak out about. He responds, “I like talking about people who don’t have any power, and this seemed like one of the least powerful people in the United States are migrant workers who come and do our work but don’t have any rights as a result, and yet we still invite them to come here and at the same time ask them to leave, and that’s an interesting contradiction to me. . . . migrant workers suffer, and have no rights.” He manages to be both Colberts at once, traversing the space between the two in order to make his testimony serve multiple purposes, one among them being to refuse to reveal his pundit self or his “actual” self as the “real” Colbert. This effectively lets him have his cake and eat it too: albeit partially because of the lack of danger in the media world in particular and for straight white men in general. In “Passing Lines” Brad Epps writes:

to see passing might not so much close passing down as open it up, give it over to dissemination, and in so doing disrupt the surety of dominance, or at least of dominant notions of identity as fixed, eternal, and incapable of entering – and I use this word deliberately – self-defined different fields[.] . . . [P]assing lines, telling stories about one’s self, and so on, are tactics of empowerment, weak and partial though they may be. At the same time, it is important to keep in mind *that the lines of passing are recognized as such only when they falter and fail. Their successes tend to be either invisible or visible only retrospectively*: after and away from danger, from the time and place of passing. (2001: 115, italics added)

While it must be reiterated that Colbert is definitely a unique case created in part by his privileged status as well as the more pliable categories he seems to be traversing, his case also produces an opportunity to counter the normative passing scene addressed by Epps and others and take the possibilities of passing, and its effect on identity, to a different plane where the lines can be seen without a falter or failure, in the very moment of passing between identities, not after. And this moment of passing, and of seeing the pass, is not momentary but ongoing in a

way not seen before in passing narratives. To also be able to bring this act into the very annals of serious politics – a congressional hearing – functions to open it (and him) up to disruption and critique in a different way than traditional passing stories by having passing, its revelation, and that reveals’ simultaneous disavowal all occur in a single moment and to have this moment be continuous.

Even within *The Colbert Report* itself, he sometimes avails himself of the opportunity to raise the specter not only of multiple selves but also to negate the question before it can even be asked as to which Colbert is “really” speaking, as in the show intro on January 10, 2011 after the horrific shooting in Tucson, Arizona. He begins the show minus his usual smirk and raised eyebrows, with a look of “genuine” concern and care as he says:

Before we start, I’d just like to say all of us are shocked and saddened by the senseless attack in Tucson this weekend, which killed six people and wounded 14 others, including congresswoman Gabriel Giffords. While I’ve never met Representative Giffords, we have tussled in the media, and her husband Mark is the astronaut who taught me how to land the space shuttle. To the congresswoman, her husband, and the families and friends of all the victims of this horrible attack, we at the *Report* send our thoughts and prayers. We may never know what motivated this clearly unbalanced individual. But we do know that now is not the time to lay blame or politicize this tragedy.

There is then an immediate cut to a montage of newscasters and pundits on Fox News, CNN, and C-SPAN laying blame and politicizing it before the camera returns to Colbert with his eyebrows raised looking shocked before saying, “Oh, I guess I’m wrong. Did we pick someone to blame yet? Well get on it, I look like an idiot out here.” He switches seamlessly here from what appears to be a sincere and heartfelt expression of sympathy right back into the “character.” It is not what he or his “character” says here that is most powerful, but the transition itself that calls the most attention not only to the appropriate acknowledgement of sympathy but to the obscenity of the news media’s response, tying them all yet again to the blowhard pundit Colbert and the quest for higher rating.

In “F2M” Halberstam writes “There is no movement, or only a very limited and fleeting movement, in crossing from” one stable identity to another (1994: 219) because the transition stage where identity is in flux is short – always having solid starting and ending identity positions. Here is where Colbert’s ongoing performance can be seen as a possible inroad in how to stay in that unsteady, usually fleeting, position of in-between categories. While in hindsight he is often labeled as obviously playing a character, his refusal to acknowledge this – or in the few instances where he has, to then never acknowledge that he has acknowledged the character – creates a space of transition where he is always already passing, in drag, revealed, but not. He may have shifted from passing to drag or passing-in-drag over the seven years of his show, but this too remains unacknowledged and his plans are anyone’s guess. He is always in the crossing moment, always becoming both Colbert the character and Colbert the political satirist.

The lack of a reveal that ends the passing scene refuses a return to a prior reality where the subject or viewers have learned something about his authentic self. This harkens back to the ideas of carnival (that are seen in camp and drag as well) of which Stallybrass and White write: “Carnival was the true feast of time, the feast of becoming, change and renewal. It was hostile to all that was immortalized and complete. (Bakhtin 1968: 109)” (7). They argue that “To complete the image of grotesque realism one must add that it is always in process, it is always *becoming*, it is a mobile and hybrid creature, disproportionate, exorbitant, outgrowing limits, obscenely decentred and off-balance, a figural and symbolic resource for parodic exaggeration and inversion” (9). This idea of always in process sheds light on the construction that is Colbert, its cultural meaning and possible impact, and links it to Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guatarri’s postmodern ideal of becoming as well as the practice of queering conventions in order to reveal, challenge, and change normative constructions of identity, authenticity, and reality.

BECOMING COLBERT (AND SO CAN YOU!)

Deleuze and Guatarri's argument about rhizomatic becoming sheds some light on the unique production that is Stephen Colbert and *The Colbert Report* and the possible disruptions they may provide to the status quo uses and ideals of media, identity, and authenticity or "the real." As the above sections lay out, Colbert's passing-in-drag is unique in its refusal to differentiate one true "self" against the "others" that self passes or performs drag as, or to culminate in a final moment of revelation that returns to an authentic originary self. In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guatarri argue that residing in a place of "becoming" that is rhizomatic rather than linear/hierarchical (arboreal) creates a possibility of a different kind of reality where the focus is not on origins, beginnings and ending, or singular subjectivity (1987: 21, 55, 239, 293) but instead on intensities and variations (rather than authenticities), an intermezzo space which "avoids any orientation towards a culmination point or external end" (22). Their argument is one possible avenue towards what the beginning of this chapter discussed as the postmodern flattening of meaning which allows conversation to shift away from singular truths and objective reality. In the case of identity construction and enactment, Deleuze and Guattari's concepts help lead towards a possibility other than singular authentic identifications that must be adhered to and must define a singular whole self. While, as Kellner and Best point out, it is somewhat unclear what this possible alternative is, they nonetheless lay out a partial road away from the confines of modernist ideology and regimes of Truth and Authentic Identity. I argue, based on the preceding points, that Stephen Colbert is an example of how Deleuze and Guattari's rhizomatic becoming can be mainstreamed and, at least within the restrictions of a mediated reality, create new queer combinatory possibilities of actionable politics, fictive

realities, and authentic fakes. Beginning with the so-called “mediated reality” that is assumed to limit Colbert, we have already seen how Colbert and the Colbert Nation refuse to be confined to the media world (though of course they use it extensively to interesting ends) but instead take multiple routes to confuse the boundaries of “media” and “reality”. This can be understood through Deleuze and Guattari’s rhizome:

unlike trees or their roots, the rhizome connects any point to any other point, and its traits are not necessarily linked to traits of the same nature; it brings into play very different regimes of signs, and even nonsign states. The rhizome is reducible neither to the One nor the multiple. ... It is composed not of units but of dimensions, or rather directions in motion. It has neither beginning nor end, but always a middle (*milieu*) from which it grows and which it overflows. ... The rhizome operates by variation, expansion, conquest, capture, offshoots. Unlike the graphic arts, drawing, or photography, unlike tracings, the rhizome pertains to a map that must be produced, constructed, a map that is always detachable, connectable, reversible, modifiable, and has multiple entryways and exits and its own lines of flight. (21)

As discussed in the sections above, Colbert and his Nation take novel routes in parallel dimensions of media, such as the Wikipedia and Super PAC examples, in order to make a multiple reality – or at least show how reality itself is already so often reversible, multiple, and/or modifiable. This is effected in part by Colbert’s passing-in-drag act discussed in the preceding sections. His unique refusals of normative/traditional passing and drag narratives opens up this middling space for his audience. Deleuze and Guattari write that “A rhizome may be broken, shattered at a given spot, but it will start up again on one of its old lines, or on new lines” (9). Colbert’s concurrent avowals and disavowals of the “character” nature of his television show function to make the idea of authenticity irrelevant. While he may on occasion “admit” to the construction of his *Colbert Report* pundit, this admission doesn’t change anything. He always picks it right back up and returns to such reality-bending activities as testifying before Congress and getting the FEC to approve a satirical Super PAC that is able to effect “real” political ads in the normative media sphere. These actions are entirely dependent on the double-

or triple-speak of a “fictional” character that regardless of his fictionality (or because of it) garners the vocal and monetary support of a legion of fans willing to participate in the simultaneous production of something and nothing that are the actions of Colbert and his Nation. The language of truth, authenticity, and reality become painfully limiting here, such as in the cases mentioned above of “tampering” with Wikipedia. User-generated content that became a culturally legitimate source of information, became for Colbert and his Nation a source of then possibly tampering with reality itself – or at least (alternately) creating a different reality that, within the confines of accepted “truth” dictated by user-agreement, plays by the rules in order to question the very idea of an accepted source truth, an action ironically followed (unironically) by followers of Sarah Palin. Both performances of new truth-creation are ultimately fleeting – with a return to “original” content eventually – but this fleeting possibility is the process of Colbert, a process we may see more and more of as others pick up on this new function of producing the reality you want to exist in. As seen in the Palin example, whether or not this alternate reality serves the forces of progressive or conservative ideals is still in flux. But what is significant here, particularly in the case of Colbert (though one might argue that Palin could very well be a similar case), is what Deleuze and Guattari term the “becoming”:

Becoming produces nothing other than itself. We fall into a false alternative if we say that you either imitate or you are. What is real is the becoming itself, the block of becoming, not the supposedly fixed term through which that which becomes passes. ... The becoming-animal of the human being is real, even if the animal the human being becomes is not; and the becoming-other of the animal is real, even if that something other it becomes is not. ... a becoming lacks a subject distinct from itself; ... it has no term, since its term in turn exists only as taken up in another becoming of which it is the subject, and which coexists, forms a block, with the first. This is the principle according to which there is a reality specific to becoming. ... Becoming is involutory, involution is creative. ... to involve is to form a block that runs its own line 'between' the terms in play and beneath assignable relations. (238-239, emphasis added)

It is the italicized portions in the quote above that differentiates Colbert. His passing-in-drag is always of the middling sort – and his expressed purpose is always nothing other than the act itself. He refuses the assignable relations of media and politics by always running that line “between” real and fake, allowing for the becoming itself to be the aim all along.

Colbert opens this possibility up to his Nation as well. As the oft quoted parenthetical of his book *I Am America (And So Can You!)* illuminates, not only Colbert but anyone – you – can be part of this becoming as well. And this is exactly what his Nation did at the October 30, 2010 rally in Washington D.C. dubbed the “The Rally to Restore Sanity And/Or Fear.” Put on by Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert, the rally drew roughly 250,000 people (as per CNN and GoogleEarth satellite imaging count) and perplexed cable news media three days before the midterm election. While Stewart used the rally as a sort-of platform to advocate for moderation, compromise, and reason, Colbert staged a “Formidable Opponent” with Stewart that he attempted to “win” for fear by bringing out a gigantic puppet of himself that mimicked his every move and that he called “Fearzilla.” But it seemed that what came to define the rally was not the “Sanity” or “Fear” in its title, but the “And/Or.” Just as Colbert and his Nation function in the constant shaky ground of enacting and/or advocating something and nothing at most times, the rally’s main accomplishment was to entirely perplex the mainstream media. Covered by CNN, MSNBC, and Fox News throughout the day with all the channels alternating between it and rallies in West Virginia by Sarah Palin and Ted Nugent, in Connecticut with President Obama, and others in Ohio, Nevada, and Alaska, Jessica Yellin on CNN labeled it a “non-political political rally” – even while it was being discussed as part of their “Ballot Bowl” coverage. What is perhaps most notable about the rally is that while Colbert succeeded in continuing his own farcical performance of pundit passing-in-drag that crosses boundaries between assignable

relations of fear/sanity, real/fake, pundit/comedian, his location so far outside the norm seems to have shored up Stewart's credibility. So while the rally served multiple functions for Colbert and his Nation – not least among them being both something and nothing simultaneously – it in effect cemented Stewart's place as a “real” pundit by juxtaposing him to Colbert's mimetic performance that refuses to be categorized. The juxtaposition worked outside of Colbert's show to force him into a category in a way not usually seen on *The Colbert Report*.

If Colbert holds the possibility of an integration of a postmodern becoming or a queering of the mainstream where we can occupy a continuous middling ground where authenticity is no longer part of the equation, and we can operate on a plain of existence where fake and real intertwine and identity can be multiple, the question remains how and to what purposes can this be integrated into our current socio-political landscape. Unfortunately, even though the Rally had some inklings of being able to occupy multiple positions simultaneously, it also managed to re-contain itself in the larger worlds of punditry, politics, and media – though it should also be noted that within the smaller universe of the Colbert Nation it still managed to maintain the elusive ground of being simultaneously something and nothing that they continue to embrace (as seen in the Super PAC support). While the transfer rate of queering mainstream culture may leave much to be desired, the shifting and multiple planes of satire, drag, and passing through which Colbert and his Nation refute ideals of the real and authenticity are still alive and well, and growing further out into the confusing overlapping realities they create through truthiness, wikeality, and Super PACs.

Just as the queered inscription over his fireplace places “seeming” over “being” in a twist that holds up as ideal the in-between space of the traditional passing narrative that is between set identities, his “The Wörd” segment holds another clue to where we can go through interrogation

of his satire/parody/news as a unique form of passing-in-drag: while the double and sometimes triple speak of the “Wørd” segment is interesting in itself, it is the very title that holds even more promise: the “ø” in the title is the Greek letter with multiple meanings that include latitude (in cartography and navigation), “internal or effective angle of friction” (in geometry), a generic act (in philosophy), the imaginary phallus and phallic signification (in Lacanian algebra), and the golden ration (in mathematics) (wikipedia.org). The golden ration is associated with the “incomprehensibility of God” and “arguably the most irrational of all irrational number” that crops up in all kinds of math and physics – not least among them the science of black holes where it explains the contradiction whereby they get hotter as they lose heat (cevini.com). For Colbert and his Nation, the “ø” points to ideas of becoming and queering that signify the unending possibilities that can be found in contradictions and the irrational power of seeming over being that opens space for authenticity and the “real” to become irrelevant and thus to shift the conversation towards other ideas about, constructions of, and socio-cultural significance of identity, politics, media, truth, multiplicity, reality, passing, and drag.

CONCLUSION

PASSING-IN-DRAG TOWARD A BETTER TOMORROW, TOMORROW

“Queerness is essentially about the rejection of a here and now and an insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility for another world.” (Jose Muñoz, Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity 2009: 1)

Hedwig and the Angry Inch (2001) began as a little-known independent film before winning international acclaim at the Sundance Film Festival and national box office success. Based on a play by the same name, this musical follows its namesake protagonist as she performs across the country following her ex-boyfriend’s concert tour in an effort to get him to admit he stole her songs. Hedwig is a transsexual whose botched surgery is the impetus for the naming of her band (as well as the movie). Her style often traverses the field between passing and drag and the context for her surgery – in order to marry an American GI and escape Communist East Germany – complicates the story in interesting ways. However, it is not Hedwig who grabs my attention in the context of the arguments of this dissertation but her back-up singer and sometimes friend/lover Yitzak. Yitzak – who yearns to be like Hedwig, to perform as a drag queen, and often lovingly pets or tries on Hedwig’s wigs – is played by Miriam Shor in drag king regalia. Outside the context of the film, this presents a twist into the already gender-bending story that refuses to paint drag, femininity, masculinity, or transexuality as stable or static categories. An American woman dons masculine drag to pass as an eastern European male character whose diegetic drive is to perform as a drag queen. The worlds of femininity and masculinity, male and female are blurred and confused when the borders between filmic and non-filmic realities combine for the viewer in-the-know. Like Divine in *Hairspray*, Shor’s passing-in-drag works as a campy inside joke that hails the queer viewer to see multiple layers of performance and performativity. Gender and ethnic passing and drag work together on different

filmic and non-filmic levels to create a picture so dependent on overlapping contexts that no clear message emerges about the construction of identity other than that it is constructed. Questions of authenticity are pushed aside by Hedwig's in-between identity as well as her journey to it and the film encourages viewers (as well as other characters) to see and participate in the different realities this may create for the characters involved.

Seeing Hedwig and Yitzak as passing-in-drag returns us to the main questions and arguments of this dissertation. Passing strives for authenticity, drag expressly does not. When the two are combined the ambivalences of both are synthesized in a contradictory equation where the performance of identity can simultaneously pass and fail. Passing and failing occur concurrently, creating a double reality where gender portrayal is both successful and unsuccessful, obvious and hidden, proliferating multiple options and possibilities of gender and ethnic identity construction that don't depend on singularity and authenticity but on multiplicity and performance. But in *Hedwig*, all of this is still contained within the fictional diegetic world of the movie. While the film challenges viewers to rethink their binary assumptions about gender identity, it still keeps these questions and ambivalences confined to a filmic world. This is where the key differences introduced by Stephen Colbert in particular are most evident.

Stephen Colbert's Super PAC experiment is the prime example of this. At once commentary and action, the changing face and constant revision of the Super PAC enacts this production of multiplicity and performs a new ideology of flux, fluidity, and the dual possibility of passing and failing at the same time. The logo itself offers insight here: the infinity symbol enjoys prominent display within the logo as does the Super PAC's motto of "Creating a Better Tomorrow Tomorrow." At once joke and critique, the Super PAC logo draws attentions to the seemingly never-ending capitalist push for more money, more power. The infinite possibilities of

how to accomplish this are both the goal and critique of the PAC and it therefore both succeeds and fails at the same time. It is passing-in-drag because it both creates a “real” Super PAC, or passes for a Super PAC, with its large donations and public advertising while simultaneously using hyperbole and excess to reveal the inner workings of all Super PACs and their quest for money and power. The call to build a better tomorrow tomorrow is an intentional call to action that simultaneously requires no actual action – pointing out the contradictions of Super PACs that claim to do for their donators while in the end accomplishing mostly just to generate money. Colbert’s Super PAC uses the infinite possibility of passing and failing in order not to tear down this contradiction but utilize it and expand it in order to reveal the holes in the usual formation and employment of Super PACs while also showing how these can be repurposed and reevaluated in order to make them do something different – just as drag does with gender (or race, class, sexuality, etc.).

In Chapter Five, I synthesized some postmodern and queer theory in order to more fully address the unique position of Colbert. An ongoing critique of postmodern theory is that it often tears down without building up. It critiques modernity’s ideological constraints of binaries, authenticity, and Truth but doesn’t usually give an alternative. But this is where the infusion of queer theory into the postmodern ideal can be productive because it offers up reasons for this refusal of alternatives as well as some possible places where different kinds of performances and ideas that are not part of the normal way of envisioning change and challenges can be enacted. In *The Queer Art of Failure* Halberstam argues that “Conversation rather than mastery indeed seems to offer one very concrete way of being in relation to another form of being and knowing without seeking to measure that life modality by the standards that are external to it” (12). Halberstam recognizes the push for mastery, for explanation, for solid knowledge, as part of the

normative ideal that holds back other kinds of knowledge and other optics for understanding and being in the world.

In this dissertation, I have tried to participate in a conversation with texts and theories that refuses conclusion. The open-ended option of discussion without decision, conversation without deeming expertise, is part of what creates space for an optics of passing-in-drag that reveals the presence of multiple conflicting realities that do not need to be rectified in one Truth.

Halberstam writes that

Rather than just arguing for a reevaluation of these standards of passing and failing, *The Queer Art of Failure* dismantles the logics of success and failure with which we currently live. Under certain circumstances failing, losing, forgetting, unmaking, undoing, unbecoming, not knowing may in fact offer more creative, more cooperative, more surprising ways of [3] being in the world. Failing is something queers do and have always done exceptionally well; for queers failure can be style, to cite Quentin Crisp, or a way of life, to cite Foucault, and it can stand in contrast to the grim scenarios of success that depend on upon ‘trying and trying again.’ In fact if success requires so much effort, then maybe failure is easier in the long run and offers different rewards. (2-3)

This idea is what precipitated this dissertation which has attempted not to answer question with concrete answers but to interrogate the formation of these normative questions themselves and offer a different take on how identity can be formed when the other ideals constructing it are challenged and changed. Halberstam asks, “What kinds of reward can failure offer us? Perhaps most obviously, failure allows us to escape the punishing norms that discipline behavior and manage human development with the goal of delivering us from unruly childhoods to orderly and predictable adulthoods. Failure preserves some of the wondrous anarchy of childhood and disturbs the supposedly clean boundaries between adults and children, winners and losers” (3). Passing-in-drag takes this a step further by challenging the very divisions between success and failure and opens up the possibility of doing both – thus making the reward for failure a dismantling of the structures of success. To pass-in-drag, as Colbert does as well as Divine and

to a certain extent Cher, tears down the walls not only between identities but questions their very formation, challenges the lines between truth and fiction and success and failure, and insists on multiple realities that can be seen not as conflicting but as rhizomatically all simultaneously possible.

To follow Halberstam's question, this dissertation asks not only what rewards can be gained through failure but questions what counts as failing, what counts as success, and how combining the two "opposites" works to negate the assumption that other ideals are also opposing or competing as well. The combination of passing and failing drives away from the fields of truth and authenticity where the assumptions is grounded in an either/or ideology where there is only one "real" answer and replaces it with a version of what Halberstam addresses as the possibility of "another form of being and knowing without seeking to measure that life modality by the standards that are external to it" (12). Passing-in-drag does this through the modification of what standards are considered external or internal as well. But as always context is key – it still depends on the text, on the reception, and on the production to be able enact these changes in meaningful ways that can work to dismantle the logic of authenticity and singular reality.

Chapter One of this dissertation addressed how many media example may make small inroads through traditional passing and/or drag but often only enough to then be brought back into the fold of status quo assumptions and productions of identity and the ideal of authenticity. A trope used since ancient Greece (and possibly beyond), taking on the identity of another – be it gendered, racial, class, or just acting in general – often works within mainstream constructs of reality and authenticity to reinforce ideologies already in power. From men playing women in Greek and Japanese theatre, to blackface minstrelsy on stage and screen, to *Tootsie*, *Mrs.*

Doubtfire, and *Tropic Thunder* – there are hundreds of example that show how drag and passing can be coopted to reinscribe identities in stable, singular, authentic categories that keep hierarchical binaries intact. But this is not interesting – we already know how mainstream culture often work. What is important is those examples that work hard within the mainstream or sometimes just slightly outside of it to create new pictures and ideals of identity and reality that refuse to use the language or ideals of authenticity and singular truth or to function within the binary system at all.

In Chapter Two, I addressed the 60-year career of Cher. Over the many decades of her music and film career, Cher’s ethnic ambiguity and gendered bio-queen status work together to create an ambivalence around identity the refuses an original or authentic identity. Cher employs drag in her “real” Self through campy femininity and shifting excessive ethnic representations and passing as “authentic” identities in her fictional movies. In tandem, these two kinds of performances result in contradictory revelations of identity: her fictional selves are more “authentic” than her “real” Self when addressed within the confines of normative identitarian politics. This forces us to find new ways of viewing and consuming her performances. Using the optics of passing and drag together and applying them the Cher’s persona reveals how she performatively constructs multiple shifting identities of ethnicity and an excessive campy gender that is “feminine” but aligns more with male drag femininity than socially acceptable female femininity. Cher’s performances and performativity draw links between camp, masquerade, and the Unruly Woman that combine across gender and ethnicity to produce an ambiguity that can potentially create new realities that challenge the myth of authenticity through their simultaneous deployment.

Drawing on the combination of camp and the Unruly Woman in Chapter Two, Chapter Three concentrates on how these are synthesized with abjection and the grotesque by Divine and John Waters in order to take us even further outside the constructs of authenticity and a singular reality. Divine and Waters' films deploy the grounded bodily "real" of abjection with the hyperbole of the grotesque to create Divine's passing-in-drag. The abject, grotesque, campy drag context of Waters' films as a whole and the carnivalesque/camp audience in-the-know construct a reality in which Divine's drag passes both within the film and to censors and sometimes a mainstream audience as well. This combination constructs a reality in which a man in obvious drag can *be* a woman, revealing not only the fiction of gender but the fiction of authenticity as well.

Chapter Four departs somewhat from the previous chapters in its attention to examples that ultimately act to shore up authenticity and singular reality in order to address the connections between passing, truth, authenticity, reality, and education that are that starting point for Chapter Five. Texts like *Black Like Me*, *Soul Sister*, *Bessie Yellowhair*, *Self-Made Man*, *Nickel and Dime*, and *Black. White.* are expressly about passing and the traversal of identity categories. But they all return to the fold of static singular identity by positioning this passing as a tactic to educate about the experience of Others. By making education the goal of these "experiments," they all position passing as a tactic of inauthenticity that can be used but must also always be abandoned in favor of one's true authentic identity. While these examples fall back into the fold of those addressed in Chapter One, they are addressed here in order to juxtapose them to a text that utilizes similar techniques and goals to different ends: Stephen Colbert.

Using the information gleaned in Chapter Four on how journalism and passing are used for educational purposes, Chapter Five addresses how the addition of satire and drag can be not only educational but contribute to a new optics or epistemology about truth and reality. This new passing-in-drag optics (introduced in Chapter Three) creates a space in which authenticity doesn't matter and identity can be multiple, contradictory, and changing. Like a traditional drag audience, the Colbert Nation is a large part of this new epistemology such that the effects of passing-in-drag and the challenges to singular original truth and reality are enacted not only within the media text but outside of it as well – thus widening the field of impact and potential for change.

Together, the chapters of this dissertation work to create an optics of passing-in-drag that can be used towards the queer ends described by both Halberstam and Jose Muñoz. Muñoz writes:

Queerness is that thing that lets us feel that this world is not enough, that indeed something is missing. Often we can glimpse the worlds proposed and promised by queerness in the realm of the aesthetic. The aesthetic, especially the queer aesthetic, frequently contains blueprints and schemata of a forward-dawning futurity. Both the ornamental and the quotidian can contain a map of the utopia that is queerness. Turning to the aesthetic in the case of queerness is nothing like an escape from the social realm, insofar as queer aesthetics map future social relations. (1)

Colbert, Divine, and Cher contribute to a queer aesthetic that can help – with the aid of their audiences – to the creation of this new map of social relations. Applying the optics of passing-in-drag to these texts reveals not only what is missing but also how our ontology as a culture can potentially change to create more truths, more realities, and more ways of being and interacting with the world around us. The possibility of passing and failing simultaneously that it provides creates a challenge to the binary systems of opposition that rule our ontology and epistemology by making spaces in which the fake is real and fiction can be fact. Halberstam argues that

“Through the use of manifestos, a range of political tactics, and new technologies of representation, radical utopians continue to search for different ways of being in the world and being in relation to one another than those already prescribed for the liberal and consumer subject” (2). Colbert, the most recent example used in this dissertation, is just one example of how passing-in-drag can combine the use of manifestos, political tactics, and representation to imagine a radical utopia where not only identities but realities can be multiple and fluid – continuing the conversation towards a futurity that is not dependent on authenticity, originality, or static singular ideals of being and acting in the world. Passing-in-drag combines knowledges about identity boundary crossing such that theoretical boundary crossings are necessary. The combinations of queer, feminist, postmodern, critical race, and cultural theories required by this optics facilitates a synthesis of them that contributes to an epistemology that can be both unified and contradictory. Just as the combination of passing an drag reveals the potential to both pass and fail in the same act, the optics of passing-in-drag produces an epistemology where the contradictions between theories does not mean that they are not compatible but that their different truths can be used together to construct the basis on which to create the multiplicity of identity, reality, and truths that contribute to a better future: a better tomorrow, tomorrow.

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