CHER-ING/SHARING ACROSS BOUNDARIES

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Abstract

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.

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, p. 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)[1] 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).[2] 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 miscegenation and anti-miscegenation laws (Daniel, 2002); to the 1800s

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1. View more information at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pat_%28Saturday_Night_Live%29 (Pat (Saturday Night Live), n.d.).
2. View video and more information at http://health.discovery.com/videos/pregnant-man-pregnant-man-on-discovery-health-channel.html (Discovery Communications, 2008).

with sexual inversion science that strove to concretely define (and medicalize) homosexuality (Foucault, 1978); or even further with the desire to hierarchalize male 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 subsequent 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 article, I will address the productions of such identities in the past half a century in one sustained popular icon: Cher illustrates the production of gender and ethnicity as performed identity. In this article 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, p. 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,[3] to four seasons starring in *The Sonny and Cher Comedy Hour*[4] (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

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3. See image at http://www.imdb.com/media/rm3345192960/nm0000333
4. See image at http://www.imdb.com/media/rm3412301824/tt0066717

1999 ("Singles Charts," 2003) before starting a successful Las Vegas show at Caesar's Palace in 2008.[5] 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 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 affair[6] 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

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5. http://www.cherworld.com/cherphotos/displayimage.php?album=51&pos=35
6. 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 Fleshy" 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).

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, p. 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" (p. 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 man's arms, whenever she simply let that heavenly-flexed neckbear 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" (p. 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 a more recent movie, *Tea with Mussolini*, 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 Femininity

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).[7] 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 such as *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, p. 125). Cher's own performativity of excessive gender, in this case a kind of female-female drag, enables

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

the large gay following (Bono, 1996), 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.

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 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, p. 1). Jayne Wark also uses performativity in her address of performance and argues that Butler oversimplified the complex nature of performance (2006, p. 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" (p. 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" (p. 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 skin[8] 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 a 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, p. 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, p. 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, p. 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 focusing on the outward appearances of role, implies that roles, and, in particular, sex roles, are superficial–a matter of style" (Babuscio, 1990, p. 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 '70s[9] and '80s,[10] but more recently in the 1990s[11] and into the present[12] 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.[13] 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, p. 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, p. 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 humor to examine social and cultural forms" (p. 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

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9. See image at http://www.imdb.com/media/rm3746142208/nm0000333
10. See image at http://www.imdb.com/media/rm1436194816/nm0000333
11. See image at http://www.cherworld.com/cherphotos/displayimage.php?album=13&pos=69
12. 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
13. 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).

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8. 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

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.[14]

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 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 identi-

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

fies 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 "Note 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, p. 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" (p. 26) and that by flaunting femininity it "holds it at a distance" (p. 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 Vegas[15] 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, p. 119). It espouses youth worshipping, not youth–another irony that utilizes the "outer truth" to reveal the lack of any inner one (Booth, 1999, p. 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 originary 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, p. 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 oneself" and maintains the spectacle of female masquerade by women creates unruly representations that can be transgressive, dangerous, and produce a "loss of boundaries" (p. 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 originary 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, p. 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,[16] San Diego,[17] Miami,[18] Vegas,[19] Chicago,[20] Dallas,[21] and Tucson.[22] 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 to which Cher is 'real'" (p. 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*

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

16. See image at http://www.screamingqueens.com/files/images/galleries/celebrity_impersonators/0145_Cher-RJ-2_s.jpg
17. See image at http://www.screamingqueens.com/files/images/galleries/California/0100-Cher-CM-San_Diego-2.jpg
18. See image at http://www.screamingqueens.com/files/images/galleries/Florida/0095-Cher-Miami-EL.jpg
19. See image at http://www.screamingqueens.com/files/images/galleries/Nevada/0125-Cher-AS-Vegas-2.jpg
20. See image at http://www.screamingqueens.com/files/images/galleries/Illinois/0030-Cher-CS-Chicago-1.jpg
21. See image at http://www.screamingqueens.com/files/images/galleries/Texas/0010-Cher-WS-Dallas-1.jpg
22. See image at http://www.screamingqueens.com/files/images/galleries/Arizona/0005-Cher-Tucson-AZ-2.jpg

where "Cher" is performed and re-performed by Cher and Jack as well as a Cher doll. The episode "Gypsies, Tramps and Weed"[23] 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?
>
> 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]
>
> 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–á la her most famous scene in the camp classic *Moonstruck*[24] 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, p. 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 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.

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

24. 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).

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. 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 in similar ways to 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, p. 17). Similar to Butler's (1993) argument that drag challenges originary 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" (p. 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" (p. 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, p. 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"[25] 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 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, p. 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." While, as addressed earlier in this article, 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.

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

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's[26] 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 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, p. 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" (pp. 186-187). I argue that the same can be true for the parody of ethnic

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26. 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.

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, p. 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, 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-biographical 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,[27] is at the beginning of the film the U.S. "Other" to English Lady Hester (Maggie Smith), who among

27. See image at http://www.imdb.com/media/rm45719040/tt0120857

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 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, p. 105). The shift of what identities mean and how they are emphasized is representa-

tive 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 American-ness 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, p. 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.

fuse 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.

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 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 re-

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