

# Between Mimicry and Difference: Performing Elvis(es)

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Lookalike. Tribute artist. Impersonator. Mimic. Body double. Decoy. Stand-in. Just some of the terms that describe someone performing as somebody else. These “representers” embody many key postmodern and poststructural ideas of dualities and multiplicities. In this article I assert that tribute artists reiterate mythic histories of pop cultural icons and their relationships with audiences; create, enact and reperform fan communities; and construct and deconstruct fannish and performance notions of “transformation.”

This is an interdisciplinary research enquiry, engaging with analytical frameworks and ideas from performance, visual art, popular culture, and fan studies. As such, certain terms and definitional differences exist across disciplines, and I outline my understanding and use of key terms for clarification. I will also use language idiomatic to fan communities, which may be traditionally read in an academic text as colloquial or slang; however, it is appropriate to discuss fandoms using the language they themselves speak.

This interdisciplinary foreground can also be seen in my methodological approach. I use an autoethnographic method championed by key scholars of fan studies (see Hills 63-90) to investigate the performance of “tribute” and representation of Elvis, via my participation in the 2013 Live Art Development Agency workshop *Probing Elvis*, led by Nigel Barrett and Louise Mari of Shunt Theater. This included a visit to Europe’s largest Elvis lookalike-competition *The Elvies*, in Porthcawl, South Wales that same year. I interrogate my position as fan/non-fan and participant/observer within this research, and within my engagement with the various fan communities and their cultural outputs.

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One position that stays constant, however, is that of myself as artist-researcher. I use a practice-research method informed by a performance practice-as-research lineage by creating and analyzing a practice-experiment, *Vaseline and Rose Oil*, which was performed as part of live art festival *Experimentica* at Chapter Arts Centre, Cardiff in 2013. This autoethnographic and practice-research methodological approach means that I employ the first-person perspective in this article.

Throughout my practice-research I utilize a poststructural methodological questioning of singularities, authenticity and essentialism. The poststructural premise is that texts do not have an “essential” meaning; rather, no one correct “reading” of literature, historical accounts, documentary images, artworks and performances exists. This notion is integral to critical iterative practices (such as fanfiction) and opens up the invitation for the creative practitioner to take ownership of the text and re-write it. From this autoethnography, I position celebrity re-presentation as fan labor: re-claiming and re-working the originary’s personae as their own. I use the term “originary” as distinct from “original.” The latter term infers a hierarchical preference to the icon or text that spawns “copies.” “Originary” moves away from this binary of the authentic and mimesis and connotes an inherent productive quality.

I analyze my experiences as both audience member and artist-researcher to unpack how tribute works as an embodied fan performance mode. I apply theoretical frameworks from performance and fan studies fields to do so, including Owen G. Parry’s “fictional realness,” John Fiske’s “producerly texts,” and Erving Goffman’s “frame analysis.”

### *The Elvies: Frame, Game and Play in Porthcawl*

In 2013 I participated in a Live Art Development Agency DIY<sup>1</sup> workshop entitled *Probing Elvis*, in South Wales, UK. Nigel Barratt and Louise Mari of the theater company Shunt developed this artist-led workshop and aimed to give performance-makers the chance to reflect on our own practices by exploring the working methods and performances of tribute artists. We began by meeting at *The Elvies*, the largest Elvis tribute artist competition and festival in Europe, taking place in

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<sup>1</sup> Whereas DIY is traditionally an acronym for “do-it-yourself,” the Live Art Development Agency are specifically referring to the fact that their program of workshops forms part of an unusual and innovative professional development scheme; developed by artists, for artists.

Porthcawl, a small seaside town in South Wales. The workshop participants came from diverse creative practices, but our interests coalesced around the idea of performing as someone recognized as a cultural icon, and how to re-present him to new audiences. Few of us were actual Elvis fans—honestly, at that stage, I could not name more than a handful of his most famous songs.

Our first action as a group was to attend some of the performances. While wandering towards the venue of the Elvis competition, Porthcawl Pavillion Theater, I realized how outnumbered we were by Elvis lookalikes: fans dressed as their idol regardless of whether they were performing, and representing him, with varying degrees of success. Once within the theater, the impersonators' level of professionalism and commitment to "becoming" Elvis became clear. The dozens of performers we saw were all excellent entertainers in their own right, sometimes in a bizarre, "end-of-pier" way.<sup>2</sup> We saw the current youngest-ever Elvis representer perform, Elvises with dodgy voices but incredible dancing performed, and there were gospel-singing Elvises, sex gods, caricatures, and Elvises who were older than Elvis ever lived to be. In short, just about every iteration of Elvis imaginable competed for awards such as the "Gold Lamé Jacket," "Best '68 Special," "Best Movie Elvis," "Best Gospel Elvis," "Best Vegas Elvis," and, like any good awards ceremony, the "Lifetime Achievement Award."

Something strange happened as the evening's performances wore on. As we got to the finals of the competition, our workshop group began to behave like fans. We shoved our way to the front of the auditorium, covertly elbowing out the crowd already gathered. Unlike them, we did not know the words to every song. We had not been following this particular lookalike's fortunes on the Elvis tribute artist circuit. But we cheered and whooped as if we were watching the real deal. When Gordon Davis performed his category-winning Vegas-era set, workshop pals and I were even jumping up and down to receive one of very sweaty kisses from his on-stage Elvis. How did we, seeming non-fans, come to act and perform as screaming Elvis fans while Davis performed Elvis?

Both performer and audience here worked together to co-create the performed Elvis, within a frame allowing us to both recognize the imitation or "fakery" and suspend that recognition within the performance. While within the Porthcawl Pavillion, Elvis performers and audience mutually locate and construct a

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<sup>2</sup> "End-of-pier" is a British-English term, referencing acts shown in small theaters built on the end of seaside piers. It can be derogatory, referring to broad comedy or light entertainment.

Goffmanian “distinctive interpretative frame,” in which we accept a hybrid performance of fantasy and reality (Goffman, *Frame Analysis* 26). As sociologist Kerry O. Ferris states in her ethnographic research of celebrity impersonators, this frame creates a collaborative and conspiratorial game between performer and audience (60). *The Elvies* audience’s tacit agreement to overlook the aesthetic, cultural and performance accuracy of the performers’ manifestations of Elvis ensured that we stayed within the impersonation frame; such acceptance represents an example of rules of irrelevance within the “play” of *The Elvies*. For Goffman, the rule of irrelevance encompasses what is and is not attended to within a given encounter or frame (*Encounters*). His example is a board game which can use either bottle tops or gold figurines as playing pieces. The structure’s “obligations [are] fulfilled and expectations realized” (Goffman, *Encounters* 11), regardless of the physical and aesthetic attributes. If we continually pointed out discrepancies in the Elvis re-presentations—“he didn’t have that paunch in 1968,” “that was a bum note,” “call that a hip gyration”—we would be dismantling the rules of the game, as well as being quite a mean audience.

When we were vying for the attention of “Elvis,” as we see the “original” Elvis fans in archive footage of studio performances doing, everyone in the theater was accepting the “deception” of the impersonators as Elvis, while simultaneously we all acknowledged that no one was deceived. It was a performance game that enabled us to engage in an uncynical and naïve viewership while we performed as fans. We wanted to be “fooled,” even though we never truly were, mirroring Richard Schechner’s argument that audiences must be engaged in the “play” of a performance (103-4). The audience became co-conspirators, willing Elvis onto the stage, enabling the transformation of the performer from Elvis-fan to Elvis-embodier.

The biggest stumbling block to accepting that we were seeing the “real” Elvis is that we all knew him to be dead (with the exception of some lovers of conspiracy theories among the fans). In literal terms, we were not seeing his reanimated body on stage. But in other ways, the Elvis impersonators were zombie-like in their both/and re-presentations. They appear as a Derridean undecidable: they appear as both fan and idol, present and absent (Derrida 42-3). In this sense, they are both alive and dead. A confusing hall-of-mirrors quality existed in the performances of the impersonators, which moved back and forth between sincere imitation, parody, and moments that revealed their own positions as fans of the originary. When not before the audience, the impersonators discussed their favorite Elvis songs or the

moments they fell in love with Elvis' music; they momentarily removed the façade of re-presenting Elvis and positioned themselves alongside the audience as fans. This "metacommunication"<sup>3</sup> or bracketing<sup>4</sup> allowed the audience to "see double"; revealing the performance of multiple personae and signaling the audience's multiple levels of awareness (Schechner 103).

Returning to Ferris' use of Goffman, the "frame sophistication" in celebrity impersonation requires a level of cooperative management from performer and audience of the multiple contextual layers and performances of self/other, both understanding this and "holding it to one side" (62). For Ferris, this marks the performance mode of tribute as a liminal space in which external realities are suppressed while alternative actualities are created (75). Victor Turner posits that liminal spaces are contexts which temporarily dissolve one's sense of identity and everyday social structures, often within a ritual context (95). Here I diverge from Ferris' use of Turner's liminal: tribute performances seem more "liminoid" than liminal. As liminoid, they present more an optional ritual rather than required rite-of-passage; a temporary break from society, with play and leisure at their heart. Rock concerts, and indeed tribute concerts, are therefore liminoid, while a graduation or wedding ceremony would be liminal.

My initial engagement with *The Elvies*, as a non-Elvis fan, had a light-hearted curiosity, and it did not occur to me to read it as a site of ritual. However, there were (temporary) transformations within the performance frame of tribute. Audience members acted simultaneously as non-fans and fans, and performers appeared as both amateur entertainers and iconic rock god(s). Building on Turner's broader definition of the limen, performance academic Susan Broadhurst states that hybridization characterizes liminal performances: indeterminacy, a lack of aura, and the collapse of the hierarchical distinction between high and popular culture (11-3). *The Elvies* performances demonstrated all these characteristics and more.

Broadhurst's invocation of "aura" connotes the mythic status and performance-presence of a cultural icon such as Elvis. It also reminds us of Walter Benjamin's use of the term and its relation to authenticity and presence. Discussing an actor

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<sup>3</sup> Schechner (103) draws on social scientist Gregory Bateson's theory of metacommunication as a signal that frames other signals contained within or after it. The example is a dog playfighting with its owner; the "nip" of the dog within this frame means play and love rather than harm.

<sup>4</sup> For Goffman, bracketing creates a frame within a frame which signals a behavior that might not otherwise occur within the wider cultural frame, for example, undressing in a life drawing class or doctor's surgery rather than in a public street (*Frame Analysis* 254-61).

performing on film for the first time, Benjamin states that the actor is now also concerned with performing himself, rather than solely the character; but in reproduction, the aura disappears: “for aura is tied to his presence; there can be no replica of it” (XI). As Philip Auslander argues, what musicians really perform on stage is not just music, but first and foremost “their own identities as musicians, their musical personae” (102). These personae are expected to be similar from performance to performance but are also newly produced at each performance by a working consensus with the audience.

Lorena Turner’s classifications of lookalikes, impersonators and tribute artists creates a hierarchy of representation, implying that the more “accurate” the mimicry of the celebrity, the more successful the performance (122-3). But for me as an audience-member at *The Elvies*, my “value” assessment of the performers moved away from focusing on the perfect simulation. The joy of *The Elvies* and the representer culture performed within and around the awards was, to return to Broadhurst, the collapse of assessments of high or popular culture and notions of performance rigor and polish. Binaries of amateur and virtuoso were dismantled. As one Elvis tribute artist stated when asked if he was an impersonator, “you can’t impersonate ‘genius’.” This mindset frees the Elvis representers to find their own transformative performance niche within the culture of “the King.”

### Performing Tribute: Celebrity Representation as Fan Labor

I argue that representers, particularly tribute acts, perform fanac, or fannish activity. Fanac, also known as fan labor, includes fanfiction, fan art, music and costuming based on pre-existing fictional and real-world people. Fanac is an important outlet for fans to express their creativity and dedication to the canon of a fictitious, celebrated, or mythic world (Duffett; Hellekson; Hills; Stanfill and Condis; Stein; Stein et al.). Fanac also serves as a context for those who created the original cultural output, such as writers and actors, to engage with their fans. Fan scholar Matt Hills positions impersonation practices as fanac; Elvis impersonators are “disciples of the text” and of the “icon” himself (166). Hills introduces the term “performative consumption” to capture the contradictions between “use-value” and “exchange-value” which fan culture represents and stages via tribute (158-9, 171). The term also refers to the dialectic between “self-reflexivity” and “self-absence” performed by tribute (171).

Many fanac creators term their outputs “transformative”; this wording becomes key to legal battles regarding intellectual property rights, and the term presents an alternative to “derivative” (Archive of Our Own). The Organization for Transformative Works, a nonprofit fan activist organization, defines transformative as a “work takes something extant and turns it into something with a new purpose, sensibility, or mode of expression.” Taking the example of fanfic, the term transformative can apply to something written from a character’s viewpoint that is not the canon’s protagonist, or something more overtly critically engaged. For example, fanfic can illustrate current attitudes towards celebrity, sexuality, race or gender.

The (fan) performances I saw, despite replicating Elvis’ songs and stagecraft, were far from derivative. The performances’ passion and unique, often bizarre representations were indeed transformative. Similar to fanfic forums, *The Elvies* were, despite the framework of a competition, refreshingly free from hierarchical value judgements of taste, aesthetics, and professionalism, criteria which can be crushingly prevalent in traditional cultural sectors. In fanac, some key criteria used to judge “value” are passion, imagination, and dedication (Dilling-Hansen; Polasek; Stein; Stein et al.). *The Elvies* gave a platform to anyone who wanted to perform and present themselves as Elvis; the earlier performances we encountered prior to the competition stages demonstrated that little to no ‘quality control’ was in place. This did not affect our enjoyment of those presentations, however. Indeed, many fanac producers relish the title of “amateur,” believing that contributing to their respective fandom strengthens the fan community.

Fanac can also create new audiences for the originary. Media scholar Henry Jenkins describes fanac as a productive mode that “embrac[es] an understanding of intellectual property as ‘shareware,’ something that accrues value as it moves across different contexts, gets retold in various ways, attracts multiple audiences, and opens itself up to a proliferation of alternative meanings” (*Convergence* 256). By highlighting and reiterating a cultural property, fans strengthen the cultural legacy and importance of the originary. Just as an art critic creates a response to an artwork, fanac authors both extend and replace the meaning of the cultural property itself. The embracing of the “amateur” qualities by representers, however, further subverts the representation of the celebrity. This position becomes actually (possibly unintentionally) quite transgressive: the icons of Elvis, Michael Jackson, Madonna and more are totems of the commodity of late-capitalist society, where the acts of the individual can be equated with acts of consumption. Placing fans as

the active producers of these cultural icons challenges the stranglehold of mythic celebrities created by the media and entertainment industry.

Fan communities, exemplified by *The Elvies*, have an active engagement with the cultural property they coalesce. Jenkins discusses the transformation of fanac in the advent of digital technologies such as Web 2.0, which provides platforms for fans to become “active” readers, participating in the production of content using inspiration from the fandoms they inhabit. He develops Michel de Certeau’s term “textual poaching” to describe fans’ “impertinent raid on the literary preserve where fans take away only those things that are useful or pleasurable” (*Textual Poachers* 9). However, Jenkins’ theory of active readership does not encapsulate the depth of transformation that both fans and tribute artists experienced at *The Elvies*. This performative transformation differs from the fannish definition.

Performance scholar Erika Fischer-Lichte terms “transformation” a liminal process that involves the performers and audience becoming co-subjects in the performance and a metacommunicative reversal of roles in which “all participants experience a metamorphosis” (*Transformative Power* 23). Fischer-Lichte unpacks the notion of the performative turn, a term prevalent in contemporary art since the 1960s. She states that the performative turn has changed the nature of many traditional performance binaries: between subject and object, observer and observed, and artist and audience. By collapsing these binaries, the performative turn creates a dynamic and transformative event. This troubling of performer and audience distinctions returns us to Ferris’ use of Goffman and Turner in her discussion of celebrity impersonation. *The Elvies* deconstructed traditional divisions of performance-maker and audience to create a space for a co-creation of the Elvis representer.

Fischer-Lichte’s refutation of the oppositional nature of “presence” and “representation” is also integral to the performances of *The Elvies*. As I understood the Elvis tribute artists (or ETAs) as non-celebrities vying for the title of best Elvis tribute artist, I also accepted them “as” Elvis; a “perceptual multistability” (Fischer-Lichte “Reality and Fiction,” 87), or an understanding that the performer stands in for a character and is also a bodily being in the world. This duality of understanding within *The Elvies* created moments of “destabilization” as a state of being caught “betwixt and between” perceptions, being on the threshold of understanding the performer in multiple ways to create a transitional, liminal state (Fischer-Lichte *Transformative Power*, 148).

Although Jenkins' model of fans-as-poachers is dominant in the field of fan studies, this approach does not allow us to consider the context and reception of the reworked and transformed cultural properties of fanac. Specifically, applying a performance studies paradigm to fandom reveals the generation of meaning through fan play and participation outside of the primary media text (Booth and Bennett). Kurt Lancaster's *Interacting with Babylon 5* is one of the first investigations to do this. Lancaster contrasts the experience of engaging with fan performances (whether reading or writing fanfic, performing as tribute, or watching as tribute-fan) with "traditional" entertainment such as television or novels (32-3). The latter participation takes place vicariously through another's performance, whereas fan-produced works require a more active engagement.

More often than not, within fan communities, representers are the super-fans. On the second day of the *Probing Elvis* workshop, we met with Garry Foley, that year's *Elvies* winner of the "Best '68 Special" award. Garry arrived in his off-duty clothes—slim fitting jeans and a western-style shirt—rather than one of his Elvis costumes, but I could still imagine Elvis wearing this outfit in his downtime in the early sixties. It seemed that Elvis had become ingrained in Garry's persona. Before leading a workshop in which we were taught some of Elvis' signature moves, and then collaborating on a group performance of "Return to Sender," Garry told us of his journey to become one of Europe's most successful Elvis performers. An Elvis fan from a young age, he started off in musical theater before performing as Elvis full-time. The workshop group had been really impressed with Garry's performance the night before; as he stated, the fact that there are so many ETAs means they each need to have their own unique selling point if they are to make their performances their profession. Garry's was to work with accomplished musicians as his "big band" backing him, and he himself was a talented piano player. This technical virtuosic flair was his selling point, but the attempt at more precise musical mimicry meant that there was less freedom in his act for him to improvise and engage with the crowd.

What his workshop was teaching us is what Ellen Kirkpatrick terms "embodied translation," Kirkpatrick relates this as a method of cosplay (a contraction of costume play) where fans wear costume and occasionally act as fictional characters. Cosplayers, ETAs, myself and the other workshop participants were creating a dialogue with the source character through costuming and rehearsals; we were learning how to read the originary's body language, and how to speak and perform it. The transference of this newly acquired language onto our own "unique material

visuality” is an instance of embodied translation (Kirkpatrick). In translating established characters, cosplayers—and indeed tribute artists—are implicated in a constant process of recreation, simultaneously producing a new character and a revised version of the originary.

### *Vaseline and Rose Oil: “Becoming” Elvis*

I took inspiration from the world of cosplay for my performance intervention *Vaseline and Rose Oil* at Experimentica festival in Cardiff (2013). The other *Probing Elvis* workshop participants all contributed to a cabaret of Elvis-inspired performances, but I wanted to create a participatory practice experiment in which the festival-goers could participate in the Elvis act. Named for the products that Elvis used to create his iconic quiff, *Vaseline and Rose Oil* was a temporary barbershop located in Chapter Arts Centre’s café, and offering only hairstyles which would signify the King. While cosplayers perform embodied translation, the transformations of the visitors to my barbers was more skin-deep, as only an aesthetic transformation occurred—they were not required to perform hip gyrations, sing, or enact a lip curl.

Nonetheless, this visual change signified to the other festival goers that their position had shifted from viewer to “performer” to fan, and the twelve or so Elvisified participants wandering around the festival became a kind of “I-spy” feature for other visitors, a “spot the Elvis” game. The space and time of the hairstyling (which was not that speedy given my poor ability at coiffure) provided a context to chat with the participants about Elvis, whether they were fans, and why they were participating. For example, was it an homage? For some, it was a tribute; for others, a bit of silliness; for many, just curiosity to engage with the work.

The 2017 *Cut Festival: The Art of Barbering*, a multidisciplinary arts festival in East London explored the history, politics, and craft of barbering and its relationship to themes of race, gender, ritual, community and social healing in their respective practices (*Archive*). The artists and audience involved stated that for many, hairstyling is an integral part of their identity and how others perceive them; a way of “keeping who you are intact” (*Archive*). To intervene in this identity self-construction, and to “map” another’s aesthetic identity, involves a level of trust, and indeed intimacy. Spending a lot of time touching a stranger’s head was, for me, an unusual experience. But far from the cliché of discussing holidays, this tactile intimacy actually became a sort of shortcut for the people I was styling to open up

and discuss Elvis, as well as topics such as the work, the festival, how the participants saw themselves and chose to present themselves to the world.

An element of power play also existed. Though I was the “transformer,” I made the decision that even if encouraged by the people in my “barber’s chair” I would not be cutting any hair. The transformations were mask-like in that they were temporary, a persona participants could “try on.” As artist Oreet Ashery states, reflecting on her use of hair as a medium in character building, hair can make gender and identities appear and disappear (*Archive*). I found it important that the participants had input into their Elvis-styling, choosing how their Elvis-ness manifested and understanding that it would last for only the day.

Some of the *Vaseline and Rose Oil* participants commented on the archival images I had pinned to the wall behind my salon chair set up: images from *Life* magazine in 1957 which showed teenage women getting their hair cut short in Elvis-fashion. The accompanying article, *Ain’t Nothin’ But A Hairdo*, explained that in Grand Rapids, Michigan, over 1000 girls had gone for the chop to style themselves after their musical hero. Some girls brought their chopped off long ponytails back to their parents and boyfriends, much to the recipients’ disgust. Their disgust related to how Elvis performed a very particular type of sexualized masculinity—an indication of how this was received is seen in CBS, the American TV network, filming him only from the waist up. His overt sexuality was censored and hidden from his contemporary audience. I was interested to see how these young women, and the festival goers, used the hairstyle to help them perform Elvis, a “trying on” of masculinity(ies). It was not about reenacting an “authentic” portrayal of Elvis, but about using an aesthetic signifier as a way of embodying a less overt Elvis performance: a bit of swagger, charisma and confidence.

Within *The Elvies*, Garry Foley’s performances, workshop content, and marketing rhetoric all strive to create the “authentic” Elvis experience. His website details how “his costumes are exact re-creations of Elvis’ stage wear and are all made by a renowned US costume maker, who holds the original patterns of Elvis’ jumpsuits”; that he is “one of the closest tribute artists you will ever see”; and lists testimonials exclaiming “Close your eyes and it really could be the King performing, just a few feet away from you!” (Foley). The accuracy of the impersonation, consolidated by Foley’s use of exact replicas of costumes, act as authenticators which sell his act to potential audiences. Celebrity impersonators offer audiences the prospect that the “real” is valuable but flexible: we desire an

encounter with Elvis, but accept that we cannot access him, so the impersonator steps into that absence (Ferris 77).

### Tribute Artists as Fan Labor

Despite professional tribute artists' reliance on "authentic" representations, representers' performances escape a circular and uncritical repetition. Instead, these reiterations of past performances affirm their own differences. Like Gilles Deleuze's example of Pop Art, the simulacrum<sup>5</sup> of impersonation breaks out of the copy mold, with its own agency and a life of its own. As Deleuze scholar Brian Massumi states: "The thrust of the process is not to become an equivalent of the 'model' but to turn against it and its world in order to open a new space for the simulacrum's own mad proliferation" (91). ETAs need to be equivalent to the "model" but other than it, to be of "value." Having a unique selling point within the saturated market of ETAs, a unique performance niche within the genre, contrasts with the ideal of the accuracy of mimesis of Elvis. While seemingly opposite performance values, both are required to have marketable value to the Elvis fans who follow the ETA circuit.

This commodification of fanac points to what media scholar John Fiske calls the "shadow cultural economy" of fandom (30). Fanac has its own systems of production and distribution of cultural production which circulates among, and helps to define, the fan community. Fiske draws on Bourdieu's metaphor of culture as an economy in which people invest and accrue capital, and in which judgements of taste and value are made. He argues that fandom works both outside and sometimes against dominant cultural capital, yet also reiterates and reworks certain characteristics of the "official" culture it opposes (34). "Official culture" sees its texts or cultural properties as the creations of special individuals, artists or geniuses: Elvis, for example. This reverence places the creator's audience in a subordinate relationship to them.

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<sup>5</sup> Deleuze argues that simulacra, being far more than "simple imitation," can utilize their iterative nature to challenge or even overturn an accepted ideal or "privileged position" (69). Deleuze defines simulacra as "those systems in which different relates to different by means of difference itself. What is essential is that we find in these systems no prior identity, no internal resemblance" (299). Deleuze sees the emancipatory possibilities of simulacra, to deconstruct, analyse, and subvert that which they reproduce.

Popular culture, and fandom itself, recognizes the multiplicity of production of “industrially produced” cultural properties; opening them up to a productive reworking and overwriting that a 'completed art-object' is not (as readily) subject to. Fiske argues that dominant culture denigrates and misunderstands the production and reception of popular culture (including fanworks), failing to recognize that many “industrially produced” texts have “producerly” characteristics that stimulate popular productivity because of their contradictions, “inadequacies,” and superficialities<sup>6</sup> (47). These qualities make the texts open and provocative, inviting transformation through fan labor such as tribute performances and fanfiction. ETAs and their audience are transformed from passive consumers to active co-producers through their reinscription of Elvis. They are not subordinate to the myth of the icon but produce a contemporary rewriting of him.

Fans' productivity is categorized by Fiske into three distinct areas, with the caveat that fanac may span all three. All productivity occurs at the interface of the cultural property and the everyday life of the fan. Semiotic productivity encapsulates a productive behavior relating to all popular culture rather than just fandom, including meaning-making of social identities and experiences from the semiotic resources of the cultural commodity (Fiske 37). Fiske gives the example of Madonna fans who performed their sexuality differently after engaging with her music video and stage performances (37). This productivity is usually a personal meaning-making; whereas in enunciative productivity, meaning-making is shared through oral culture or online forums, often fan-to-fan (Fiske 38). Soap opera fans discussing potential future storylines is an example (Fiske 38). Enunciative productivity is not solely verbal; the fans not performing on stage but also dressed as Elvis in Porthcawl are producing their fan identities and consolidating a fan commodity through this construction of social identity. Lastly, textual productivity is when fans produce their own cultural products based on their fandom, with production values ranging from a DIY aesthetic to a similar production value to that of the originary (Fiske 39).

ETA performance is fan labor that exemplifies all three of Fiske's categories of productivity. Foley's performance at *The Elvies*, for example, demonstrates

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<sup>6</sup> Fiske's chapter “The Cultural Economy of Fandom” was published in 1992, prior to web 2.0 technologies and fanac platforms such as AO3. At the time of publication, although some fan labor was disseminated on the web, many fan fics and fan art was shared at fan conventions and other IRL platforms. While fan labor is now more easily accessible and visible because of platforms such as AO3, Fiske's argument of fannish textual productivity is still relevant.

textual productivity by his reworkings of Elvis songs in a “big band” style, and his insertion of his opinions-as-fan in his onstage patter, moving in and out of Elvis and fan personae. His participation in ETA culture—judging other categories, offering advice to emerging ETAs, and even leading the workshop I attended—is enunciatively productive. Most interesting to me was the evidence of personal semiotic productivity that his chosen career brought to bear on his lived experience, even when not outwardly performing as Elvis. In our interview session, Garry spoke of the inner-confidence and conviction in his creativity that he had gained by studying and embodying Elvis’ performances.

Foley said that his ambition for his tribute as and to Elvis was to give something back to the contemporary Elvis fan community, who now would not be able to access the real King’s performances, as if he were a stand-in for the originary. This quality of mimicry is reminiscent of the colloquial terms “realness” and “passing” as used in Owen G. Parry’s interrogation of the term “realness” in relation to the film documenting 1980s drag balls, *Paris Is Burning*. “Realness” as the ability to pass as a specific class or gender other than one’s own functions as a repetitious device that deterritorializes the major language (“the real”) and subverts it from within, calling forth a new language (“realness”), and a new scene (the ballroom) (Deleuze and Guattari 108-9). “Realness” points to the fictions already at play in the so called “real,” freeing its performances from being subservient to, and free from the hegemonies of, the dominant “real” (i.e. the world outside the ball competitions). Parry offers the term “fictional realness” as a performance method produced through modes of “affective inhabitation” rather than uncritical imitation, as a framework to read “exaggerated experience,” cultural properties that present a hybrid of actual, virtual and fictional realities (115). As Judith Butler states in *Bodies That Matter*, “what determines the effects of realness is the ability to compel belief” (129). As discussed, the “acceptance” or “passing” of ETAs as Elvis is a co-created state by performer and audience; an acceptance which is simultaneously acknowledged as an ephemeral state within the frame of *The Elvies*, and a temporary, simultaneous knowing and *unknowing* of the ETAs’ other performed selves.

Parry’s term “fictional realness” is at work in *The Elvies*; by productively reenacting the myth of Elvis, the very “realness” of the myth is both deconstructed and reconstructed by fans and fan-performers. Elvis’ “genius” and status is brought into being by the breadth of fan labor; as Foley’s mission on his website states: “keeping the legacy of “Elvis” alive.” Note the quote marks here; Foley himself

even seems to call into question the fixed identity or original “realness” of Elvis. Performing ‘Elvisness’ is an expansive rather than reductive reiteration: as Claire Colebrook quoted in Parry recognizes, repeating the “hidden forces of difference that produce texts, rather than repeating the known texts themselves” (10). “Realness” and “tribute” are understood not through imitation but through affect: a layering of performed selves, a process of becoming.

## Conclusion

Through my analysis as audience-member at *The Elvies*, and as artist-researcher at *Experimentica*, I position tribute as embodied fan labor. The performance mode of tribute, like other fanac, both disseminates and constructs the mythos of celebrity. As an audience member, I was temporarily co-opted into the Elvis fandom, through tribute’s process of transformation. The performances were transformative in both the fannish and performance studies understandings: taking an existing “text: and giving it new expression, and both performers and audience going through a significant (though temporary) change, respectively.

Tribute is not an uncritical repetition; instead, tribute underscores identity as performative. A play of “fictional realness” is enacted; Elvis’ performance legend is constructed and deconstructed by both the ETAs and audiences as Elvis fans. Tribute also dismantles binaries of “amateur” and “virtuoso”; value judgements from both audiences and judges at *The Elvies* are not focused on precise mimesis of the originary, but on the performing, embodying, and enacting of fandom itself. Through the interpretive frame of *The Elvies*, the audience understood the ETA performers as simultaneously “the” Elvis and Elvis fan, and they act as co-conspirators in this performance “resurrection” of “The King.”

The ETAs at *The Elvies*, and the many live artists engaging with Elvis representation at *Experimentica*, demonstrate not only Elvis’ position as an open and producerly text which invites creative engagement, but his continued significance within wider popular culture.

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