



Making Up My Selves

Growing up, children are encouraged to play dress-up games to foster developmental skills. Once grown one is no longer supposed to play pretend, since the “true self” has been found. But what if this self is just an elaborate assemblage of Halsey lyrics, miscellaneous pieces of old, childhood costumes and pop-cultural tropes?

When seeking advice in the vast expanse of internet forums for easing human interaction, the default answer is to:

Just Be Yourself

The “just” implies the straightforward nature of who this “yourself” is. But what if I don’t know where this true self ends and the artificial selves begin? What if my true form has been cut up into an elaborate collage, mixed with years’ worth of holographic stickers, glitter glue, and pop-cultural tropes?

In Halsey’s fifth studio album, *The Great Impersonator*, they dedicate each song to one of their greatest influences by, as the title suggests, impersonating them both in their sound and their looks. Some of these include Dolly Parton, Kate Bush, Björk, David Bowie, and Marilyn Monroe. The album had a lukewarm reception. Critical voices accused her of main character syndrome.¹

The line between main character energy (affectionate) and main character energy (derogatory) is a fine one. We see this reflected in many instances of popular and online media. The rise and fall (and rise again) of Anne Hathaway is a good example. She was very popular in the early years of her career until, all of a sudden, she was too present, and then the so-called “Hathahate” movement began. Where in the beginning she could do no wrong, now suddenly she could do no right. When she won her first Oscar in 2013 and began her acceptance speech by emotionally exclaiming “It came true!” the internet erupted into a wave of hate. Her smile was too big, her demeanor was too polished, as were her outfits. She was deemed too performative and not authentic enough (unlike the clumsy and funny Jennifer Lawrence, who was everyone’s sweetheart—until she too lost favor by being too quirky). Ten years later, people began reflecting on “Hathahate” and became aware that it might’ve been a little bit of an exaggerated reaction, maybe, thus leading

1. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OKtGEpUXIA&t=393s>. Princess Weekes: Main Character Syndrome & The Authenticity Trap. 27.03.25. YouTube, 2024.



to Anne Hathaway's redemption—no longer hated or idolized, but respected.

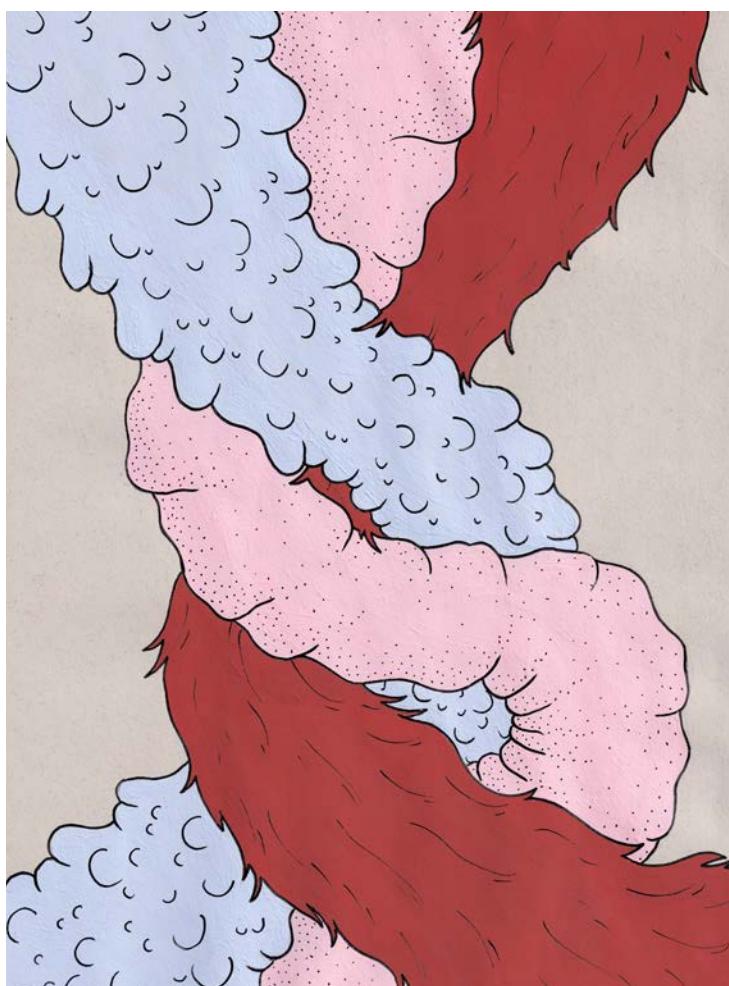
I do not wish to be perceived for practical purposes, I don't exist for practical purposes, I'm the only one who exists

I think, therefore I am

you, on the other hand, look very
no thoughts, head empty

you, on the other hand, look very
serving side character energy

you, on the other hand, look very
NPC



Another victim of the 2010s misogynistic vitriol was Mary Sue. "Mary Sue" is a term originating in the fan-fiction community that can be used to describe a femme character who is unrealistically flawless. She's breathtakingly beautiful, powerful, and everyone loves or wants to be her. Mary Sues are known to be self-insert characters that allow the author to live out a life in which they are everything they wish they were. They quite literally give off "main character energy." In the 2010s, the fan fiction community began voicing their frustrations with



Mary Sue characters, quickly turning into hate. Blogs like The Marysue Review and The Mary Sue Rehab Center were created, dedicated to reviewing and/or ridiculing such characters.²

I fucking love Mary Sues. Come on, give it to me. I want all the rainbows and sparkles, all the superpowers. I want love triangles or even rectangles! I want love pentagons, hexagons, heptagons, octagons! I want to be the femme fatale while being the epitome of pure. I want to be shoved into expensive gowns against my will (secretly loving it). I want to be able to fight with a sword that is also a wand that is also on fire and can only hurt people who have bad intentions while I fly around on my jet-black, neon-pink-maned alicorn.

I love tropes

I collect tropes

I turn them into snowballs,
patting them together tightly
into perfect little spheres.
All the contradictions stirring deep inside them,
changing their trajectory,
hitting passersby straight in the face,
turning them all into glorious Mary Sues.

Halsey plays Kate Bush plays Bowie plays Ziggy Stardust plays
A Clockwork Orange

Halsey plays Marilyn Monroe plays Jean Harlow

Halsey plays Dolly Parton,
Dolly Parton plays Dolly Parton

“I always think of ‘her,’ the Dolly image, like a ventriloquist does his dummy. I have fun with it. I think, what will I do with her this year to surprise people? What’ll she wear? What’ll she say?”³

Throughout her career, Dolly Parton has engaged with different stereotypical female gender performances present in country music, criticizing and negotiating them. She plays with the virgin-whore dichotomy, combining the “chaste mountain girl” and “town tramp” into one persona, embracing the controversial chasm in a self-aware yet playful manner. She is often quoted as saying, “If I hadn’t been a woman, I would have been a drag queen.” One time, Dolly Parton participated in a Dolly Parton lookalike contest—and lost to a drag queen.⁴

RuPaul’s Drag Race All Stars season 7 plays Dolly Parton plays
Dolly Parton plays Mae West

When I was in kindergarten, I received a BABY Born doll. Its head and limbs were plastic, and the torso was made of soft,

2. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XMBeK-PPOsI>. Izzzyzzz: The Weird World Of Mary Sues. 27.03.25. YouTube, 2022.

3. Edwards, Leigh H: Dolly Parton, Gender, and Country Music. Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2018. S. 101.

4. Ibid. S. 2, 27-38.



stuffed cloth. It had brown eyes just like its mother (me), that opened when held upright and closed when laying down (just like its mother, little old me!). I was even allowed to go to the toy store to pick up an additional outfit. Being the pragmatic mother that I was, I picked a little baby-blue-and-baby-pink raincoat with the matching pants and boots. I even took the tiny scarf my grandmother had knitted off of my stuffed monkey to give it to my fur-deficient child.

Girls playing women

“Born sexy yesterday” is a movie and TV trope describing an adult, (almost exclusively) female character who is both sexually desirable and naive or, in extreme cases, childlike. An example of this is Leeloo from *The Fifth Element*. She is created at the beginning of the movie, then has to navigate the sci-fi world she was just born into, sporting a sexy little outfit made of bandages adorning her adult body. She doesn’t get to experience her growing body—puberty has already been enacted on it, no need to go through the peskiness of that mess. Her body is already in the state of being desirable, while her mind is not yet able to desire. She’s the perfect combo: hot and naive, ready to be taken advantage of.

Women playing girls, girls playing women

A female friend sends me an Instagram reel of “Princess Diana’s speaking coach” (an old British dude) telling me how to find my own voice. She comments: “lol just saw this now I want to speak in my lower more core me voice.” In the video, this man tells an equally posh interviewer, “We’ve moved away from the authenticity of our being,” elaborating that, in the West, we tend to inhabit the upper part of our bodies. To demonstrate this, he begins talking in a higher, more nasal voice, which makes the woman interviewing him laugh.

There are many examples of women and femme people altering their voices to influence their image. Margaret Thatcher famously went through rigorous voice coaching to make her sound more powerful. Elizabeth Holmes, the former CEO of the fraudulent blood-testing company Theranos, spoke in a deep voice, which she later admitted had been faked in order to be taken more seriously.

Women playing men

Paris Hilton takes it to an extreme with her baby voice. She has explained that it was part of the character she created—on the one hand for the reality TV show *The Simple Life*, but also as a defense mechanism to hide her trauma from the abuse she experienced. On *The Zach Sang Show*, she explains that, in the 2000s, blondes were associated with being airheads and that it was cute to be dumb, so she played along.



Femmes playing dumb

I like to play dress-up. Always have, always will. As a child, my favorite pastime was rummaging in the trunk full of my parents' old clothes, costumes from carnivals past, and miscellaneous pieces of fabric. I would clad myself in elaborate outfits—from a jilted bride to the bratty head cheerleader, to the mousy tomboy who catches the vampire's eye, to a glittery fairy fighting off the evil darkness, to the mother drying her tears as she watches her kid leave for the first day of school. This need never left. I would try to convince my friends to create alter egos for going out, but to little success. Nowadays, I like to look like a toddler dressed me with very specific prompts in mind: a ditzy secretary who loves to gossip just a little too much, a pirate with seasickness, or even a jaguar who has taken on human form to avenge its family.

I've always wondered if my performative streak is a flashy overcompensation. Do I lack a sense of identity? Am I diverting from my insecurities? Am I crying out for attention? I'm sure that has been the case at times, but I do not subscribe to the idea that flamboyance is fake and artificial. This opinion alludes to the existence of its counterpart: the authentic, the natural, the real, the "normal." Yet what is considered to be the norm nowadays is also a construct. Pink used to be a color for boys, high heels were first worn by men etc. etc. Isn't a drag artist then being more authentic by highlighting the absurdity of gender performance as opposed to a normie who has never questioned theirs?

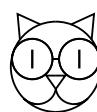
Who cares if the "true self" exists, and if it does I'm sure it likes to put on a pretty little dress every once in a while. I love adorning mine with glittery trinkets and expired make-up to prance around in. I want to fill it up to the brim with souvenirs I collect throughout my life, until tacky figurines, stick-on moustaches and empty bottles of cheap perfume spill out of it, ready to be picked up by the next attention whore to be.



BIO

Anina Müller is a performance artist. She completed her Bachelor of Fine Arts at the HGK Basel FHNW and will soon graduate with a Master in Fine Arts at the LUCA School of Arts in Brussels. She has won the Maurer-Billeter Foundation sponsorship award and was nominated for the Vordemberge-Gildewart Foundation stipend. Teetering between the absurd and the sincere, her works explore identity through the lens of pop-cultural media and how this influences the perception and presentation of the self.

This text is an excerpt of a longer work in progress.



Wild Papers editor: Ingo Niermann
English copy-editing: Rosanna McLaughlin

Illustration: Eva Fàbregas

Graphic design: Ana Domínguez Studio

© 2026, Anina Müller, Eva Fàbregas & Wild Publishing, a division
of Institute Art Gender Nature at HGK Basel FHNW, Switzerland