Reflection on the 2021-22 Jewish Gender Performance and Drag Working Group

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As Roberta Mock highlighted more than once in our shared conversations in this group, scholars of the last couple of decades seem to have become even less certain about what we mean by "gender" in our work. The concept is a slippery one and may shift from paragraph to paragraph in a single article. Even those who want to fully depart from the gender binary and propose a "third space" (or multiple new spaces) seem unable to escape the binary's insidious legacies and effects in our world. Facing such conceptual uncertainty around gender and its meanings in contemporary representations, I believe we can learn something from Jewish history.

Jewish tradition allows for contexts in which intentional unknowability might serve as a marker of humane intelligence or even of divine will, rather than a question to be answered or a problem to be solved. Methods of Talmudic exegesis, for example, avoid undue simplification and value a multiplicity of complicating perspectives, which function to better consider all facets of a given experience or situation. Judaism has also traditionally understood the Divine as unknowable, framing the transgression of the biblical Adam and Eve as, not simply a sexual act, but as their illicit grasping to know the unreachable Divine and, we might presume, to thereby possess the forbidden power to name and order the universe according to their own will, to create the world, like gods. This transgression can be imagined as a willful violation of Divine unknowability.

Jewishness itself has been "unknowable" in certain respects throughout history. What has been sometimes described from the outside as a definitional "slipperiness" of Judaism/Jewishness has, across the centuries, provoked anxiety and hostility from broader majority cultures, but it has additionally been studied positively as a productive cultural asset. Challenges have long existed for outsiders to the Jewish world in respectfully making sense of the multiply-determined nature and intertwined meanings of Jewishness: a minority peoplehood or nation, a set of collective histories, embodied cultures of ethnicity/race, specific languages and learned traditions, religious or spiritual orientations, codes of law and ethics, social or aesthetic sensibilities, and combinations of these various elements. However, this categorical "slipperiness" complements Jewish values of holding complexity and of questioning harmfully rigid social categories within modern life.

In the realm of theater history and cultural theory, scholars like Andrea Most laid the groundwork for studying at least one variation of Jewishness as a set of sensibilities that challenge preconceptions of fixed, static social identities. Most's *Making Americans: Jews and the Broadway Musical* (2004) contrasts a perceived modern Jewish American value of a selfhood that is flexible, multiple, aware of its own inherent flux, publicly expressive, and democratically improvisational, with a traditional Puritan sensibility of selfhood rooted in privacy and static permanence. According to Most's argument, the former (Jewish self) is the basis of the "American Dream" of democratic self-making created in twentieth-century popular theatrical culture, including Broadway and Hollywood. Along these lines, it is telling, as Mock also noted during one of our meetings, that non-Jewish Europeans sometimes associate Jewishness with such improvisational underdog icons of twentieth-century American entertainment culture as Bugs Bunny. As Jonathan Branfman added in response to this observation, there is a synergy to be observed between this Looney Tunes character who, voiced by the Jewish American Mel Blanc, shapeshifts (sometimes in drag) and who "smart-talks" to escape predators like Elmer Fudd, and performances by witty, fast-talking Jewish American icons like Barbra Streisand, who was also repeatedly juxtaposed against socially enfranchised non-Jews and even starred in a film that pays homage to Bugs: *What's Up, Doc?* (1972). Across many popular examples of Jewish American performance, improvisational and

multifaceted qualities that sometimes connote "slipperiness" are shown to be productively subversive, frankly entertaining, or necessary for survival. In other words, "unknowability" or categorical indeterminacy become appealing when they combat endangerment or when they reflect values of open-mindedness, flexibility, and creative problem-solving within a flawed or unequal power structure.

To be sure, preceding more contemporary representations like the reality-television series *RuPaul's Drag Race*, the American Dream's celebration of the self-made, flexible improvisor has not always included or respected LGBTQ+ people or the art of drag. Within mainstream twentieth-century American representations, drag was often coopted to serve comedic or socially troubling purposes, including by Jewish performers like Milton Berle and Eddie Cantor. Marjorie Garber's *Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety* (1992) counts the gender-bending performances by Jewish Americans like Dustin Hoffman and Barbra Streisand as instances of what she terms "category crises," in which a performance of gender "crossing" or "transgression" serves to stand in as an easily legible marker of greater social shifts and uncertainties, rather than representing the lived experiences of gender diversity in its own right. But Garber also discusses the "third space" created as a byproduct of such instances, which may suggest new possibilities between the unnecessary limitations of available roles or categories. Mainstream American drag generally no longer stands in for "category crises" in America today but instead often compels us to attend more deeply to the possibilities of such "third spaces" between existing modes of being – a task that challenges some traditions for the sake of understanding multifaceted embodied realities beyond entrenched norms, as well as for the worthy goal of expanding our ability to see and empathize with those erased within our existing frameworks.

In dialogue with Garber's piece our group also revisited Jack Halberstam's application of Julia Kristeva's concept of "the abject" to think about the performative function of Jewishness in earlier representations of Gothic literature and film. In Halberstam's reading, the Gothic "monster" is a figure who contains excessive meaning, who (like "Jewish" or "gender" in some contexts) seems to signify "too much" all at once, thereby overwhelming existing majority modes of understanding social reality. Dracula is simultaneously seductive and repulsive, refined and degraded, an aristocratic Count and a bloodsucker. As Branfman reminded us in our conversation, Kristeva understands "the abject" not simply as a realm of expulsion or repudiation but specifically as a space of indeterminacy, of a troubling in-betweenness, contradiction, and unknowability.

These conceptual framings of the monstrous abject align with my own current project on American Jewishness and drag, part of which takes interest in recent and contemporary cultural legacies of projections of an uncanny or inscrutable "monstrosity" onto Jewishness from earlier artistic modes and genres. For example, I read the gender-expansive work of Jewish performance artists like Claude Cahun (1894-1954) and Sasha Velour (b. 1987) as intentionally employing abject indeterminacy and its various meanings, sometimes in direct dialogue with Jewish histories of resisting threats posed externally by hegemonic social law – including laws of categorization that proved lethal to Jews and queer people in certain contexts. Velour, for example, draws from their own Jewish family's history of a policed existence in Russia and redeems vampiric and other monster motifs in their performances in self-empowering ways that focus on familial bonds and losses, merging personal narratives with historical and aesthetic associations of the abject queer or Jewish body.

As we are still learning and relearning, certain attempts to *know* (i.e. forms of surveillance, mastery, classification, and policing) sometimes harm more than they help, especially when such knowing is devised by an empowered majority perspective to circumscribe a less enfranchised experience. The art of drag reminds us of the creative power of a consciously embodied unknowability, as well as the blind spots and limitations of

existing social structures. I thank the participants in this working group for continuously challenging me and each other to think openly and creatively about these matters.

References

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