

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

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It's been a pleasure learning and thinking with the Drag Working Group this year. Thank you to Golan Moskowitz, Ilana McQuinn, and Tulane's Grant Center for the American Jewish Experience for convening us.

In the working group, our conversations have put a more specific twist on the core questions of Jewish cultural studies. Since emerging in the 1990s, this field has asked how antisemitic racial, gendered, and sexual stigmas historically co-shape each other. In turn, the field has often asked how these stigmas intersect with a more recent American context that often deems Euro-American Jews white. Likewise, Jewish cultural studies has often examined how 20th and 21st-century Jewish performers embrace, resist, and creatively restyle antisemitic bodily stigmas to assert their own voices. While these inquiries have sometimes addressed Jewish drag and the wider genre of camp performance, our working group moved drag and camp to the center of analysis. For me, these conversations opened some entirely new topics and offered new lenses for my own established research.

Regarding topics that were new to me, I am especially grateful for the opportunity to read poetry by the Ethiopian Israeli feminist poet Janet Blai and the queer Yemeni Israeli poet Yossi Zabari. I thank Bryan K. Roby for translating this poetry and sharing it with our group. Because my own work focuses on the United States, I often analyze how American media envision Jewishness as wavering inside/outside whiteness. In turn, I often analyze how North American Jewish performers (including those who identify as white and of color) navigate this ambiguity. Instead, Yossi Zabari's poetry conveys the challenges that face Mizrahi Jews in an Israeli society that envisions Ashkenazi Jewish identity as firmly normative. Likewise, Zabari's poetry conveys how this Ashkenormativity shapes his own experiences of race, masculinity, gayness, desire, and dating as a queer Yemeni Israeli man.

On a related note, our group helped me consider an ongoing question in my own scholarship: how well can current theories of race, Jewishness, gender, and sexuality address the experiences of North American Jews of color? Likewise, how well can these theories analyze camp and drag performances (or any performances) by North American Jews of color? Academic literature about North American Jews of color remains rare, despite groundbreaking work by Katya Gibel Mevorach, Marla Brettschneider, Melanie Kaye/Kantrowitz, Ilana Kaufman, and Ari Kelman. Katya Gibel Mevorach's 1997 monograph [Black, Jewish, and Interracial](#) remains one of very few book-length studies by-and-about North American Jews of color. This dearth creates challenges for scholars wishing to analyze how North American Black Jewish performers like the rapper Drake or comedian Tiffany Haddish simultaneously inherit histories of anti-Black and antisemitic stigma, including stigmas of queer (non-normative) Jewish and Black gender. For now, this analysis often requires drawing on two literatures which speak past each other and which actually erase Jews of color: on one hand, Jewish cultural studies literature by-and-about Euro-American Jews, and on the other hand, feminist, queer, or critical race theory by-and-about non-Jewish people of color.

Through our discussion group, I became newly aware of Jewish themes within a queer theory text which is commonly perceived as by-and-about non-Jewish people of color. This text is José Esteban Muñoz's 1997 article, "The White to Be Angry," which also constitutes a chapter in his 1999 monograph, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*. In both versions, Muñoz analyzes the queer performance artist [Vaginal Davis](#) to theorize how queer people of color creatively reinhabit racist, homophobic, and transphobic stigmas to assert their own perspectives. In the time since Muñoz's writing, Davis has often spoken about her



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Jewish ancestry. For instance, she recently told the [Exberliner](#) that “my mother...was a Black Creole from Louisiana” and “my father... was a Mexican-German Jew.” Such statements highlight that Jewishness is a theme always-already present, but not yet explored, in Muñoz’s scholarship about drag. This point is especially thought-provoking because Muñoz’s work has helped to found the field of queer of color critique, which has not yet addressed North American Jews of color.

Through this type of connection, I aim to build new dialogues between queer of color critique and Jewish cultural studies in my current book project, *Millennial Jewish Stardom: Masculinity, Race, & Queer Glamor*. Likewise, our working group has helped me develop lenses for a new article on Tiffany Haddish, America’s first star of Ethiopian Jewish ancestry. Haddish’s performances often employ camp and sometimes employ drag to creatively reinhabit common stigmas about Black women and Jewish women at once. Her performances thus highlight the need for new conversations between Jewish studies, gender studies, queer theory, critical race theory, and media studies.

The Drag Working Group has been a wonderful environment in which to launch these inquiries. Thank you again to Golan for convening us.



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