

“Danielle Abrams’ Jewish and Black Temporal Drag”

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

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This is what happened. In the summer of 2021, still in the midst of home-sheltering, I tried to organize an online event that explored how Jewish communities and individuals locate themselves in relation to whiteness. I was (and remain, very) interested in the implications of this positioning for racial justice and how, as creative practitioners, we might facilitate or even intervene in discussions about race and Jewishness. Four artists agreed to join me: Brian Lobel, an American theatre and performance-maker, based in the UK; Oreet Ashery, an interdisciplinary artist from Jerusalem, based in the UK; Leeor Ohayon, a Mizrahi British photographer and writer; and Danielle Abrams, a mixed race African American and Jewish performance artist.

This event didn’t happen. During a 90 minute introductory meeting, we decided not to rush into anything public-facing. We agreed that we needed to more fully understand what our questions were and why we were asking them, both of ourselves and to others (presumably, but not necessarily, other Jews). We remained uncertain about whether we were referring to race or whiteness, and how these concepts intersected in a variety of contexts in real lives. We decided to spend some regularly scheduled time together first and planned a “Sunday School” during which we would read, watch, listen, learn, and tell each other stories.

This didn’t happen either. Our diaries became increasingly crowded as we emerged from the high pandemic version of our lives. For me, this included becoming a member of Tulane University’s Jewish Gender Performance and Drag Working Group, led by Golan Moskowitz, which offered the opportunity to both read around and reflect upon some of the questions about Jewishness and whiteness that preoccupy me. I assumed that there would be plenty of time to return to our Sunday School collective when things settled down.

But this now won’t happen. On 21 April 2022, Danielle Abrams died by suicide. It was the eve of the opening of *Rights Along the Shore*, her collaborative exhibition with Mary Ellen Strom at Boston Center for the Arts. This multi-disciplinary artwork examines the effects of racially segregated swimming sites in USAmerica through strategies of counter-narrativity.

Abrams died the day after our Jewish Gender Performance and Drag Working Group screening of *Make Me a King* (dir. Sofia Olins, 2021), a short film about a fictional contemporary British Jewish drag king, who models their performance on that of real-life Yiddish American vaudevillian, Pepi Litman. This temporal proximity led me, perhaps inevitably, to reflect upon Abrams’ work through the lens of our Working Group discussions and readings (and vice versa).¹ For our final two sessions, Jonathan Branfman and Bryan Roby chose a number of complex, provocative texts in order to frame considerations of the gendered relationships and tensions between Blackness and Jewishness.

During a discussion of the comedian and actor Tiffany Haddish, Roby observed that both (at least historically) might be understood as “fugitive states” that manifest in the “refusal to be identified with one territory”. This chimes loudly with Abrams’ performance of Black Jewishness via what we might classify as drag. To the best of my knowledge, Abrams, a butch lesbian, never identified as trans. But when Marquis Bey characterises trans*-ness as a poetic force like Blackness, which is “a mode of worldly inhabitation that fugitively engages history and space by revelling in excess, constantly refusing to limn ontological overflows”,² they could be describing how Abrams’ body operates in performance.

Abrams’ body of work features multiple personae in and through which gender, race and religion alchemically construct each other. To be more specific, religion here refers to (cultural) Jewishness, rather than Judaism, intertwined with the conditional whiteness of Ashkenazi heritage. Over an extended period of time and in many different performance contexts and environments, for instance, she embodied her Jewish

grandfather, “Uncle Bob” (who had been a ballroom dance teacher and social director at a Catskills resort), in an ill-fitting tuxedo and slipping toupee.

In her 1998 performance/video work, *Quadroon* (a Louisiana Creole term for a person who is one-quarter black), Abrams inhabits four “autobiographical” female personae, including both her black grandmother from Virginia and, styled as Dew Drop Lady in *bubbe* femme drag, her babushka-wearing New York Jewish grandmother. In her performance intervention, *Early Bird* (2004), Abrams *kibbitzes* on a bench with Jewish pensioners as the latter, trying to interest them in the fact that her father is black.

Abrams explained that her artwork uses “history as a vehicle for time travel. It is a launching point to insert synchronous, antithetical, autobiographical, and contemporary events”.³ Watching video traces of her presence onscreen, I find myself returning to the text that I nearly (but didn’t) set for our Working Group: Elizabeth Freeman’s *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (2010). Freeman’s theory of “temporal drag” revolves around the embodiment of anachronism, engendering reparative possibilities through the meeting of past and present bodies.

In *Routine*, which Abrams performed between 2008 and 2017, she is a cigar-chomping mid-century Borscht-belt *tumbler*. Between old-school sexist, homophobic and self-deprecating jokes, she dunks her head in a 25 gallon vat of borscht, progressively dying her face a darker shade of crimson. For Abrams, it was a multivalent act which could be read as either embarrassment for a history of Jewish blackface entertainers, or else “as a kind of bloodletting or cleansing—a *mikvah*. My intention was to review and resignify the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century blackface mask—one that paradoxically functioned as a Jewish portal to assimilation and whiteness”.⁴

At least one version of this performance appropriates Lenny Bruce’s famous routine delineating the performative binary between Jewish and “goyish”. “Dig. I’m Jewish,” Abrams begins, just as Bruce did. Within the categorized litany of Jewish people and things (macaroons, titties, fudge), it is *almost* possible to miss the assertion that “Blacks are all Jews”.⁵ Her hair dripping and white dress shirt stained red, Abrams signals not only that they are *not* but also that some *really* are.

This is far from the “terrorist drag” that José Esteban Muñoz ascribes to the artist, Vaginal Davis, although Abrams’ gender play similarly resists easy enfold in social fabric due to its intersectional complexity.⁶ In dialogue with Freeman’s concept of temporal drag, Muñoz’s matrices of tactical identification, disidentification and “interiorized passing” offer a means to explore with more granularity just how Abrams “enact[s] a multivalent and intersectional understanding of the various contingencies and divergencies within a class or group”.⁷ Indeed, she stated that “Muñoz’s ideas helped me recognize the integrity and potential of embodying personae that are *critical* representations of the self.”⁸

In her live performances and on video, Danielle Abrams offered us, in Bey’s words, a metonymic body that “know[s] something about possibility”.⁹ May she rest in power and her memory be a revolution.

¹ A showreel of excerpts from Abrams’ performances, made in 2010, can be watched at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OFXxLdghrHE&ab_channel=DanielleAbrams (last accessed 11 July 2022).

² Marquis Bey, “The Trans*-Ness of Blackness, the Blackness of Trans*-Ness,” *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 4, no. 2 (May 2017), p. 284.

³ “Danielle Abrams: An Upclose Look at Artistic Activism,” *Artistic Fuel*, 16 June 2020: <https://www.artisticfuel.com/visual-arts/artistic-activism-danielle-abrams/> (last accessed 11 July 2022).

⁴ Chelsea Coon, “An Interview with Danielle Abrams,” *Big Red and Shiny*, 11 July 2018: <https://bigredandshiny.org/41246/an-interview-with-danielle-abrams/> (last accessed 11 July 2022).



⁵ Bruce's original line (in published transcripts) was "Negroes are all Jews", which Abrams does not choose to say. It is also worth noting that, by this stage, Bruce's hipster stand-up was far from Borscht-belt comedy in terms of both style and content.

⁶ José Esteban Muñoz, "'The White to Be Angry': Vaginal Davis's Terrorist Drag," *Social Text*, no. 52/53 (Autumn - Winter, 1997), p. 86.

⁷ Ibid., p. 100.

⁸ Coon, "An Interview with Danielle Abrams", original emphasis.

⁹ Bey, "The Trans*-Ness of Blackness, the Blackness of Trans *-Ness," p. 288.



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