

A version of this extract entitled 'Out there: Performative Tropes and Double Acts' was first delivered by Dorothy Rowe at the Association of Art Historians Annual Conference in 2004. The conference details were as follows:

AAH Annual Conference 2004 *Old/New*; 1-4 April 2004 University of Nottingham

Session: *Interventions/Intersections: The future of feminist art, histories and critique*

Session conveners: Penny Florence and Marsha Meskimmon

Paper: Dr Dorothy Rowe 'Out there: Performative Tropes and Double Acts'

A press release contextualises the work as follows and is what got my attention in the first place (quote):

Following a desire to become someone else, Oreet Ashery had been practising her male alter-ego Marcus Fisher, an orthodox Jewish man walking the streets. An offer she couldn't refuse came from a friend, Shaheen Merali who asked, "Do you want to become a black man? If so, I will become a white woman". What is becoming? Isn't it enough to fantasise about what it is like being someone else, do you actually have to 'make-it up', 'perform it'? What kind of black man will Oreet want to be? What relationships will they develop? What processes of desire and identification will take place? What kind of woman will Shaheen fashion from his imagination? How do you trap desire? And how does guilt inform research? The piece is an experiment in racial bankruptcy and investment, collaborative voyeurism and heavy make-up...¹

Ashery's performance as Marcus Fisher is put to one side in *Coloured Folks* in favour of a circuit of difference and ethnicity that further complicates the relationships between visibility and identity. Merali's 'white woman' and Ashery's 'black man' are conceived through a dialectic of guilt and desire yet the need to perform them troubles me. On the one hand it could be argued that the motives behind the performance are intended to investigate the operations of inter-subjectivity within the spaces of the cosmopolitan city based upon the powerful but contingent significations of the visible alone, yet on the other hand I am left wondering how their performance differs from the parodic imitations of the black and white minstrel show or Lawrence Olivier 'blacked-up' as Othello, for example? Is *Coloured Folks* perhaps a 'Disneyfication of difference' writ large? ² Whilst *Marcus Fisher's Wake* clearly operates within a complex dynamic of Jewish feminine cultural identity, *Coloured Folks* troubles me, yet perhaps this is its success? Is *Coloured Folks* speaking to the idea of being British in London, is this why I don't get it? Is it ultimately too close to home? Or is it simply that the project reveals very quickly the limitations of the body as a visible site for inter-subjective identity exploration, the 'racial bankruptcy' hinted at above? Again, it is the unspoken annihilation of the narcissistic impulse that returns to haunt the performative

explorations of corporeal subjectivity in this work. As Janet Hand has convincingly explained via her reading of Janine Antoni's *Lick and Lather*, the self-shattering implied by narcissism can also be 'figured as a paradoxical 'structuring' of subjectivity; the desire to disappear implied in the fantasy of disguise for both Ashery and Merali, can perhaps be read through Hand's theorisation as an alternative to 'the omnipotent identity fantasies of self-presence' that have dominated the logic of the Symbolic for too long.³

¹ Information provided by David A. Bailey, AAVAA 2002.

² Louis Keidan (2002) *Exposures* Black Dog Publishing, p.1

³ Janet Hand 'Disappearing Acts: an impossibility of identity' in Steyn, Juliet (ed.) (1997) *Other than Identity: the subject, politics and art*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, p.224.