A CONVERSATION WITH
THE MALE GAYE: A Film Transcript
by Jack Waters

When I was 23, I took a group of fellow Julliard dance students to compete in a choreographic competition in Cologne, Germany. The ensemble consisted of two women and two men, including myself. As the piece, danced to Stravinsky's "Dumbarton Oaks" concerto in E flat, was a part of an American "pure dance" tradition, it didn't occur to me that both men being black, and the women white, would touch off a race-sex-power thing in a European audience. The casting had never dawned on any of us as a potential issue in the isolated world of the conservatory in which we were being trained. I simply used the dancers I liked, and who happened to be available. I suppose I assumed that European dance audiences would make the same assumptions about the dance company's artistic and informed than most Americans, especially in the area of race and politics. I didn't know why I made these assumptions, because showing me that racism is real, but the fact that the entertainment figures like Josephine Baker and other black performers whom I knew of that have done well in Europe. I guess I didn't fully realize that the initial kind of success these performers enjoyed was usually somewhere on the level of trained monkeys in the eyes of the audience, and that there are limits of expectation that even the supposedly sophisticated European will tolerate from works of an exotic. I noticed that quite a few of the gay men we met in Europe were really wrapped up in this exotic self-presentation. It was difficult for even the worldly British we met to see Morris and me as American citizens, rather than African objects. Of course, we had not been extremely careful, I'm sure we might have ended up as objects of the black men of the non-black audiences. Some of those men kept, in the literal as well as figurative sense, which I guess we did anyway. I suppose the black men saw us as the European version of the American lawn jockey.

The competition in Germany ended up a major disaster, but the result of the competition, a famous choreographer from Holland and a big hit, won the competition and was about to place him as the throwing the competition at his home in Amsterdam at the end of the festival. Bitter about losing the contest, which was commonly acknowledged as having been rigged, we accepted his invitation, talking explanations and compensations would be forthcoming in Amsterdam. The fact that we were exceedingly well received initially at the festival, and were given so many verbal indications of our impending victory at the preliminary judgments of the competition, added to our confusion dismay over not winning a single prize. In Amsterdam, the Dutch choreographer expressed his profound dismay that we hadn't been successful at the competition and said that he felt we should have won. One of the judges we knew from Julliard had previously mentioned that all the judging was done in German and that the American judges had no idea what was going on in the decision-making process. The Dutch choreographer (who was bid in to an Australian collection several of whose members appear under his list, in the political as well as figurative sense, which I guess we did anyway. I suppose the black man saw us as the European version of the American lawn jockey.

For many, the hybrid's implicit critique of racism and its pretense of being an American 'other' would be to mandate his culture for the "outsider"..., in this case, a white American audience. Anything less than this reminds well-intentioned audiences that even their power to know can be short-circuited. To assure them, their fates, difference must be named, contained, made intelligible, even familiar. Note the success of "natural" theatre, and the insinuation of images, such as John Leguizamo's "Do the Right Thing," of popular cultural narratives. By resorting to dominant cultural stereotypes without subverting them, works such as these perpetuate the familiar narrative of the American 'other', and thus guarantee that there will be no fundamental dis- ruption of the order of things, simply an extension of the space of American culture to include a larger, more colorful family, so to speak. Diversity, according to this model, would be contained and controlled by a regaining "universe" (i.e. Euro-American) sensibility. This form of "multiculturalism" has dominated the policies and priorities of mainstream institutions and, as well as essentials of all backgrounds, who are deeply

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That feeling you get when you’ve written something, particularly when it’s something you’ve written a long time ago that you can’t bear to look at now because it contains so much of a you that no longer exists. Your association with it makes it all but unreadable to you. Sometimes you can approach it anthropologically by taking yourself out of the mix. You can try to consider the writer (yourself) as if they (you) were someone else, which, in a way, it/you/they is/are, because you’ve changed. At the same time, you just can’t, because you know that person so well that the attempt to be objective is, after all, really just a performance. Well, maybe not just. Because when you think of it, the reaction might be the same when reading a number of texts not written by you. That tired subject/object debate again. Part of the problem is the text itself. Or text itself. Specifically, that English is a colonial language, as are the characters by which it is inscribed. That’s when pictures and markings can come in handy. So, you think of the body. Both as a page and as an implement of inscription. Impressions, after all, are impressions. The language and the system imposed imply an understanding of a given condition or situation that becomes part of this cycle of presumed consensus. Who are you? What am I? This is one of the reasons I have little use for pronouns—the part of language that becomes the basis of containment and, by extension, possession, ownership, subjectivity.

Now I’m thinking about the one-drop rule. About how notions of genetics and ancestry can change perceptions of selfhood in the fraction of an instant. About the idea that the hint of the shadow of a suspicion that any article of any element that is not white is not as white and, therefore, is tainted, blackened, Black by default. Like Jewishness in some instances, or Irishness or Italianness at some points in history after Anglo was white but not necessarily racial. Something Laverne Cox said started me thinking in this direction. In a conversation with bell hooks at the New School, Cox noted that “no one is as white as they think they are.” This was the downfall of Rachel Dolezal. I would have bought her claim to blackness lock, stock, and barrel if she hadn’t tried to substantiate it with a lie of genetic origin. WHO CARES? Okay, a lot of people care, but if you accept that race is a construct (and who doesn’t at this point?) why would you need to falsify your ancestry? I think a lot more people would have gone for it if she hadn’t tried to apply the one-drop rule, the artificial and long debunked basis of racial discrimination. But I digress. We were talking about me.

My main complaint is my own concluding statement. I thought I was covering my bases by being conditional. I said “if.” “If I had to make a distinction between pornography and eroticism, ... I’d say [p]ornography always produces a victim.” That “always” sounds so absolute to me now. A tad opinionated and very second-wave feminist. An inspiration for the video, but placed in a time that so much preceded it. The question then was whether a feminist principle could or should be transposed to a gay male politic. The politics of identity is where the trouble begins. Maybe it’s a good trouble, and that is why it’s not such a terrible conclusion. You tell me. I still think of Andrea Dworkin as an important influence in the same way that Marxism is an essential basis of capitalist critique. But at a certain juncture theory and lived experience diverge. The defining relationship of one temporal existence shouldn’t dictate the courses of fluid and changing social intercourse. This is where language and words become problematic. I should have said obscenity instead of pornography. Have I changed since the words were printed and the picture was locked, or is it possible that image and language can constantly mutate? Would race no longer be a binding construct if the colonial order that enforces it was disarranged? How would that become possible? Would that even be desirable and if so, by whom? Why? Under what conditions? Let’s talk about sex. That’s why I like the word intercourse. So much more multidimensional than discourse. Binary. Dissecting. Is Andrea speaking through me? Am I Andrea Dworkin? Is Andrea white? How white is she/am I? Let’s talk about gender. At a certain age it changes. Hormones.

One of the reasons I am no longer I. Gertrude Stein. Marlon Riggs. Isaac Julien. Brother to Brother. Sisterhood is Powerful. Lorraine O’Grady. Laverne Cox. It’s an equation and an ongoing roll call. I once performed as Audre Lorde and got it all wrong. Esther Kaplan performed as an ACT UP clone and got it right. I’d read Audre and looked at her picture but never saw a movie or a recording of her speaking. So I performed a character that was my imagination of what she might have been that simply was not Audre. It’s an argument for the necessity of thorough research on the part of an actor. I used to think acting was pure bullshit, but now I know it’s a craft. I’ve grown. I’ve changed. I’ve developed over time. The me that is no longer I is one of endless possibility continually transformed by the power of the imagination. It’s a train track I don’t mind traveling on.

Jack Waters is a visual artist, filmmaker, writer, media artist, choreographer, and performer known for experimental works that encompass non-narrative, documentary, and personal history strategies. As a journalist, he has published articles on politics, cultural affairs, and reviews in visual arts, film, and media. With Peter Cramer, his partner and longtime collaborator, Jack co-founded the non-profit arts umbrella organization Allied Productions, Inc. and its primary venue, Le Petit Versailles Community Garden.