

# A CONVERSATION WITH THE MALE GAYZE: A Film Transcript

by Jack Waters

When I was 23, I took a group of fellow Juilliard 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 pretty innocuous little ditty in a "pure dance" idiom, 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 developed the dance. I simply used the dancers I liked, and who happened to be available. I suppose I assumed that Europeans were somehow more sophisticated, educated and informed than most Americans, especially in the area of race and politics. I don't know why I made that assumption, except for the success of entertainment figures like Josephine Baker and other black performers whom I know 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 the 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 fascination. It was difficult for even the worldly British we met to see Morris and me as American citizens rather than African *objets d'art*. Had we not been extremely careful, I'm sure we might have ended up possessed as items in the blackamoor figurine collections several of these men kept, in the literal as well as figurative sense, which I guess we did, anyway. I suppose the blackamoor statuette is the European version of the American lawn jockey.

The competition in Germany ended up a major scandal. We didn't win, but the Chairman of the competition, a famous choreographer from Holland and a big honcho with the company that took first prize, invited us to visit him 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, thinking 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 confused dismay over not winning a single prize.

In Amsterdam, the Dutch choreographer expressed his profuse 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 Juilliard 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 also had a blackamoor collection) said what most impressed him about my choreography was that we didn't try to "sell black." Later he showed me a videotape of a piece he'd recently created using the exact score I had used in the piece I had entered. My work was better.

During our stay in Amsterdam we were frequent guests at his house. The female members of our ensemble were made to feel less welcome, and were rarely present at the gatherings consisting primarily of the male dancers from the National Ballet Company, and older male colleagues of the choreographer. The choreographer and I developed a competitive master/pupil relationship baited by his insistence on playing "name that classical tune." At conflict was my expertise in literature and materials of music as learned at school, as opposed to his knowledge of the classical idiom through acquired experience. More seriously (from my point of view), we argued over his opinion that blacks do not belong

in classical ballet because of their cultural difference and, more importantly in his opinion, because against the background of a predominantly white *corps de ballet*, a black would throw off the very symmetry which is the crux of the classical ballet form. Though I never mentioned it, I found his aesthetic feelings in grave contrast to his libidinal inclinations, since he was notorious for his prowling and cruising the dancers in the major black American dance companies.

One night after showing slides of his amateur photographic work—competent erotic shots of nudes from his ballet company—he asked if I'd pose for him. I said yes. He made a very big deal about promising that the photos were just for himself and that no one would ever see them except for personal friends, as in the current situation. Frankly I could care less if he'd published them in *Newsweek*, so long as I got proper credit, and the idea of asking for a model's fee didn't occur to me since, twisted as the acquaintance was at that point, I considered us to be friends. I was actually touched at his concern for my privacy, though at that point in my life I valued recognition considerably more.

About a year later I talk to Morris, who's moved to Germany. He says "Guess what? Your picture is all over Europe." It seems the Dutch choreographer has a deal with a postcard company and is publishing my image on cards as well as posters. Morris also mentions the print is the title image for a museum exhibition done in Amsterdam, and has been used on TV commercials. Other friends of mine in Europe have the postcard, not realizing it's me because, even though my first name is given as the title of the print, the picture is cropped so that my head is missing. Something about this kind of symbolic decapitation drives me insane. It serves too many purposes, none too honorable; the suggestion that the mind and the identity are secondary and the legal and economic alleviation that the lack of identification permits. Later I find out that the image is also distributed widely in the U.S. as well, so the guy is definitely making money off of me. I guess if I had to make a distinction between pornography and eroticism in defining pornography, I'd say that pornography always produces a victim.

Still from Jack Water's *The Male Gayze*

...Coco Fusco continued from page 2

For many, the hybrid's implicit critique of realism is precisely the problem, for it is often presumed that the objective of a "cross-cultural" artist should be to *translate his/her 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 assuage their fears, then, difference must be tamed, contained, made intelligible, even familiar. Note the success of "naturalist" theatrical and cinematic representations of American "others," such as John Leguizamo's *Mambo Mouth*, Yvonne Rainer's Puerto Rican character in *Privilege*, or any number of "documentaries" about the downtrodden produced for mass (white) consumption. By resorting to dominant cultural stereotypes without subverting them, works such as these perpetuate the fantasy of the other's immediate legibility and thus guarantee that there will be no fundamental disruption 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 reigning "universal" (i.e. Euro-American) sensibility. This form of "multiculturalism" has dominated the policies and priorities of mainstream institutions and critics, as well as essentialists of all backgrounds, who are deeply

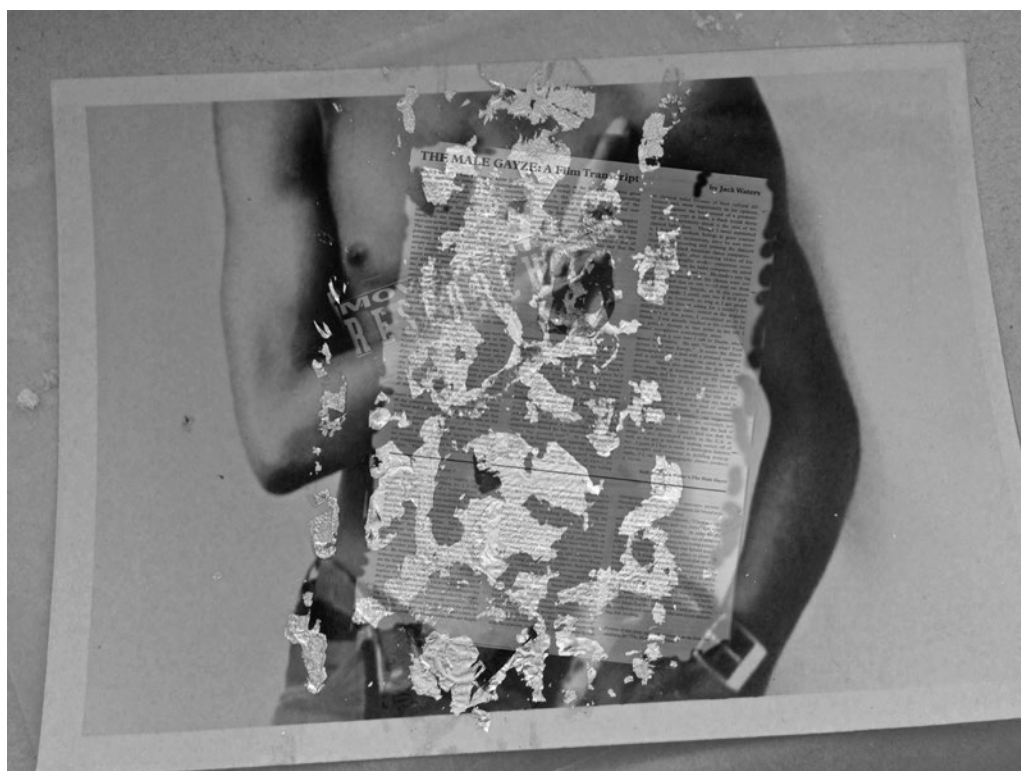
invested in avoiding the destabilization of ethnic identities and communities, and preventing the de-universalization of "whiteness." To allow the hybridization of American culture to flourish outside extremely limited spaces is something akin to removing the emperor's clothes—it would implicitly take power away from those whose prerogative it has always been to distinguish between good and bad, true and false, us and them, and to speak on behalf of all, particularly on behalf of the "others." Those who have been able to consider themselves most immune to hybridization, those whose world view, culture, and identities have historically been posited as universal, are most threatened by being compelled to recognize their boundaries. The current climate of political conservatism and xenophobia sweeping the U.S., Europe, and Canada reminds us again of the dominant culture's power to resist the imminent threat. Masked occasionally by fetishized desire for and celebration of the "other" or couched in the moral righteousness of those who lambaste "political correctness," the reactions against crumbling walls and increasingly fluid boundaries rage behind every patronizing gesture of the acceptance of a few. It is no coincidence that the "multicultural" celebration of recent years has coincided historically with the amnesty clause of this country's most recent

immigration regulation; both measures provide a friendly face that superficially counters the brutal realities "others" face on a daily basis.

Trinh T. Minh-Ha's phrase, "There is a third world in every first world and vice versa" has been quoted repeatedly in recent years. At stake for the stateless hybrid artists is the possibility not of escaping by returning to an original place, or by losing a sense of difference, but rather by defining that hybrid space as a shelter between cultures and a place to chart new beginnings. It would seem at this point that we must begin to take apart the notion of one world's being "in" another, to speak instead of those hybrid spaces where worlds have already collided, melded, and blended. We might understand cultures and peoples as battlegrounds crossed by first, second, and third worlds, by the West and non-West, and by many languages, ethnic fantasies, and fears. Some behold those battlegrounds with wonder and others with terror. For the hybrid tribes that are its inhabitants and progenitors, the confusion and disruption of the new is not disturbing, but exciting.

Portions of this essay appeared previously in the Exit Art catalogue for "The Hybrid State Films."

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.