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Border-Crossing: To Pass or Not to Pass

Dr Ope Lori on Quilla Constance's *Pukijam*

This transcript was written and presented by Dr Ope Lori for Quilla Constance's Pukijam conference, held at Chelsea College of Arts, 2015, and curated by Maria Kheirkhah. The event was supported by Arts Council England, The Research Centre for Transnational Art, Identity and Nation, UAL and Diversity Art Forum.

Pukijam is a video that requires the viewer to read and re-read, an act reminiscent of the ambivalence that was felt by cultural theorist Kobena Mercer in his seminal text 'Welcome to the jungle' and his re-reading of the work of Robert Mapplethorpe. Here the author talks of his ambivalent relationship to seeing Mapplethorpe's work and then revisiting it some years later, only to see the images of erotic black males from a different viewpoint, where object fetishism wasn't necessarily only to be read as a negative thing, without being able to read the bodies within their specific context and historic specificity. Jennifer Allen's (aka Quilla Constance's) *Pukijam* asks of the same from the viewer.

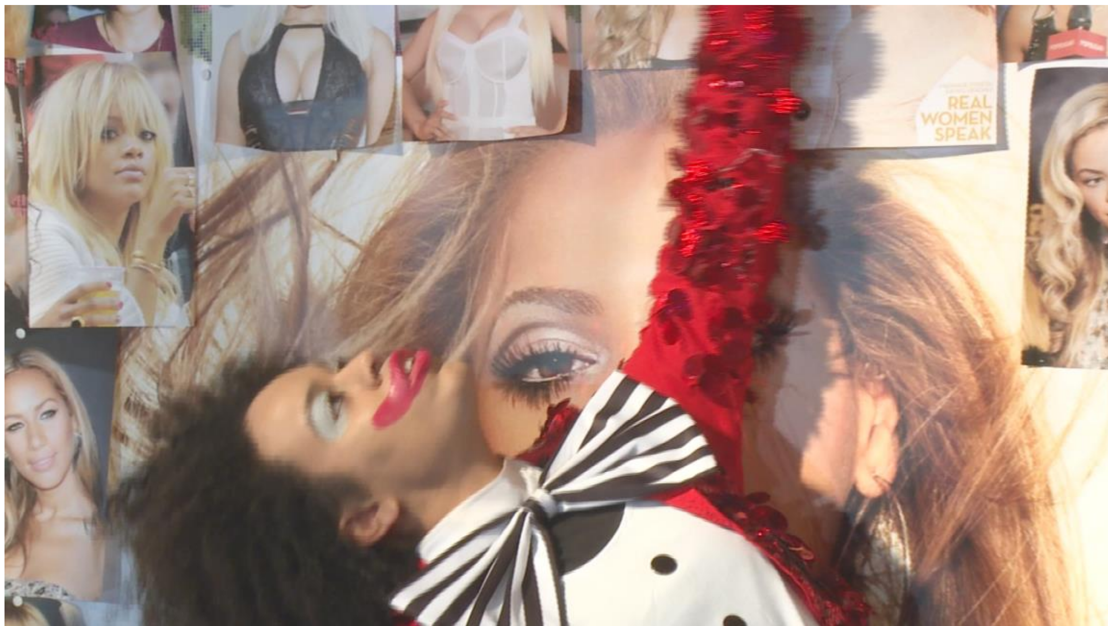
Ambivalence is not least experienced from the viewpoint of how the reader interprets Quilla Constance's *Pukijam*, as we know that multiple readers, the author and texts themselves give multiple meanings; but more so, it is the very nature of ambivalence seen through skin colour and the notion of *passing* as a strategy, that now becomes the measuring stick for acceptable black female bodies on screen. This paper titled *'Border-Crossing: To Pass or Not to Pass'*, will look at the relationship between ambivalence, colourism and media whitewashing, in the generation of ideal types of female bodies in popular cultural imagery. Quilla Constance's body in performance creates a tension against the backdrop of this ideal image, highlighting the element of risk and violence inherent in trying to safely cross the colour line through the use of the stereotype. This act of passing can, as I will show, never be a safe one.

For anyone who hasn't seen it yet, I just want to show a short 2-minute extract from a specific section, followed by an extract taken from the 2012 documentary *Dark Girls* by Bill Duke to contextualize the themes of my talk.

Colourism

White aesthetics play a major part in constructing the ‘visual pleasures of looking and desire’ on screen, from Hollywood movies to television, music videos and advertisements within ‘Euro-American’ culture. The dominant message is clear and pervasive as we saw in the extract, taken from the documentary ‘Dark Girls’; white and light skin sells for women, leaving the woman of colour outside discussions of beauty. This has also produced a hierarchy of beauty based on skin colour, which has been internalized as a colour complex for non-white women globally. This phenomenon is termed as ‘colourism’, a form of discrimination that privileges lighter skin tones over darker skin tones even within members of the same racial group. **(Show slide: white racism)** At its foundation is white racism.

Documentary films such as Bill Duke’s *Dark Girls* (2012) and Chris Rock’s *Good Hair* (2009) shows the extent of such belief systems for women of colour and the harrowing effects of this form of discrimination in their lives but also highlights that this is globally a big business. The skin lightening and black hair industries are grossing billions of dollars yearly through black women’s self-negation of their blackness in order to assimilate into a white ideal of beauty. In an interview with Oprah in 2009, Chris Rock states that this is a $9 billion dollar industry ‘that affects the daily activities, wallets, self-esteem – and even sex lives of black [African-American] women’.



The issue of colourism was also implicated in the controversy that surrounds *Nina* (2013) **(show slide: saldena/simone)** the biographical film adaptation of Nina Simone’s life, in which Zoe Saldana, a mixed-heritage Latin-American plays the role of the dark-skinned, African-American soul-singer. **(Show slide: Saldena on set)** Here you can see Zoe Saldana on the shoot for the *Nina* film, where she is notably darker through the use of special make-up, performing a modern day version of a ‘blackface’ performance to fit into her role of a dark skinned woman.

In contrast, these two modern day examples of casting aesthetically lighter-skinned women in screen images are symptomatic of a systematic process of ‘Hollywood whitening up’. ‘Whitening up’ as a term works in opposition to the act of ‘blackening up’, characterized by the blackface performances of the 19th century, which Allen makes use of in *Pukijam*, albeit the painted face. In

performances, one can never simply change race through changing colour and so my use of 'whitening up' should not be taken to mean that black people desire to transform into white bodies. Rather I want to establish the idea that whiteness is the yardstick that is used to measure these women, and that the process of using lighter-skinned women as an analogy to signify whiteness is a strategy that is used by the image making and movie industry. This is not an isolated case, as in 2012 we see the cinematic adaptation of the novel *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006), a story based on the political and ethnic struggles of the Nigerian-Biafran war in the 1960s and 70s, where the filmmakers cast the light-skinned, British mixed race actress, Thandie Newton to play the role of Olanna, one of the four main protagonists of the story. This has been met with uproar from many Nigerians, who said that her features and skin complexion did not reflect the Igbo heritage that she was supposed to come from.

The issue of using actresses with lighter complexions to play these roles reflects Hollywood's and the music industries aversion to making female character choices based on 'white aesthetics', value judgments, based on what is deemed beautiful from a Euro-American perspective. Casting actors is therefore not simply a matter of those who can act the part well, but rather as stated by Dana Nolan Professor of Cinema Studies at the Tisch School of Arts, 'it is simply a matter of business as usual'. But what is this business as usual? Perhaps 'business as usual' can be conflated with 'mixing business with pleasure', - the pleasure within looking, where pleasure according to feminist film theorist Teresa De Lauretis, and I quote, is derived from 'the representation of woman as image, (spectacle, object to be looked at, vision of beauty – and the concurrent representation of the female body as the *locus* of sexuality, site of visual pleasure, or lure of the gaze)'. **(Show slide)**

Pleasure in the context of Allen's work can be seen in the use of light skinned and blonde haired women, rather than darker skin tones and dark hair, where light skin tones have greater monetary value than darker skin tones; lighter is the skin that sells in media image-making industries, in the production of the beauty myth and ideal models of women.

I also want to touch on this kind of homogenization of colour, not only related to skin colour, but thinking about how technology has also conspired in creating these lightness ideals. Out of a selection of these black female music icons, not all of them are in fact black or are of the same complexion in real life. **(Show slide Rita)** For example we see the artist Rita Ora in there, who is actually of Albanian ethnicity. As we can see from many advertisements of women's beauty products, specifically here **(show slide: Beyonce)** in the example of the controversial L'Oreal advert of music artist Beyoncé from 2008 where the cosmetics and beauty company were accused of whitening the singer through digital lightening, the camera as well as computer image manipulation techniques can be racist and complicit in reinforcing these ideals.

(Show slide: Early photography racism)
In 2013 in the exhibition *To Photograph the Details of a Dark Horse in Low Light*, London-based artists, Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin, produced a body of archival work that explored the *Racism of Early Colour Photography in Art*. In focusing on the idea that photography as a medium is prejudice, they looked at the Polaroid camera during the apartheid era in South Africa, which they say was engineered only to take pictures of white people, and meant that the cameras exposure was not suitable for the black person, who would come out inherently darker, with only their white eyes and teeth being visible.

Colourism draws on the growing multiculturalism and miscegenation of racial identities, nationalities and all of those bodies in between the black and white dichotomy. This is more evident in the US where intermediate groups such as the Latino population exemplify the difficulty inherent with placing people on a hierarchy, based on a dual dichotomy, when the United States in itself is developing a triracial system which according to Eduardo Bonilla-Silva and David Dietrich in *The Latin Americanization of US Race Relations A New Pigmentocracy*, places whites at the top; an intermediary group of honorary whites, similar to the coloreds or the mixed race in South Africa during formal apartheid; and a non-white group or the collective black at the bottom'.

Hair
(Show slide: Hair of Allen)

Skin is a major part of the discussion on colourism, however, woven into its discourse is a discussion on the politics of the hair. In *Pukijam*, even though my initial observations led me straight to noticing that all the women were of a similar digital complexion, what then immediately struck me, was that all of these women had blonde hair. Blonde hair according to Marina Warner in the *Beast to the Blonde: From Fairytales to their tellers*, 'naturally enciphers female beauty- inner as well as outer'. Blonde hair has been seen as the chosen colour for women looking to increase their sexuality and femininity, and the choice of film stars and sex symbols, such as the iconic Marilyn Monroe. And here are just a few examples of the women that Allen uses. **(Show slides)** From left to right, Nicki Minaj, Tara Banks, Queen Latifah and Eve. The use of blonde hair however is a contentious issue that has divided critiques over its symbolic value within the black community. On one side of the debate the British artist Joy Gregory **(Show Slide – The Blonde),** produced a project on empowerment and strength, where non-European males and females explain why they choose to dye their hair blonde, with reasons which range from 'the personal, and the serious to the superficial'.

On the other side, **(show slide - McMorris)** Ekua McMorris's self-portrait *Bathroom* (2008) the artist is wearing a Marilyn Monroe style wig, and by looking into the mirror McMorris shows her ambivalent relationship with her hair and the desire to assimilate into another culture's ideal looks. McMorris has said that the work is 'based on her childhood desire to have blonde hair, which stemmed she said from the fact she and her siblings were the only children at school with dreadlocks'.

Hair Story, an exploration into African-American hair written by Ayana D. Byrd & Lori L. Tharps (2001) illustrates how 'good' and 'bad' were equated with 'fair' and 'dark' respectively, showing the symbolic value of colour. This was further compounded through the texture of hair. In slave culture, the texture of hair, either being straight or kinky (curly) was as important as the colour of skin complexion and was used to police 'negro' identity. These hierarchies of colour and texture amongst slaves meant that light skin was equated with 'good hair' and dark skin slaves, with 'bad hair'. Straight hair, like light skin, equated to economic opportunity and social capital, enabling slaves with the combination of lighter-skin and straight hair to work in the households, whilst their darker-skinned counterparts worked on the fields.

(Show slide: Gabby Douglas)
In the most recent UK Olympics 2012, it was the hair that upstaged the achievements of the 16-year old Gabby Douglas, who was the first ever black African-American gymnast to win a gold in the women's individual all around title. Rather than focusing on this landmark event, it was from amongst the black community that reference was made over her relaxed (chemically treated) hair looking 'unkempt'. The hair was a marker of a black presence and more of an indicator than skin colour itself. Lori Tharps highlights that the rule of thumb was that if the hair showed just a little bit of kinkiness, a person would be unable to pass as white. The politics of passing as a major Afro-American theme of the early 19th century onwards is described as **(Show slide: Passing definition)** 'an eroticizing alternation and a peculiar play on difference, and the corresponding double consciousness it requires of those who can seem either Black or White'. Two key films which highlight this issue of passing, are Douglas Sirk's (1959) *An Imitation of Life* and Basil Dreaden's (1959) Sapphire. Essentially, the hair acted as the true test of blackness. In *Pukijam*, this is evident, for what makes Allen stand out from the women in the montage of images, even with her light skin which unites her with them, is the fact that the hair gives that contradictory meaning and exposes the black presence.

(Show slide: Stereotypes) This tension about being left on the outside is one, which is evident in Allen's work. The jump cuts and mish mash of images, sounds, music genres, between positive and negative stereotypes, between white beauty ideals and blackness, between the real, the representation and the performance, are in constant battle in the work, adding to the strategy of ambivalence and a certain uncomfortability when thinking about where one stands with the work. What Allen does in my opinion, lends to the American Radicalist educationalist Henry Giroux's concept of border-crossing.

From his perspective, a border is an 'inherited enclosed psychic space in which one resides and to border cross, allows one to step away from their inscribed identity and world view, and to enter, and I quote **(Show slide: Border crossing)** "new spaces in which dominant social relations, ideologies and practices are able to be questioned".

These new territories then, these oppositional spaces which allow for border-crossing are liberating but at the same time risky. Through the borders of the image itself, knowing where one has crossed from is as important as knowing where one is crossing to. A synthesis of old and new ways of seeing is needed in what has been termed the invocation of the 'forbidden montage' by the Israeli filmmaker Eyal Sivan in the construction of oppositional gazes in representations. This is as an image created out of the experience of perspectives from both the consciousness of the dominant oppressors view, with that of the oppressed. And I think this is what is at play within *Pukijam* and what makes the work so challenging.

Allen uses these master narratives of race, takes them out of context and re-packages them again, she does this through the use of stereotypes and her dual subjectivity, her skin colour allowing her to pass, but hair denying her full access; she is one and the same the master and the slave.

Allen's use of stereotypes, even in spite of the risk they uphold is really important to *Pukijam* and perhaps despite the initial feeling that the work plays into the hands of racist rhetoric, we can lend the work to the same risks that were taken by **(Show slide 5: Betye Saar)** the artist Betye Saar in the iconic piece 'the Liberation of Aunt Jemima', where through an image re-construction, she engaged with the discourse of the dominant narratives of white patriarchal culture to create a new way and a new meaning for the mammy and black female subjectivity.

Thank You

N.B: Quilla Constance's Pukijam video was originally screened at 198 Contemporary Arts, 2015 as part of Quilla Constance's solo exhibition: Pukijam - curated by Maria Kheirkhah.