



ANTIRACISM

Volume 4 • Number 1&2 • \$5

Himani Bannerji	Sanhita Brahmacharie
Phinder Dulai	kevin d*souza
Minal Hajratwala	Marwan Hassan
Peter Hudson	Rabindranath Maharaj
Hiren Mistry	Arif Noorani
Rajinderpal S. Pal	Poonani Posse
S. Ramnath	Louise Saldanha
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Rungh

Volume 4, Number 1 & 2

RUNGH is an interdisciplinary magazine committed to the exploration of traditional and contemporary South Asian cultural production and its contexts. It is a project of the Rungh Cultural Society, an incorporated, non-profit society.

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editorial

Welcome to the Anti-Racism issue of *Rungh*. Featured on the following pages are art, creative writing, and critical commentary addressing this increasingly important subject. As editors of this issue during a transition year for *Rungh*, Sourayan Mookerjea and myself found ourselves thinking about how to present such material in a journal that has mostly devoted itself to issues around the arts and culture from the South Asian diaspora. One of our concerns was that, as soon as we broach the subject of anti-racism, we necessarily move beyond what might be thought of as an exclusively "South Asian" issue. How then, do we address anti-racism adequately but still maintain some sort of connection to South Asian arts and culture?

What we decided upon was a blend of materials originating from a relatively wider spectrum of contributors. We also wondered how to determine what an anti-racist article or story or poem or artwork looks like—should it be simply informative, should it be subtly creative, should it be polemical, or does any of that matter?

We hope, then, that the range of materials that follows at least begins to address the complex issue of anti-racism in a contemporary, multi-racial world. In this issue you will find: creative writing in the form of prose from Marwan Hassan and Rabindranath Maharaj, poetry from S. Ramnath, Wayde Compton, and Minal Hajratwala, and two letters from Phinder Dulai and Himani Bannerji; critical commentary from Peter Hudson, the Poonani Posse, and Hiren Mistry; dialogues on teaching and communicating from Louise Saldanha and Aruna Srivastava and Sharron Proulx and Sanhita Brahmacharie; and an artist-run centre from Kevin d'souza and Arif Noorani addressing the complex intersections of race, desire, and sexuality.

We hope this issue on anti-racism contributes to the sounds of progressive change in all our communities.

—Ashok Mathur & Sourayan Mookerjea

contributors

Himani Bannerji is a writer, professor, and cultural activist living in Toronto.

Sanhita Brahmacharie is a divorced 28-year-old South Asian lesbian office worker, cultural worker and unrepentant caffeine addict. She was born in Calcutta and currently lives in Calgary.

Wayde Compton is an activist based in Vancouver.

Kevin d*souza is a cultural activist and videomaker. He lives in Toronto.

Winslow Delaney is a visual artist based in Vancouver.

Phinder Dulai lives and writes in Richmond. He has published one collection of poetry, *Ragas from the Periphery*.

Minal Hajratwala writes and performs poetry in San Jose, California, where she is a newspaper journalist. Her poems appear in various literary journals and in anthologies.

Marwan Hassan has published two books—a novel and two novellas. He lives in Ottawa.

Peter Hudson is a Vancouver writer and editor. He has recently edited a special issue of *West Coast Line* entitled *North*, an anthology of contemporary Black Canadian writing.

Rabindranth Maharaj writes short stories and novels. His first collection of short stories was *The Interloper* from Goose Lane Press in New Brunswick.

Hiren Mistry is a student, writer, caterer, and collector of music, studying South Asian diasporic culture and cultural productions at Trent University.

Arif Noorani was past festival co-ordinator for *Desh Pardesh* in Toronto.

Rajinderpal S. Pal is a poet and editor. He is currently on the organizing committee for the PanCanadian Wordfest (Calgary).

Sharron Proulx-Turner is a 43-year-old two-spirit with two getting-old kids (barb and graham), a writer (working on her second book), an instructor at old sun college (siksika nation), an activist and a lover of chinooks.

The wimmin of **De Poonani Posse** are TJ Bryan, Sherece Taffe and Nicole Redman, three Blk (of African descent) dyke artists/writers/organizers. DPP is a cultural production house dedicated to organizing Black lesbian-focussed events and produces *Da Juice!*—a Black lesbian magazine based in Toronto.

S. Ramnath works as an elementary school teacher and has a degree in Physics from the University of Calcutta and in English Literature from the University of State of New York, Albany.

Louise Saldanha teaches at Grant MacEwan Community College in Alberta. She is working on a critical book on Canadian women of colour writing children's literature.

Aruna Srivastava is an educator and activist. She teaches at the University of Calgary.

WHY DO WE DO THIS

ANTI-RACIST WORK

IN THE CLASSROOM?

Louise Saldanha & Aruna Srivastava

In November 1996, we met to talk about the problems of doing anti-racist work in the university context. We both teach English literature courses, Louise formerly at Grande Prairie Regional College and currently at the University of Calgary, where she is working on her Ph.D. (with Aruna as one of her supervisors). When we taped this discussion, Louise was in the middle of a course mandatory for Early Childhood Education students called English 397: Literature for Younger Children a course in which she was encountering some strong resistance from her students to any suggestion of anti-racist analysis. It is this particular course that is both the focus of and reference point for our discussion. Aruna was in the middle of courses on fiction for first-year students and a course called Aboriginal Literature and Film. For some time now, we have been engaged in these discussions about the role of woman of colour as instructor in the university setting, in terms of teaching, research, and the institution generally. Both of us have been engaged in research into critical race theory and critical pedagogy and are committed to working through some of these theoretical principles in our teaching.

LOUISE Aruna, why do you do anti-racist work in your classrooms?

ARUNA It was definitely a process, starting with my original interest in democratic ways of teaching, which I learned from teaching composition courses as a grad student. I then saw connections between pedagogical practice and my interest in postcolonial theory and at the same time was a practicing feminist, becoming aware of my own identification as a racialized woman. So, I wouldn't have called myself an anti-racist teacher until about 5 or 6 years ago, which went along with anti-racism in the context of my academic research and my community work. I quite

slowly developed strategies of dealing with race and racism in the classroom, some of it by trial and error; I went through some quite nasty stuff when I first started teaching, although not as much now. But I'm still not quite sure what motivates me; I have often talked about my confusion about whom I do this work for, and about the troubling fact that I probably focus most on trying to teach white students about white privilege: I still find that students of colour get lost in that equation. That's still a real problem with my teaching. Why do you do this work, Louise?

LOUISE Right now, I don't know! I continue to be inspired by the literature on critical pedagogy and my initial goal in this class, especially since it is a required course for teacher education students, was to facilitate discussions around how education is never neutral. The students in the class are predominantly white and middle-class and have, despite the currency of multicultural and diversity discussions in their programme, never had to question the ways in which the knowledges and values that inform their own education practices are connected to their racial and economic privileges. I have emphasized, from the first day of English 397 [Literature for Younger Children],

however, the necessity of a critical self-reflexivity so that we are aware of the ways in which not only children's books, but the reasons we choose to teach or not teach certain books, works to "produce" children within dominant ideology. But, as a woman of colour committed to anti-racism, I suddenly find myself in this profoundly conflicted position as a woman of colour and as the instructor: I have to convince these students that racism does exist, that "race" has material consequences in the lives of people of colour, that since (and this is one thing on which they all agree) the classrooms in which they will teach will be increasingly multi-racial, they cannot afford to not know this, and that when they say that *children do not notice "race"* that they are speaking from their whiteness; and I feel I have to be gracious, "helpful" (because I, too, have internalized the myth that educators should remain detached and, well, teacherly) in the face of their white defensiveness and anger. This is hard on my soul, lots of wear and tear, and I am feeling not up to this... I know I'm setting up all sorts of false standards for myself, but I don't feel that I'm doing it particularly well at this point. Now, my number one goal has shifted from changing the world to survival!

I don't want to teach in any sort of mainstream way, but it's exhausting to think of facing years and years of this, often hostile, resistance from students for the rest of my teaching career. Will I be hanging on to a few crumbs here and there where students will write really thoughtful e-mails to me, saying *I get it?* Sounds like some dysfunctional relationship right out of *Oprah!* It was so much easier just to teach that "journey of the hero" thing in children's literature — that's what I'm sure right now the students would happily hear: and they'll end up thinking I'm a great teacher and I've taught them something. This might be to do with gender, this feeling that I really want to be liked by everyone in the classroom.

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ARUNA Contradictions: first, we're working against our own socialization as women and teachers. Wanting to be liked: I remember reading bell hooks in *Talking Back*, talking about trying to ignore the desire to be liked; I find that that's easier as I go along. There are students who aren't going to like what I do, and yet part of what anti-oppression teachers, myself included, possess is a messianic side, so I have also come to question the nature of my investment in this work. There is a positive side to it and students often validate that, but it also has a pernicious side: I am there to *convince* the majority in the class that this is necessary to do—outside of race or gender, there is something contradictory about being in that position of holding the truth even if you are teaching that truth is provisional. I think that's where the disappointment of anti-racist teaching comes in: your expectations far exceed what realistically happens. From my personal and other communities, I

simply don't expect as much as I do in the academic one. I'm much more forgiving of white people in my other communities; I still like them and can challenge them about their racism, privilege, blind spots; they can still be friends and co-workers. In the classroom, it's difficult not to indulge in the binaries: everything is going really well or really badly, and nothing in between.

You talked about survival; a lot of women of colour who write about teaching also talk about different survival strategies, one of which is in fact *not* doing this work as a way of surviving, choosing to teach in that "objective" authoritarian way. Although that's something that I personally reject, I understand it and am curious about what strategies we choose just to get through.

LOUISE This anti-racist analysis and consciousness that I have been coming into over the last two years is so intimate to me—it really breaks my heart continually running into this wall of resistance..

The thing that you're better at than me is not demonizing students; it's easier for me to say *they're all like this* even though I know they are not: from their personal journals I know that some students are slowly starting to question privilege, their assumptions, and their knowledges. But is "some" students enough? "Most" of the students remain stuck very loudly in their white defensiveness and it's tough to continually have to find ways through that, which is why teaching this class has become all about survival...mine.

It's all very fine for tenured professors to tell me to write an article about this class, and yet what the hell are they doing? In terms of white alliance, why should it be my job to fix white people? In order to make the students aware of social injustice, I have to ensure that they are feeling good enough about themselves so that they'll listen. As long as they are allowed to think the "problem" is out there—because they, as self-reflexive practitioners, are "good" people, and they can only think of racism,

sexism, homophobia, etc. occurring as something apart from them — then only are they willing to think about how they, as teachers, can work against inequity in their classrooms. And, I feel, that this is as far as we are going to get in this course, as far as I can push if I'm going to stay sane. Yet, the white students are going to get away without questioning their whiteness. The most I might get by the end of the term is this white guilt thing. Yay.

But for now I'm not pushing it because I'm so happy when these students even recognize that we need images of children of colour in picture books — because their students, the children they will teach, will not all be white, and they are slowly recognizing that children of colour need their presence affirmed through these important, but never-seen, representations. But, what is that really? What are the consequences of letting them off so easily? Even getting my students to the point where they see that racism exists has been hard work, because they don't want to see race, and they will see it only as long as it doesn't affect their own lives.

ARUNA There are some people who'd say that's enough, that if a white student leaves the class actually thinking about representation in teaching children's literature then you've moved her one step along that admittedly-liberal path. I'm not all that convinced: the most frustrating thing in anti-racist teaching — where it fails — is when students seem to understand, and do the work, and yet you know that when they're really pressed to recognize their privilege, all of the defensiveness and denial occur, and that people of colour get hurt and other white people who are in fact *more* racist get validated all at the same time. About half the time I think teaching in any group where you have more white people than people of colour is going to result in that liberal dilemma. Are we wasting energy worrying about that?

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For me, it is harder when students of colour leave my class, or when they don't themselves appreciate an anti-racist approach because it inevitably singles them out. I have to confront my own sense of feeling betrayed by them: what is our relationship to students of colour — do they feel betrayed by *us*? This is the first year I've done anything to move in their direction, not just by having a group of aboriginal students working in their own group, for example, but by putting women of colour in the class in touch with each other because one of them was having trouble with racism in her study group. Up to this point, I would have listened to that inner voice tell me *this is wrong, it is preferential treatment*, and would internalize all possible complaints from white students. I think that my failure has been a failure of nerve: nothing wrong with that, we are conditioned to have failures of nerve. Is the challenge we present really that big a deal all the time — how do students *actually*

respond to our political teaching when it comes down to it? Not always as negatively as we assume.

LOUISE I find it troubling that in attempting to suggest an anti-racist analysis in English 397, I have ended up giving so much space to whiteness. I realize that I didn't give people of colour in my class a language to talk about their location as people of colour, and so when they're trying to talk about their own experiences of race, class, etc. they're doubly uncomfortable. Talking about “race” has focussed the attention on them, but they are unequipped to talk back, in a sense. They're tentative: How to talk about racism without offending the white people, their white friends and colleagues? I think it would have really helped if I had put people of colour together in their own groups.

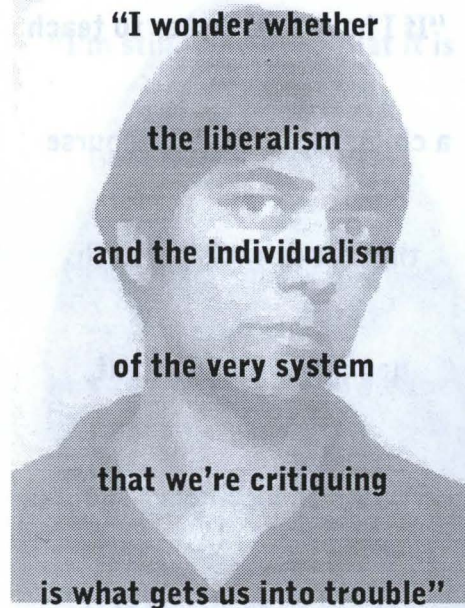
ARUNA This is scary stuff, though: our internalized fears aren't completely false. Take the example at the University of Calgary of the faculty opposition to universal, published teacher ratings. I have mixed feelings, and recognize what we as faculty fear, yet I think there's something not quite logical about the assumption that innovative teachers will get bad evaluations, and that published teaching ratings would discourage innovation. My own evaluations have been pretty good, even though some students are *always* offended by my pedagogy. Maybe, as you pointed out, tenure affords me this sense of security, and maybe that was part of the reason I became more insistent about these issues this year: I finally had less to lose.

LOUISE It's overwhelming to confront white oblivion, especially as a racialized female. Despite students' claims that “race” is irrelevant, I know, from their comments, attitude, and behaviour, that the fact that I am a woman of colour is relevant, but no-one wants to talk about it. They say instead: *racism is no longer an issue; we see no burning crosses. Everyone is equal. We're multicultural.* Faced with this,

how do you present racism as a real problem, then? And they're so committed to the idea of the democratic classroom in which everyone can speak and is heard equally. So why do the three women of colour in the class never say anything in a large group setting? And why is it that the rest of the class does not notice? One of the most difficult things is to challenge this liberal ideology which makes some people's silence, somehow look like equality.

ARUNA There's lots of contradictions there: if we recognize that racism has been learned through a lifetime, then it's understandable but weird that we'd assume that that would change significantly in a couple of months. It's amazing that *anyone* in 3 months would intervene in their own thinking, even to the point of moving from *none of us see race to race is a problem*. Combine that with race not being the only factor: look at other ideologies, including a strong, conservative educational system where there is very little encouragement for students to think critically; we do little to reward them for taking risks. It may not be comforting but I remember, when I feel defeated and upset, that good teachers know that most learning occurs outside the classroom, and long after their particular influence. Very rarely do we get feedback, unless we have students who take our classes again. Students do come back to our classes more often, because we teach them ways to radically change themselves; we have to still the naysaying voice complaining that we are "cultic" teachers. Our pedagogies are very demanding, and I have an increasing respect of the work that students do in my classes, because it is *hard*. Still, it is difficult to remember all these long-term effects when faced with racism in the classroom, or with racial dynamics, and to remind ourselves that this resistant student might, three years down the road, be an anti-racist activist.

Can you imagine a situation in which what you're going through at the present



wouldn't seem so personal and crucial as it does now?

LOUISE Here at the University of Calgary everyone tells me I'm lucky to get a senior course in my area of research. Maybe so, but I feel it as a huge responsibility too because I want to make a crucial intervention. So, in doing anti-racist teaching, I risk unpopularity, but still maintain my commitment to the principles of critical education. This work is difficult, but then how can I *not* do it? I guess, when I think about what I was saying earlier, about losing sight of my commitment, I realize that I'm making a *choice* to do this anti-racist work and that it is always going to be crucial and personal.

ARUNA It depends too on how invested you are in a course; I got much more upset with whiteness in my course on South Asian diasporic literature than I do in the course on Aboriginal literature, because my identity was being challenged, negated. With first-year novel courses, I don't have the same expectations I have with senior or graduate courses. When I think about first-year students, their idiom is different: my choice would be to have students without sophisticated rhetoric; in our graduate course, for example, you couldn't tell who was being racist, be-

cause our academic and intellectual rhetoric was the same, whereas in a first-year course, students are less guarded, and I can challenge them directly. My own sense of safety is less in a grad course or a South Asian course because there students had the language of multiculturalism, which is what you got in your class, Louise, as well; the rhetoric is so smooth that you get caught in other traps. I had a student in the first-year course talking about *Medicine River*, clearly not seeing her racist stereotypes, but I didn't get as upset as I would with a student in my senior aboriginal literature class saying exactly the same thing and that's because I expect such a student by then to be racist in more subtle ways, which means you have to get into frustrating, coded discussions about white guilt, which are *really* about whether racism and whether oppression of aboriginal peoples really exist. As students move through the university system, they think less critically perhaps, but can mask racism and their own privilege in increasingly sophisticated and elitist ways; our commitment cannot match the institutional commitment to denying that inequality exists in its hallowed halls.

I think there are several reasons why teaching in university doesn't allow for good anti-racist work: we're teaching too many people at structured times, we have no time to debrief, no flexibility in time, we grade students, there is a liberal expectation that this is free space, a level playing ground. *Actual* talk of oppression makes people upset and angry. Also, I have internalized too many institutional values. It's easy to say this with tenure, but I still feel that for all of us going through the ranks, we make more of those institutional fears than are actually real. What happens to us is often arbitrary—anti-racist work itself won't mean always that we don't get a job. From a privileged place, it is frustrating to succumb to those fears, because anti-racist work at the university occurs in a very protected setting, which is probably why it isn't working. I waste so much energy on that teacherly sense of being

fair to all students in the *same way*; especially the students who are taking up too much space get more from me than those who really *need* me to hear them—we're back to *why do this at all?*

LOUISE But you're not paid to do it; you're paid to be there, and you've *chosen* to do anti-racist teaching, and I totally admire your energy and the commitment that this takes — sometimes, for me, it's really hard to get out of bed. To take this stuff on, day after day, keep strategizing around and through student resistance, is tough, tough work. And sometimes it seems like there's so few of us doing this work, and why is that? Do you have to suffer racial, gender, or class oppression in order to fight oppression? Structurally, this makes little sense. But, then, why change the world when it's working so well for you?! It gets kind of lonely at times, especially after a really tough class, because most of my colleagues cannot understand the frustrations I experience, cannot understand why this sort of teaching is politically important, cannot understand why I would want to do this to myself, and cannot, like many of the students I teach, understand the ways in which they, themselves, need to unlearn their racism.

ARUNA But I wonder whether the liberalism and the individualism of the very system that we're critiquing is what gets us into trouble: I still really believe that I'm on my own, and a lot of my strategies are solitary strategies. That's where we revert to the authoritarian thing, into that conundrum that feminist teaching faces as well: I know very few feminist teachers who teach radically differently from the way things have always been done, although *what* they are teaching can be radical. I also found it was very hard for me to let go of my classes when I went on sick leave this term: I had the opportunity to say *these are not my possessions, these courses, you can benefit from other instructors*, and I did not take that opportunity. Although that was partly a valid distrust of

"If I have half a year to teach

a children's literature course

that's anti-racist in both

pedagogy and content,

I want it to be a vehicle

for writers of colour"

white teachers, it also assumes that I can always do it better than people who are substituting for me, and who have been paid to replace me.

LOUISE This current economic climate also functions as a major obstacle to doing this work in the university. We, as academics, have not theorized enough the ways in which the university has aligned itself with corporate agendas, and students therefore are increasingly motivated by the bottom line: how is anti-racist work in the classroom going to help them find, and keep, a job? This is something that keeps surfacing in English 397 as well. I understand that these teachers in training are very concrete thinkers which makes sense because they will be going into classrooms where they will be faced with twenty high-energy kids. So I can understand the need for a concreteness, but it's the uncriticality that bothers me: the assumption that critical thinking isn't helping anyone these days to get a job. The message I'm getting is: *fine, children's literature is heavily ideological and works in the interests of specific power and cultural norms, but we're not going to get work reminding anyone of that*, especially in the school system where there are much more visible pressures from the institution, the principal, the parents. Ironically, that is

one way the university allows us to do anti-racist work in the classroom more easily, I guess.

But the way in which doing this work is so difficult is more abstract, but no less tangible. Even if you walk into an empty classroom, you can see how knowledge is being organized and produced: there are the rows of desks all neatly facing the one big desk that sits in the front, where the blackboard is, the screen for the overhead projector is, where *THE ANSWER* is, and, thus, where I'm supposed to be.

I want to restructure this space, redistribute the power inherent in its design, and encourage students to participate in their own knowledge-making: Why do we like or dislike certain children's books? Where have our ideas about what a "good" children's book come from? Where do our ideas about who a "child" is come from? What are the consequences, especially as teachers, of our beliefs? Yet some students' intense unwillingness to work on these ideas tends to overtake our class and I thus find it increasingly difficult to avoid so easily slipping into that beckoning "I'm the teacher" space in front of the class. That authoritarianism looks mighty good most days! This is my first response (survival, again?) to occupy that space of authority in front of the class waiting for me and which is too easily slipped into: *I'm the boss; this is the way it is; this is a racist world we live in; that's your history; how are you accountable to that history? take notes; write it all down; no debate; it'll be on the final*. You know, even saying this to you, I know how problematic this impulse is, but it sounds so good, so "safe," so not-exhausting. It's definitely a real challenge to resist the way these authoritative spaces are there for us to occupy, especially doing this anti-racist teaching which is about confronting unequal power relations between white people and racialized people (embodied so visibly in this class by me, but where I am the instructor). It's a tough negotiation: my formal authority versus my disempowerment especially be-

cause my “instructor-presence” in the class proves to my students — that racism no longer exists. If a woman of colour can teach an English literature class, then we’ve come a long way baby, actually we’ve come *all* the way. Again, it’s that idea of classrooms being this free, democratic space somehow independent of the racism, classism, sexism that *may* (although they are not convinced that it does) exist outside its walls.

And look at the ways in which we organize the curriculum; courses in English Literature are always compartmentalized, as if they are somehow separate from each other: Victorian Literature, Shakespeare, Children’s Literature. How about a course on discourse, which would include some children’s books? This might help us get away from the extremely entrenched idea of “children” as untainted by the historical and social realities in which they are produced, and to get away from the notion that interrogating these politics contaminates the “innocence of childhood.” Different ways of organization—both at the structural and curricular levels—can produce different kinds of knowledges, and make it easier to “do” critical pedagogy in the classroom.

ARUNA One of the things in my pedagogy that I’m still convinced works is this notion, articulated by Joyce King among others, of knowledge and counter-knowledge: asking students to find out for themselves the dominant forms of knowledge they possess, and countering that with other, less “well-known” knowledges, facts, stories. I’m still convinced that it is as important for students to discover for themselves how limited their knowledge actually is, and then to discover other ways of knowing that I can direct them to but not provide for them. And this is where I get into that charge from colleagues that my pedagogy is lazy. I don’t give students answers, or do the research for them, don’t provide the knowledge or the counter-knowledge myself. They need to discover all the knowledges themselves.

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other ways of knowing”

It’s difficult not to fall into that place of telling students where to find things, easy not to be critical about where I stand on issues; and I’m still entranced by how easy it is—even in a mediated or strategic way—to take on the authority and have students accept that uncritically. Even if I say that my knowledge is partial and situated, it’s astonishing how quickly and readily we all fall back into *well she’s the prof and she’s talking more and she’s answering our questions so we pay more attention to her and primarily we don’t pay attention to each other*. With racism, this means the white students don’t listen to other white students who are working things through, and who can help them out, but they also don’t listen to students of colour, because they don’t recognize them as providing knowledge they should know.

LOUISE That’s very useful: how to get students to think on their own about what knowledge *they* have and don’t have. Especially since they arrive in this class fully expecting, as they—and I, as a student, do this too—to “learn” (read: take notes, ingest, regurgitate) stuff from the instructor. In English 397, what the students want to learn is the *WAY* to teach children’s books to children. It is as if teaching doesn’t involve making certain choices (and this is doubly scary because

I’m working with people who are, or will be, teaching very soon) about what we teach and, more importantly, but less visibly to all of us, how we teach.

My resistance to the knowledge-counter knowledge idea is: if I have half a year to teach a children’s literature course that’s anti-racist in both pedagogy and content, I want it to be a vehicle for people of colour and aboriginal people writing children’s literature. I didn’t want to have white writers in the course because these writers take up too much space already. Everybody has heard of Robert Munsch, but who has heard of Adwoa Badoe? And, why is that? The final research project in my class gives students the chance to select a children’s book of their choice to work with and, get this: *every single one* of my students has selected a picture book by a white person about a white person. And none of them have noticed, despite the emphasis in our class reading on books by aboriginal people and people of colour. This blows my mind. So, no doubt about it, white writers have, in the end, found plenty of space even where I was committed to not giving them any! They are there, if not physically, certainly still foremost in the students’ mind.

Getting back to this knowledge-counter knowledge idea, and my desire to structure a course without white writers...I don’t want to have a mainstream version of Columbus in order to teach Thomas King’s *Coyote Columbus Story* because doesn’t this re-centre whiteness? King’s text, then, gets read as an *alternative* to dominant history. Indeed, the students would have different responses to *Coyote Columbus Story* if they had read something “more mainstream” first. Maybe they wouldn’t have coded their discomfort with the book through their focus on its “bad grammar” (I’m not kidding!) as they did. But what are the politics then? The aboriginal writer writing against the centre? There’s plenty of room for white people, without putting them on the course.

ARUNA What you can also do is ask *how do you know what you know?* For instance, the historical context of Standard English: I send students away to find out what "English" is. Is their English "standard?" Even their own lived experience tells them that their own English isn't grammatical, and then they can make connections between oral stories and their own speaking, although it's harder for them to move on to critique their ideas of what they think literature should *teach*: its ethics or morality. This method also allowed me to absent myself from the debate altogether, because it's very frustrating to get into the "Bad English/Good English" argument.

Around race, too, people get into weird discussions about racism, particularly othering it to the US. Best way to stop that conversation in its tracks was to introduce literature by African Canadians or ask students to find out what the history of slavery is in Canada, or where and when the largest settlement of black people in Canada is. And then come back and tell me that slavery and oppression didn't exist here. It also works to do standard anti-racist exercises based on history: *when did white supremacist groups first come to Canada? how long have they been here? what kind of funding do they get?*, so that they can't argue even that white supremacy only exists in the US. It takes a lot less emotional energy for me because the information is there and available to them. Students who don't want to do this won't, but others find that even small facts will shift their perception completely of what they know and how. This happens as much for students of colour as for white students, which is where I succeed in that battle not to privilege white students. You can always work on internalized racism through counter-knowledge.

LOUISE So even at the level of research: *go find out the history of slavery in Canada yourself and then come back with that knowledge.* That's a way in which I can see counter-knowledge working. I hadn't thought of that.

**"I send students away
to find out what "English" is.
Even their own
lived experience tells them
that their own English
isn't grammatical"**

I'm wondering if we can talk about collaboration for a bit. This has become increasingly important for me, in the writing I do, but also in my teaching practice. I'm realizing that in order to keep doing this work in the classroom, both sanely and safely, it's critical to do it collaboratively. This way, to get politically aware people of colour, students, professors, across disciplines and faculties, to get white allies, community activists, together to facilitate the class, allows students to see beyond this individual instance of this particular class of English 397. It provides them with an opportunity to see how oppression works systemically, and to see that there is no one way to read a book, teach in a classroom, or fight for justice. Facilitating a class collaboratively would also be less soul-wearying for those of us courageous (or crazy) enough to do this work day after day. It would be so important for me to have this community, but it also would be a critical way for students to see our work as not occurring in isolation and our work as occurring differently depending on our racial or economic privilege.

ARUNA I wonder why it is that although I know that the first lesson in my community work is *not* to do anti-racist workshops alone, to debrief, I *still* haven't learned that lesson in teaching. I do infor-

mal collaborative work: lots of people in the class as co-teachers, especially using white allies. But in terms of saying *I need help*, I can't. At the personal level, yes; the community level, yes. The only collaborative work I do in the classroom is with students, which can be problematic. And other things get in the way: like you and I teaching our classes at the same time of day. But why can't we just switch with each other or cancel one class? Even with guests, we shoulder the responsibility for the class's reactions to them, instead of sharing the burden with those guests and with the students.

LOUISE It's crucial for my students to see some sort of collective, including white allies, working in class. This would also change the interpersonal dynamic that occurs in class where I am always filtered through racist and sexist perceptions. The students, especially in a class like the one I'm currently teaching, comprised of largely of teachers-in-training, could see that people of colour don't live in isolation, that racism isn't an individual experience, or the problem of people of colour, that there is a need for alliance to fight oppression.

Although I really feel this as critical educational practice, I have trouble envisioning what such a course would actually look like, except at the basic level of us joining our courses, for example, which would just make for a massive class. Thus, the idea of curricular reform keeps offering itself as one of the most viable possibilities. For instance, a language and politics class would make this collaboration more workable.

ARUNA Sometimes it is a matter of just *doing* it, because, although there are institutional barriers and reasonings to prevent collaboration, there's all sorts of examples of people informally sitting in on classes. My fear is that it isn't seen as quite proper to have informal co-teachers, yet there's precedent for some of these ideas. Like splitting our large classes and meet-

ing them less often: nothing to say we can't make our classes smaller that way. It's not a great solution but nobody opposed it when I did it this term; it works, and yet to some people it seems an uncanny thing to do. We are fixated on certain ways of doing things. Why does the prof have to there all the time? Why not have 10 people come in together to teach?

One of the things we have done in this conversation is talk about anti-racist teaching in a top-down way: us vs. them. One of the ways to establish a sense of community and dialogue, making the classroom less private, is to think of anti-racist teaching in the context of how we teach each other. What have you learned from me? What have I learned from you? From other colleagues, white allies, from students? In the aboriginal literature class I learned from women of colour in particular that in fact they are willing to create and learn from community; they taught me about their willingness as strangers to help and support another woman, and formulated several different solutions themselves after I asked for their help. I was surprised at ways in which their white allies and friends also pitched in to help someone they didn't know — that is how the politics of community works. My own fear has prevented me in the past from initiating community action within the classroom.

From you I've learned that it's easy for me to be complacent about anti-racist teaching; that I do have accumulated authority that gets me through a lot of stuff, even when I'm being actively resisted. I know my institution well enough to know where my resources are, and know that personally too there's little that will prevent me from staying sane through this process. I've learned that it's perfectly possible to have a concatenation of things that make a truly horrible class: as much as I could theorize what was going on in your class, all of that meant nothing in the context of that particular group of your students; it is possible for a minority of bad students to

**“One of the ways to establish
a sense of community
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take it over until it is unrecoverable.

LOUISE At this point, right in the midst of what has turned out to be a really tough course, you know I can't think of one thing I've learned from the students in English 397. I'll have to get back to that later, think about it when I have a bit of distance once the term has ended.

From you, I've learned the importance of community, which is something I've never experienced, especially since you are my advisor and I shouldn't be revealing the difficulties I'm having like this — the university doesn't promote trust. As a woman of colour, you understand things; I don't have to explain why this teaching is doubly difficult when taken on by a racialized female, which is important support in getting through this type of teaching. Our alliance is crucial to me. Especially with this class, there are still points where this anti-racist project seems too big. But I think *Aruna's probably going through this too*. This is what I feel to be mentoring, not the traditional God/Adam thing that usually happens among profs and their graduate students. That's so cool.

ARUNA It is interesting for me to see you not recognize yet how much you have done with that class as their teacher. We do have a lot of power and responsibility,

and we are expected to solve problems like those you've had. And a lot of us invest energy in these classes in the name of something larger. The goal isn't the subject, like "Milton" — the goal is different, and if we see those not working, then we take so much more time to get it back on track. As an anti-racist worker you have put an awful lot of work into fixing the course instead of easily giving up on it, like other faculty seem to have done, presuming it insoluble. People like you put so much effort in pure pedagogical terms, just not to make that default to the lowest common denominator.

LOUISE Is there space for listing that energy on the tenure form, space to write that in? This anti-racist teaching, as emotionally and physically taxing as it is, has taken away from my own research, my dissertation work, and that's where the system sucks. Traditional ways of teaching take far less energy, and therefore more is more conducive to "success," promotion, that sort of thing. This form of critical pedagogy and the energy it needs is completely devalued it seems to me, and there's no space to talk about it unless you're doing it. I guess I can understand when people tell me to write articles about my experiences with this teaching and this class, or tell me (and it's only white folk who tell me this) how "brave" I am for doing this kind of work, but why the hell don't they do it as well? I'm being cynical, I suppose, but the university, at both a systemic and an individual level, really does work against this teaching. I feel like there's no space for it, and to literally make room is bodily exhausting. And where is there room for exhaustion.



Work Cited: King, Joyce. 1991. "Dysconscious Racism: Ideology, Identity, and the Miseducation of Teachers." *The Education Feminism Reader*. Ed. Lynda Stone (with the assistance of Gail Masuchika Boldt). New York and London: Routledge, 1994. 336-348.

A braided silken cord

aboriginal women & women of colour working together

by Sharron Proulx-Turner & Sanhita Brahmacharie

Sanhita As a young South Asian woman growing up on the prairies in the 1970s, I knew of only two categories in matters of race: "them" and "us." "They" were what my parents called Canadians—tall, rangy white Christians of indeterminate cultural heritage who actually belonged in this cold country.

The rest of "us" were shooed into the category of "visible minority." We were small isolated groups of black, brown and yellow folk careful not to be seen together too often lest we present ourselves as targets. We were marked by our difference. We looked different, smelled different, thought different. Our dreamy-eyed parents huddled over steaming cups of tea on winter nights talking longingly of different, far-off places and visits back home.

It was not until I was much older that I real-

ized that First Nations people had no place in either of my definitions—that, in fact, aboriginal peoples were as invisible to me as I was, in all my "visible minority" glory, to white Canadian culture.

My first encounter with Canadian stereotypes of First Nations people occurred in early February 1976 in the booming oil town of Grande Prairie, Alberta. I was six years old and in Grade One—newly immigrated, non-English speaking and conspicuously brown-skinned.

My class was engaged in one of those manic Valentine's-Day-inspired art projects which involved weaving brightly coloured strips of construction paper through a heart-shape. A classmate, who had been told that I was "Indian," shook her platinum pig-tailed head at my weaving ineptitude. She proclaimed to my puzzled and only partially comprehending ears that she thought that all Indians knew how to weave baskets, track animals and build teepees.

Over the years, the information I have received about First Nations people has increased in quantity rather than quality. I have been fed the usual dichotomy of aboriginal people as reprehensible drunken, lazy, ungrateful no-gooders on one

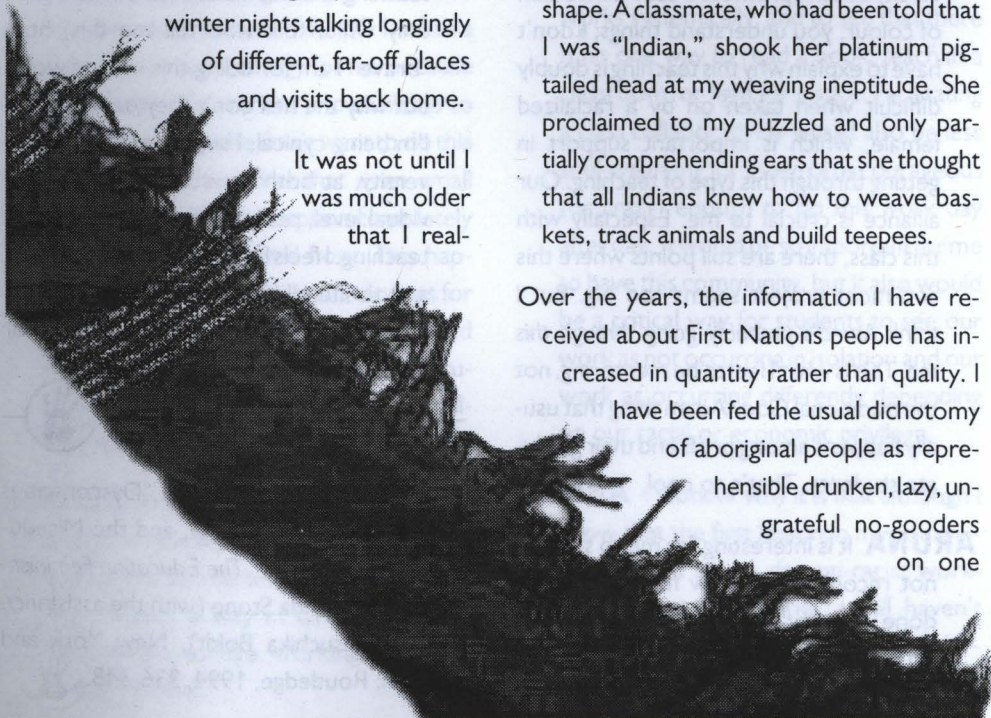
hand and as quaint feather- and bead-bedecked repositories of natural spiritual knowledge on the other.

I have remained resistant to both images. However, I have still internalized the implicit messages behind these stereotypes. I have inadvertently seen First Nations people as not relevant to my everyday city-girl life. I have experienced aboriginal people as a void. I have absorbed the message that what happens to First Nations people is not my concern, not relevant to my urban existence.

As I have begun my political work at the side of First Nations women, I have been struck not so much by my misinformation as by my total lack of information. For me, the task has been to educate myself about First Nations people and issues. I have learned that these are not "their" issues, but also mine.

As a woman of colour who speaks out against racism, sexism, classism and homophobia, I have come to the conclusion that the issues of First Nations women are inextricably bound to my own; that the same eyes that diagnose my difference as a malignant tumour to be excised from the white Canadian psyche have attempted to destroy aboriginal women, children and men for five hundred years.

Sharron I'm white-skinned and blue-eyed, red-nosed with the kind of shining silver hair that grows only on the young. I'm not



a "white" in the same sense as whites and I'm not a woman of colour. Who I am is an aboriginal woman from mohawk, huron, ojibwa, algonquin, french and irish ancestry. I'm a member of the metis nation of alberta, which in itself is a winter's worth of tea and yacking.

I speak only for myself and from my experiences and knowledge. I speak for no other aboriginal women. I think I understand what joanne arnott means when she says women of colour are our "natural allies" as far as racism goes. there's some level where our experiences of racism are identical and I think that's on impact. Impact. No air. No breath. Shame. Shame on you, shame. Whatever's being felt at that moment of impact can't be measured. Yet if impact can't be measured, can velocity? Like when a shotgun shell goes in one side and comes on out the other?

I've been facilitating anti-racism and aboriginal sensitivity workshops for about ten years and if I could say anti-racism work has gaps, it's because the gaps are full of indians. what I mean by that is overall, no one is discriminated against in this country as much and with as much wit and passion as aboriginal peoples.

this country is built on racism. if it's important to point out the samenesses of the experiences of racism among aboriginal women and women of colour, it's important to point to some differences. immigrants learn to hate aboriginal peoples right away. if not at home, then in the history books, the art, novels, movies, esl classes, tv, newspapers, ads, comics, video games, and so on. immigrants learn not to question the politics of this "first world" country where the benevolents are giving a break.

the way I see it. aboriginal peoples didn't come to this land of opportunity to better ourselves, to escape war or poverty, disease or corruption. can't come to someplace you already are. generally, overall, so on and so forth, our peoples don't aspire to become famous in that special (fe)male western european moneymakers-at-any-cost way, while generally, overall,

most other peoples, new and old immigrants, do.

truth is, this country thrives on capitalism. and generally, capitalists don't look back except to find a role model who made more money and if they look forward, it's to where they're going to vacation in the winter.

when I was a kid, I got teased and beaten and raped for being indian. my mom flatly denied it. fin. she got beaten and raped for that but they were wrong. she was french. pure french. most of the time I feel that denial my mother passed on to me in my place of shame. my place of shame is in my body in my spirit.

as an adult living in the city, I've never been thought of as an aboriginal person by a non-aboriginal person who doesn't know me. not by a cop or a cowboy in a store on a bus when I'm looking for a place to rent when I'm just standing around on the street. I don't have to deal with police brutality or ending up in jail for being alive and well and indian and walking around somewhere in calgary or anywhere in this country.

Sanhita & Sharron *Working together. side by side, united. We are not the same and our issues are not the same. However, we are sisters in our understanding of this feeling—this sense of shamefulness for being ourselves. We have an implicit understanding of racism and the impact it has on our lives. and we have a profound understanding of the power of our voices when we're able to go beyond the oppressors' logic. Our power is created when we are able to meet as equals and hear each other's stories, unfiltered by the shade of either "official" histories or popular stereotypes.*

Sanhita I am proud of the strong work that First Nations women and women of colour are doing together. Truth is, we need each other. From my perspective, anti-oppression work is like a braided silken cord. Anti-racism work which does not address the issues of First Nations people is no different than anti-sexism work which

refuses to acknowledge issues of class, sexual orientation and race.

Working with First Nations women, for me, is a matter of integrity. As a woman of colour I cannot, in good conscience, perpetuate the same oppression upon Aboriginal women as is inflicted on me. If we're asking white Canadians not to use their privilege to oppress people of colour, people of colour cannot be part of a structure that oppresses Aboriginal people.

Sharron last week greg young-ing was in calgary to launch a powerful first book, *the random flow of blood and flowers*. after the reading when a bunch of us aboriginal and folks of colour and one white woman are piling into cars, a voice splits the air with hate. danger pulls me out from inside the car. that voice's upper body is pounding on the window of a car, that voice's lower parts are slipping grabbing for some gravel on the road. that voice's face is twisted hate. that voice's fist punches punches flashes brass, stop police stop police get out of the fucking car.

it's then I notice all of us are there. all of us aboriginal and folks of colour and one white woman are there when that terrorized woman of colour steps out and onto the ice. our presence shifts her fear to outrage and she/we question question challenge challenge. that voice's power chokes on its own hate.

that's where I'd like to see us be: a force to be reckoned with. a force which cannot be ignored like crickets in the night. we, aboriginal folks and folks of colour and one white woman are not "the minorities." we are the majorities. so when we aboriginal folks carry out our duty to protect mother earth from slaughter, when we push for settlement of centuries-old land claims, when we demand our right to self-determination, join us. join us as our sisters and allies. join us as our brothers. our children's children's children need us to do these things for them. let's write together, let's speak together. let's eat together. to heal.



Everyday People

by Hiren Mistry

Teaching people that anti-racism is an *every-day* issue is difficult in itself. But convincing people that anti-racism is *everyday people's* work seems to be posing an equally difficult challenge.

Within the complex web of oppressions we are caught in, the detestable (but, sadly, inevitable) "lateral violence" brothers and sisters inflict upon one another is on the verge of claiming its next innocent victim: the authority and voice of the young South Asian Canadian.

Within the context of the anti-racist struggle, academics, theorists, workshop leaders, and "established-artists" seem to be the only ones who are given any authority about how and where this "people's struggle" is happening. Or at least that is what the latest news about anti-racist work—found within the journals, the dissertations, and the conferences — seems to be saying.

The "people" referred to in these official discussions about racism ironically remain anonymous, and consequently they remain without a voice of their own. As the move towards an anti-racist future is being made, the issues of voice, whose voice, silence, and access demand serious consideration. It would be a set-back for us all if anti-racism work began to be associated only with a particular generation, a particular way of speaking about it, and a particular reference point from which anti-racism work can potentially happen.

By profiling the lives of four young South Asians and their unique views on anti-racism it is hoped that the readers of this Anti-Racism issue will challenge themselves to make the links with, and embrace the scope of, the anti-racist realities they speak of.

The four individuals profiled in this piece are intelligent, but not necessarily "intelligentsia". They are "down" with what needs to be done in their communities, but they are not down on the communities themselves. The bridges they are creating are daring, but are by no means dangerous for us to extend into our own lives. And most importantly, their views and their lives speak from their everyday, which within the current state of much "official anti-racist" work, makes such lives and views extraordinary.

A profile of four young South Asians, their unique anti-racist strategies, and their streetwise commentaries on 'anti-racism and the everyday...'

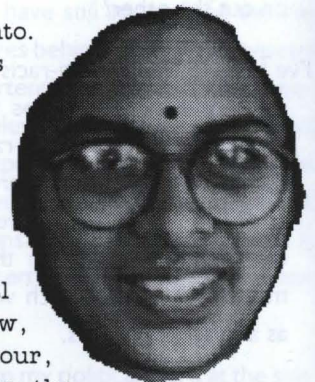
Sumita Bidaye

Sumita was born in 1975 in Toronto.

She is the daughter of immigrants from Maharashtra and currently is in her third year of Environmental Studies and Education.

She has this to say about her own work: "I'm interested in anti-racism, which means that I also look at environmental racism, who is exploited, and how,

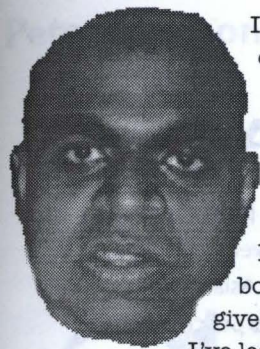
in the global exploitation of labour, media representation, and how the various systems we live within attempt to make us more materialistic. I don't go for the traditional anti-racist 'multicultural' model." On and off campus, Sumita also strongly commits herself to organizing against police brutality. In Toronto, she has been one of the strongest in speaking against the 4 recent unprovoked fatal shootings of Black and South Asian men by Metro Police. On a wider scale, Sumita has committed herself to disseminate knowledge about both journalist and former Black Panther, Mumia Abu-Jamal's unlawful sentence to death-row, and the Philadelphia-based Black liberation organization, MOVE (which, in 1985, was bombed by Philadelphia police. Eleven MOVE members died in this attack, including five children).



Rahim Ladha

Rahim's parents moved to Canada, from Uganda, after the 1972 exodus. He was Born in Kamloops, BC, but to this day is not sure how his family ended up there.

"In 1991, I decided I was going to write. I had great difficulty in expressing myself to others—especially loved ones. School didn't allow me to grow in this way so I left. Writing, in the form of plays and poetry later on, at least gave me the opportunity to focus on expression. So now I try to help those who are struggling to express and find voice.



I've voluntarily visited school libraries to check out what was available to the students, only to realize that there was very little to speak to their experiences. So, I gave away books to those who needed inspiration, especially to those younger than myself as part of one of the many small organizations for writers I ran out of my basement. I don't have any books left on my shelf because I continue to give books away. Because one of the key things I've learned about expression is that we must help each other in the process, and create community through it..."

Harjeet Badwall

Harjeet was born in 1971, and raised in the Toronto suburb of Oakville. Attending York University (an institution with a large South Asian population) in the fall of 1991 began a bitter-sweet journey into the meaning of her own South Asian identity in Canada. In her third year the idea of creating a safe space within the university for young South Asians to speak about their individual and collective issues crystallized with the formation of SAID: South Asian Issues Discussed. Since its inauguration in 1993 SAID has become a vital link between the critical voice of South Asian youth, and the various schools, organizations, and communities within the city. Harjeet has also worked with the South Asian Womens' Centre as part of a project to provide services for young women in crisis, and she has worked with ASAP (Alliance for South Asian AIDS Prevention) as a networker between mainstream and South Asian service agencies. In between, Harjeet was on the Board for DESH PARDESH for two years—a time during which the voice for 'youth' was strongly increased.



DJ Guru Prasad

"In high-school we had a band. All brown guys, though not all were South Asian, because some were from the Middle-East. We could have been classified under industrial music though we played basically anti-music that was non-political. Our only agenda was to crush all agendas...which is something I don't necessarily agree with any more. But

over all it was a very important time for all of us, because it was rare to see that kind of cultural mix, in that kind of experimental space." It is this "blurring of lines," as Guru calls it, that has been at the core of his experiences at community radio, on the air, on the mix, at the school newspaper, in the clubs, and as an independent experimental "music-life-and culture" writer over the past 5 years. "Being involved in community radio was incredible when I first began. Not only was I forced to open my mind and ears to everything from techno, to death-metal, to Australian indigenous music, but I was also being confronted by people, like a White punk-rocker—who looked like a Dread—politicizing me about racism. I was forced to confront myself about why I liked certain people and certain types of music. Was it because they were either being represented on the cover of a magazine or got critical acclaim from the 'right people?' I really began to question how people form judgments... That process of 'blurring' was beautiful."

Anti-Racism Today

Sumita When anti-racist projects or movements stay "downtown," what I don't see happening is the critique of what the urban setting means in itself, such as the White idea of the metropolis, or White civilization, as being better, the assumption that the environment is something that needs to be controlled, and the idea that the subjugation of workers is deserved. These are the implications for the urban experience. The philosophies that bind—or separate—our relationship to land play a huge part in how we can potentially create understanding and compassion with each other. It makes such a difference when, say, indigenous people from Guatemala ask for apprenticeship from the land, whereas European colonized civilization wants to stay as far away from land as possible. Holistic revolution is needed. We need to fight holistic oppression. These links matter as we struggle against oppression. This critique of anti-racist projects as downtown-centric is important for other reasons too. The majority of the most oppressed peoples live in the low-income suburbs. So when demonstrations are happening downtown, what is neglected is the suburban reality. The White suburbs are a real obstacle for mobilization and visibility for many of the oppressed. The dissemination of knowledge—especially for the youth—needs to be happening here too.

Rahim I wonder where the love is in the anti-racist movements. For myself, my expression, which is deeply personal, is my means for activism. It's coming straight from within. I agree that there are times when we must get up and march to protest. But when people rely on these gestures as being anti-racist work, full stop, I become worried that people are not thinking and feeling for themselves. Rigidity can become the oppressor itself. When one is more elastic, it comes through humility and respect—respect for another person's opinion. Struggle is part of any anti-racist movement, but that means that any movement, or all movements, need to pay heed to the condition and nurturing of the soul. Unless we take care of the battles within, how can the battles outside of us be approached? Because I know for a fact that the more I take care of myself, the more I am able to understand and absorb what's around me, and this creates the deep felt need to struggle with those around me. Intuition and love need to be part of the movement too. Similarities in political ideology don't create a community—they don't create a movement in themselves.

Harjeet My critique of many anti-racist projects—and this applies to a lot of community development projects—is the way funding restricts both the autonomy and longevity of projects. Because of the massive cut-backs, funding for ethno-specific agencies are being given in partnership with mainstream agencies. This means that the mainstream agencies are still given the power to police the ways that the ethno-specific

agencies organize. Our communities' most pressing issues, once again, become a challenge to address. Ground-breaking work is stalled because of the forced compromise to work in partnership.

When grants are given for only six months to a year it becomes a challenge to create a sustained movement. The problem is that Government funding agencies continue to see anti-racism as a series of "projects" rather than as a lifestyle or sustained, diverse movement. Community development workers within ethno-specific spaces, then, burn out really quickly trying to create miracles. There is a real problem with the way mainstream society envisions and controls "anti-racism."

DJ Guru I'd like to put it as a question. Just ask any person of colour who has been involved with resistance groups, and have found themselves surrounded by White people. Ask them: 'Do you feel like you were being used when you were involved with these people?' And I don't mean just White people — I mean liberal White people. It's like this: what use is a White activist fighting against racism without a person of colour fighting beside them? Nothing! I am not saying that White people should not support the struggle. But what I am saying is that, when speaking in the past tense, I believe that many people of colour would say that they felt used in the cause of "leftism" Because that Benetton thing was there back in the sixties, and it still is here in the nineties.

Anti-Racism and the South Asian

Sumita My comments about anti-racism in the South Asian community are pretty limited really, because honestly I haven't been included in a lot of it. I have never been to a demonstration that was all South Asian. I am not sure how many South Asian families showed solidarity with the family of Shiraz Suleman, who was killed by Metro police for no reason this spring. The only other thing I can add is that people need to be making links between globalization and popular South Asian culture, and then analyze what is being represented and glorified on screen. Tapping into the political reality of the youth is vital.

Rahim If you ask me to name a South Asian based anti-racist group or movement I would definitely struggle with trying to name one that is dedicated to that. South Asian Issues Discussed (SAID) based at York University probably comes the closest. Though it's political stand-point is multiply oppositional, it at least provides room for the sharing of diverse ideas. In this space, there is no one "right" anti-racist approach. Dialogue is the sole purpose of this space. Understanding and solidarity require this open dialogue.

Harjeet Within the South Asian community, anti-racist work can not be done in isolation. This means that not only activists and community workers need to build coalitions, but people with regular jobs need to take an anti-racist philosophy with them as well wherever they go. Coalition building is the key for the future. Exclusive spaces are still needed to deal with each community's individual issues, but the big picture always needs to be at the back of everyone's mind. A sustained movement can only be created this way.

DJ Guru It's all got to be done with the youth in mind. Because if projects are being done without them in mind, then communication is not happening — then there is no point. The South Asian community is so caught up with looks, cosmetics, and is so visually oriented whereas rooted South Asian culture is incredibly musically oriented. The importance of sound, and the transference of real intelligent information needs to be reinstated within our community here in Canada.

Parting Thoughts

Sumita Remember our people back in South Asia, learn about their struggles, and find out how we are connected to them. Don't believe the hype, and empower yourselves and your families through education. And lastly, find out about India's fifty-one million indigenous peoples...

Rahim It is through expression that I am beginning to learn what love and freedom are about. This spirit is a very powerful thing, and at least for me, holds the potential for becoming the most effective anti-racist tool...

Harjeet There is a lot of work to be done. But during the process we must learn to take care of ourselves. It is only by being healthy in this way that we can be in the position to make changes where ever we turn. We must never forget to make the connection between what is going on inside of you, and the bigger picture.

DJ Guru Every South Asian person needs to be anti-racist, if not by holding up a sign, then they must be anti-racist in the heart and the mind. Because when Columbus went looking to steal some Indians and all that gold from Eldorado, he really meant all that gold, spice, and labour from India. So we need to thank *Bhagvan* but we must also challenge ourselves — if Columbus went East instead of West and raped India instead of North America, do you not think that North American Natives would not be on our side?



Global Niggeration



BACK IN NINETY-five **KRS-One** caught flack for appearing in a **televised** Nike ad that **found** him updating the **lyrics** to **Gil Scott-Heron's** black **nationalist** anthem, "**The Revolution Will Not Be Televised.**"

Without a **hint** of irony, KRS changed Gil's final **couplet** from "**The revolution will not be televised/the revolution will be live,**" to "**The revolution is basketball. Basketball is the truth.**" Soon after the ad **aired**, *Rap Pages* editor Sheena Lester took **The Teacher** to task for "**loaning his mighty sword to the capitalist devils**" by endorsing a **blatant**, misleading **consumerism** that undermined **struggles** for **black self-determination** and made **black revolt** another trinket of **capitalism.**

Signs of blackness seem connotatively ambiguous

"There should be nothing so enticing about making money," wrote Lester, "that would have us LIE to our people—or ourselves—about something as crucial as the practice or policy of resistance, especially in America."¹

"O ye of little faith," replied KRS in the following issue, italics and all. "Never should you doubt the integrity of the Blastmaster. The God of Rap moves in mysterious ways." And it was mysterious: what followed was a rambling, convoluted treatise on capitalism, hip hop, and revolution, full of the characteristic cryptic eloquence that saw him proclaim in a *Transition* interview that "America doesn't exist."² In response to Lester's comment that "Nike owns niggas" and that niggas shouldn't be trying to further that control, KRS responded with "Nike don't 'own niggas.' Niggas own Nike."³ Welcome to KRS's cipher.

You have to wonder, though, in an era where the politics of visual representation reign supreme over the vulgarity of the material, is the seemingly faulty logic of KRS's economics that far off? Apparently dismissing the hip hop mantra to keep it real, KRS provides a provocative commentary on the political terrain of late twentieth-century society. He has no penchant towards sentimentality in embracing the rapid ascent of the image, of surfaces, as the gelded foundations of a black ontology. The mass-mediated spectacle of blackness—or more specifically African American-ness—has taken on extra-large symbolic size. Black gods oversee vast afrocentric

empires of signs keeping Babylon in a form of ideological check. NBA highlight reels and music videos are gospel. Tupac and Biggie are prophets awaiting their second coming. The spectacle of OJ eclipses that of Christ as The Trial of the Century becomes The Trial of the Last Two Millennia.

And with the ascendancy of this new negro virtuality, the meanings and symbols of blackness have shifted. As blackness is inevitably incorporated into the status quo (described by KRS as "the mental takeover of the mainstream population by the Hip Hop culture"), its politically charged origins are erased. Signs of blackness seem connotatively ambiguous, ripped from their contextual moorings, floating freely in an amorphous ocean of relativized symbols with only tenuous links to any previous meaning. As Ronald Judy writes, "it is the end of black folk and the beginning of global niggadom."⁴

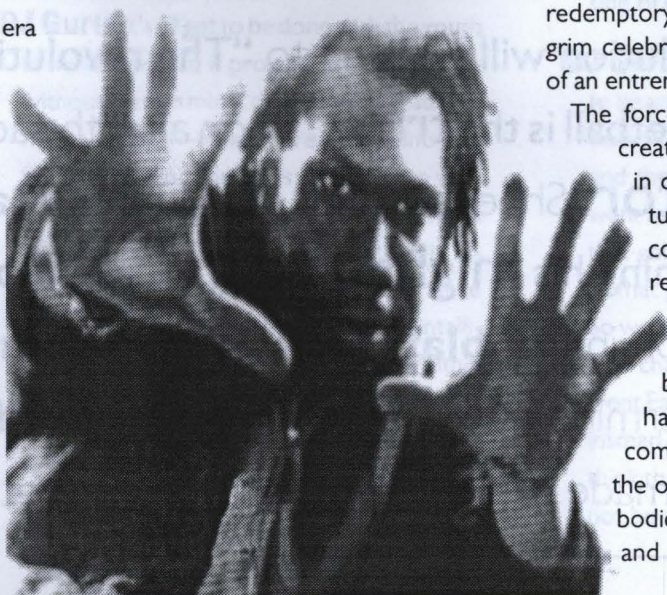
Global niggadom is the cultural space of the "nigga"—defined by Judy as "that which emerges from the demise of human capital, what gets articulated when the field nigger loses value as labour"—manifested through the signage and symbolism of hip hop. In "On the Question of Nigga Authenticity," Judy maps out the relation between niggas and a relatively conservative black community. Looking at nigga constructions of self, particularly in gangsta rap, Judy suggests a disjuncture between black folks who have become obsolete within the logic of late capitalism and know it—Cornel West's black, nihilistic anti-heroes—and those who still seek validation and acceptance within its boundaries (i.e. the black bourgeoisie). With this disjuncture comes a severing of

any necessary or deterministic relationship between what we have understood as "black culture" and an authentic, politicized consciousness defined through "blackness." "The nurturing haven of black culture which assured memory and provided a home beyond the ravishing growth of capitalism is no longer," writes Judy. "There cannot be any cultural authenticity in resistance to capitalism."

But if the nurturing haven of black culture was destroyed—if it ever actually existed in the first place—the shared memories that provided common points of reference for the construction of this home have also been erased. The memory of a shared racial past, of the experience of the middle passage and slavery, grow faint and irrelevant, undermining the potential for the collective enterprise of diaspora; and diaspora itself creates a fictive web of cultural solidarity that becomes meaningless in opposition to capitalism.

Global niggadom replaces the African diaspora as the site of identity formation and resistance against capitalism, fulfilling Louis Chude-Sokei's statement that "new economic and cultural conditions require new gods and symbols, old ones stagnate or become malevolent and repressive."⁵ The nationalist dream of a unified racial community is replaced by hyper-real diasporas imagined through pop culture memories circulating in endless digitally reproduced backlist. Chude-Sokei's comments come from "Post-nationalist Geographies: Rasta, Ragga, and Reinventing Africa," an essay on the state of dancehall in the post-Reagan/Thatcher/Seaga years. In it he maps out the economic and political impetus behind the shift from the conscious lyrics of a generation before to the gun-talk and slackness of the early nineties. "The ideology of 'roots' did not offer a framework within which to contend with the changing environment of music, multinational capitalism, and global communications technology," writes Chude-Sokei. Instead, today's Jamaican youth dismiss the redemptory promise of Africa in favour of a grim celebration of the immediacy and realness of an entrenched, brutally Darwinian capitalism.⁶

The forces of globalization have worked to create the intense local experience of yard in dancehall and diasporic Jamaican culture. Dancehall is the music of a migrant community who, despite their terms of residence in foreign, still passionately call Jamaica home. Apart from the occasional cross-over artist who breaks into the mainstream, dancehall has relatively private channels of communication. Hip hop's diffusion, on the other hand, has occurred without the bodies and communities whose struggles and aspirations originally fuelled it. Its

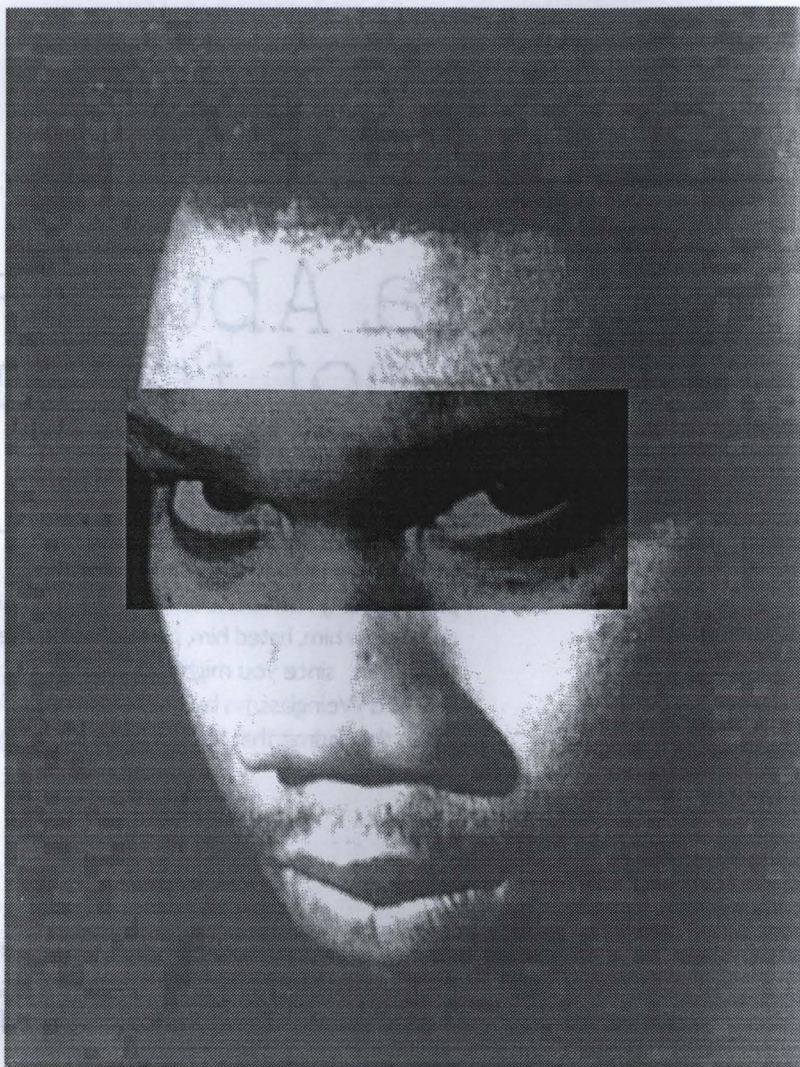


migrations have occurred through electronic means, through digitized texts, rather than flesh-and-blood people. The legends of its origins in the Bronx—or in the mythologized sites of Queensbridge, Compton, Crown Heights or Staten Island—are second-hand memories to most of its consumers/constituents/communities. These legends can be evoked but never precisely named. They are cities of the imagination for a nigga diaspora in Toronto or Tokyo or Paris, and, of course, the suburban white nigga communities across North America.

This physical displacement from the originary topographies of meaning and experience weakens the connections of this cybernetic formation of diaspora. The peripheral consumers of hip hop become suburban parasites of black and Latino inner city experience. The fetishization of ghetto-centric myths of identity allow for the simultaneous erasure of the material conditions of romanticized inner city communities, and of the supposedly peripheral locales inhabited by rap consumers.⁷ The death of North American cities and their rebirth as sanitized playgrounds for wealthy tourists goes unmarked, as does both its financing through cutbacks to education, libraries, parks, and other social programs and the buying out of local democracy by developers. It's this kind of real economic clout that proves that global niggadom has nothing on Planet Hollywood.

Despite this, global niggadom and Chude-Sokei's post-national geographies remain more critical and inventive responses to economic globalization and restructuring, and the neo-conservative social policy emerging from it and facilitating it, than anything produced by the North American Left. For the most part, responses to this capitalist entrenchment from black activist communities have been intellectually and creatively rapid. Neither the anachronistic vacuity of Afrocentricity, nor the invocations of "diaspora" that, while able to critique the essentialism and ahistoricism of Afrocentricity, seem plausible only within the quasi-anthropological pretensions of cultural theory, have been able to anticipate or critique the shifts in capitalism and its attendant shifts in racial formation and white-supremacy. They are the political formations of victimization, reacting with too little, too late. Global niggadom refuses to coddle blackness as if freedom lay in a fetishization of the term, but its uncritical complicity with capitalism leaves it as a symbolic force only. It uses the political and economic networks of capitalism that have given it life in a self-serving fashion; it is like a mercenary or parasite that is willing to thrive off its host until it is dead, instead of killing it outright.

KRS isn't the pimp he thinks he is in relationship with Nike. While Nike can, with self-satisfied aplomb, proclaim "Yep, we're capitalists," in a recent ad—fully aware that the world knows this, and, perhaps, fully aware that they have helped to transform the world in such a way that few actually hold it against them—KRS has to duck down and hope his mouthy rhetoric can cover his ass.⁸ KRS's assumption that because he's a black man—necessarily oppressed—getting paid by the man is an anti-racist, even revolutionary gesture, falls into the kind of individualistic logic that capitalism thrives off of. Brotherman doesn't realize that when capitalism is seen as an antidote for the politics of race, it only obscures the more complex, increasingly important, politics of class.



Notes

- ¹ Lester, Sheena "You Must Learn, Pt. II" *Rap Pages* January 1996, 6.
- ² Lipscomb, Michael and KRS-One. "Can the Teacher Be Taught? A Conversation with KRS-ONE and Michael Lipscomb", *Transition: An International Review* 57 168-189.
- ³ KRS-ONE, "Me Neva Go Commercial: Kris Responds," *Rap Pages*, February 1996, 9.
- ⁴ Judy, R. A. T. "On the Question of Nigga Authenticity" *boundary* 2, 21:3.
- ⁵ Chude-Sokei, Louis. "Post-nationalist Geographies: Rasta, Ragga, and Reinventing Africa," *African Arts*, Autumn, 1994, 80-96.
- ⁶ Although "Post-national Geographies" was published before the redemption of artists like Buju Banton and his conversion to rasta and a discourse of dread, the conditions that Chude-Sokei describes are still present. Buju's shift represents, I think, less a progressive movement and critique than a desperate fall-back to reliable, essentialist symbols that actually work to obscure the conditions of his surroundings. See Oumano, Elena "Selassie I Rule the Dancehall: Reggae Get Righteous Once More" *The Village Voice*, August 15, 1995 pp. 57 and Robinson, Michael "Dread Resurrection: Buju Banton" *Urb* 44, Summer 1995, 13-15.
- ⁷ For more on this see Wimsatt, William "Upski" *Bomb the Suburbs* Chicago: The Subway and Elevated Press Co., 1994.
- ⁸ See Katz, Donald, *Just Do It: The Nike Spirit in Corporate America*, and Gragg, Randy, "Domination by Design," *Metropolis*, June, 1997, 63-67, 83-85.



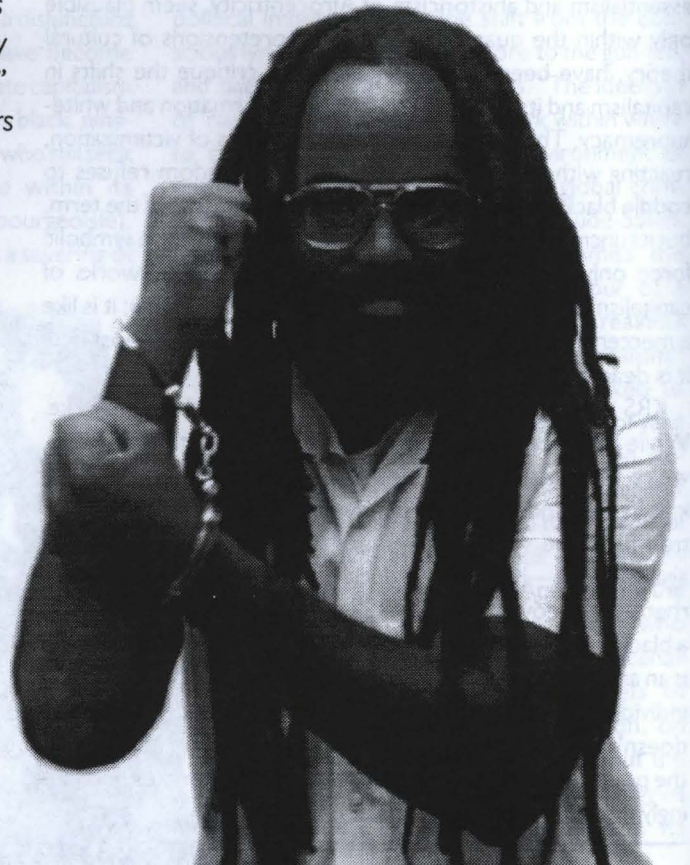
Poem for
Mumia Abu-Jamal
and not for art's sake

Mumia (rhymes with "you-me-a") Abu- (rhymes with "taboo") Jamal (rhymes with "cabal") is a political prisoner on death row in the pennsylvania. he was a former black panther party member, community activist, and prize-winning journalist. the philadelphia cops knew him, hated him, pinned the murder of a cop on him, and now he's awaiting his execution. since you might not believe me, but you might care, read *Race for Justice* by Leonard Weinglass, his lawyer. otherwise at least remember his name so it can haunt you when they admit that he was framed twenty years from now: Mumia Abu-Jamal.

*stephen spender said after spain fell and franco politicized
his shiny boots and wwii had a name and belsen and
buchenwald and treblinka were put on the map, that for all
his writing, all his aimed poesy, his pro-republican pen, his
one talent solidly sent to the task of anti-fascism, for every
line that was a kind of translation of "they shall not pass,"
his writing did not save a single jew from the gas chambers*

what're we gonna do?
FREE MUMIA!

what're we gonna do?
FREE MUMIA!
too many times, too many times
this was déjà-vu, lord if it ain't
the noose, the noose
I've had my fill of this
how many blacks dead since the last poem
published about mumia abu-jamal? how many
more years of death spread between the sentences
of death? how many? how many?



we
the urgent
demonstrated
in downtown vancouver
victoria, seattle, everywhere
we
the urgent
angry
clipped the news and gleaned the times
to see and disbelieve and steel ourselves
when they announced the death date
we
comrades
made it happen
solidified the words into torches
fashioned the baited breath into speeches

we
can-
not
let
him
die
!

he made the magazine covers
he made the braver tv shows
krs-one wrote a song for him
amiri baraka wrote a poem about him
every nook and cranny of the ever
splintered left
had to admit his priority
all this to save the life of one single man
america's lone political prisoner
at the hanging tree's roots
strange fruit
voice of the voiceless swallowed
in the involuntary reflex of only hours
left
one single man

notorious b.i.g. just died and before that tupac shakur died and before that eazy e died and the last poets had a poem a long time ago called "die nigga!" and niggas keep dying like the last poets said we don't know nothin else but dyin and ken saro-wiwa died and malcolm x died and he knew it was coming exactly like it did and martin luther king died and big surprise and there are the bones of fifty million or more on the bottom of the atlantic ocean that was before they invented the lethal injection and did I mention that mumia abu-jamal is fixin to die and I'm supposed to have tears left to cry?

we burned torches
the death penalty kills almost exclusively the poor
we composed chants
here in canada we have no death penalty any more
we took it to the u.s. consulate
the reform party would cull the bad guys from our midst
we know this is political
louis riel was a bad guy that canada killed
we know this is political
bad guys are the ones with bad ideas
we know he must go
free

we phoned
bctv
and told them there's a story brewin
a bunch of anarchists and other concerned citizens
are fixin to fuck shit up at the u.s. consulate
'cause they're going to kill a man
for having once been a black panther
and for pointing out that poor people
exist
the news dude said, in classic form, "is he canadian?"
we said, "nope"
he hanged
up

we lit torches that stayed lit in the rain
we parted the darkness like a sea
the cops fled to whatever cosiness there could be
in a squad car (pigs don't swim)
we burned the streets
we stopped the traffic
this happened
for whatever good it does
this happened
someone didn't get to their date on time
for the concern of abstract justice and one
single man's politicized life
maybe you were in that traffic jam
wondering what those fuckers be complaining about this time
maybe you were on your way to a poetry reading
maybe you honked your sad solidarity
maybe you snarled your late exasperation
maybe you shook your fist
maybe you raised your fist
maybe you were the one who told me to get a job
maybe you were the one who spit on my friend
but if you were trying to drive through robson and granville
after they announced his execution date
motherfucker: you weren't going *nowhere*

they say he shot a cop
the evidence is as thin as an fbi agent's bald spot
like peltier and too many to mention before him
(a better poem would be twenty pages of names)
he was framed
america has a habit of killing its dissidents
especially the black ones
but this one was gonna be neat and clean
not in the streets like hutton or hush hush like newton
or messy like malcolm or almost like assata
mumia is to die in the full glare of official transcription
mumia is to die on schedule
mumia is to die alone, on his back, his last words caught
in his throat

but his name was made truly global
as global as capitalism is becoming
as global as colonialism was
as global as cnn's silence
people from vancouver to amsterdam to bombay know his name
and now
you do too
lefties of every shade
knowing that it could be any one
of us on the chopping block
know what it's about:
they kill niggers who read books and figure out
how fucked up the world is
and try to make it better
be careful you don't aim a copy of *das kapital* at a cop
they more or less can legally kill you for that

recently an ex-kgb agent stated
that the rosenbergs (remember them?)
never gave the soviets secrets
about the bomb; they committed no treason
but they are dead
by the hand of the state
because they were marxists
because they were jews
no other reasons
they were framed
it is now proven
you can't call this a conspiracy theory

hate to say I told you so
I truly do
hate to say I told you so

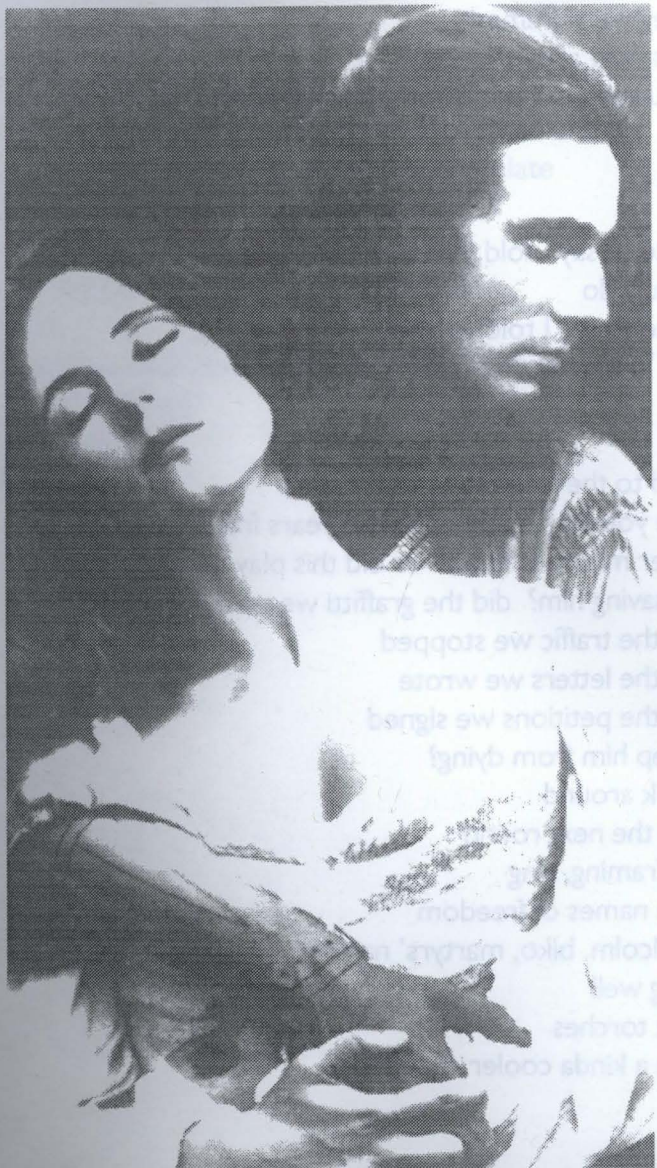
and to the future:
are you flipping through this years from now
after mumia is dead? or did this play some small part
in saving him? did the graffiti we spray painted
or the traffic we stopped
or the letters we wrote
or the petitions we signed
keep him from dying?
look around
for the next round
of framing, sing
the names of freedom
malcolm, biko, martyrs' names
sing well
but torches
got a kinda cooler cadence



Collective Amnesia

**They say forget history
and I've just started to remember...**

—*The Discovery of Amnesia*, Krisantha Sri Bhaggiyadatta



at a filling station
in a small prairie town
tha attendant and i
practice a familiar routine

i answer calgary
he says no i mean what nationality
i say canadian
he says no where is your family from
you look indian

i remember being mistaken
native for east

history of the americas began in 1492
columbus mistook
took this backyard
for my backyard
carried on regardless

john wayne crossing the red river with his cattle
never had to answer to a native american
where do you come from?

the massacre more subtle
than blood covered midnight trains
in this country with collective amnesia
we hollywood eyes
cowboys and indians
we don't talk of
tuberculosis smallpox or alcohol numb(ers)
we talk of two founding nations
and founding fathers
but nothing had been lost till they arrived

we talk of south africa
applaud the end of apartheid
and ignore the fact
the bantustans were modeled after our reservations

when children are taught a language different from their mothers
the old ways shed like baby teeth
scraped out like dirt under fingernails
that's the ultimate division
when one generation cannot communicate with the other
what unity then
what chance of resistance

the loss of language
the sentence of new words
the language at the back of the throat
throttled and silenced
the stories and wisdom of generations
not passed on forgotten

doc martens are not indigenous to canada
they don't spring from the soil here
aren't formed in some lake
some prime / ordeal soup

in a bank line
the bank of a canadian province
that still has new in its name
a teller unable to understand a co-worker's accent
says speak english
you're in canada now

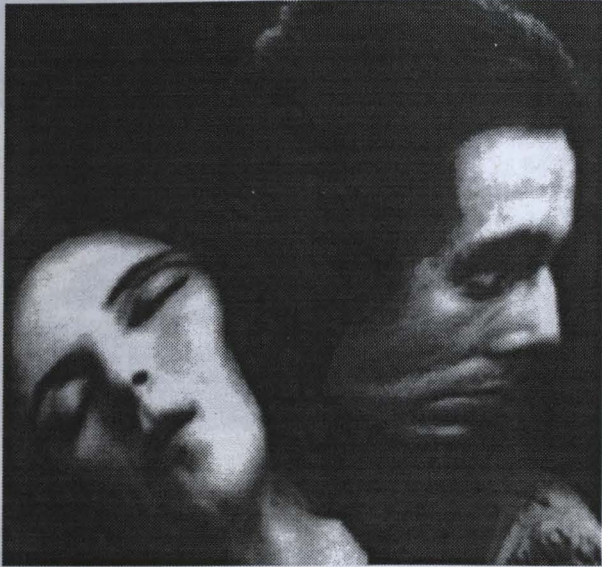


the language beneath the fingernails
in the corners of your eyes when you wake
wiped away by tip of little finger
how do i begin to explain
there is something i need to say
and i don't know how to say it
this new language has no words
for these ceremonies
for these spirits
for this land

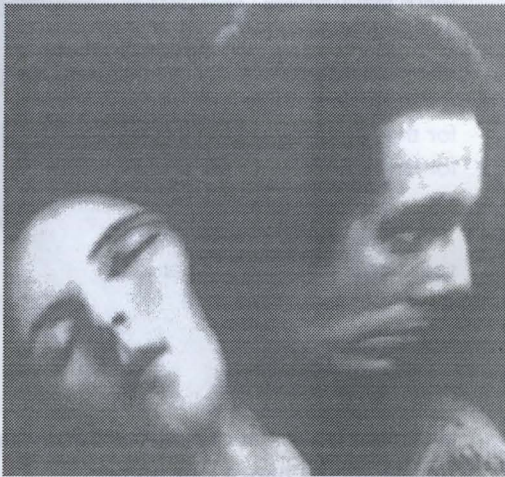
speaking cree you're in canada now
speaking siouan
speaking salishan

let's make issues out of braids or turbans in the RCMP
canada doesn't have a long history
we must hold on to what we have
let's reduce history to five-hundred years
reduce everything to bilingual

lisa's family has lived here since 1908
her neighbour says
you should have seen all the pakis in town
lisa says but i'm a paki too
no not you those other pakis
fresh off the boat



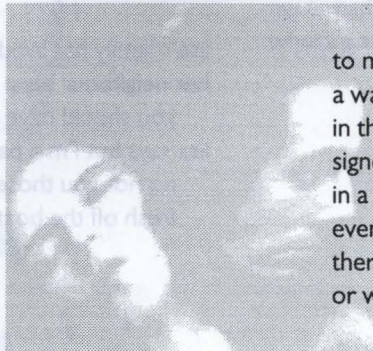
driving west on richmond road
see snow peaked mountains
you want to keep driving
in the mountains
there you can really forget
half way up mount indefatigable
friends gone ahead
you sit on a rock
look at the lakes
and trees
it's so much harder to remember
than to forget
once forgotten
consider it gone



a visiting doctor from kenya asks me
where must i go to see real canadians?
i've been here a month
and haven't seen any
and who was louise and why does she
have a lake named after her?

i rename lakes and mountains
with a sweep of the hand

outside the ship and anchor
a young man in a suit stops me
excuse me sir
have you heard the word of christ?
i say i'm in a hurry
you don't look like you're from around here sir



to manu(scripture) your life
a wad of papers
in the bottom drawer of a desk
signed by a shaking hand
in a language not understood
even if we both spoke the same
there are things about me you could never hope to know
or would ever try to understand



INDO-EAST AFRICAN, INDO-CARRIBBEAN, PACIFIC ISLANDER

1ST NATIONS, INDIGENOUS SOUTH & CENTRAL AMERICAN & MIXED RACE

ASIAN, EAST ASIAN, SOUTHEAST ASIAN, NORTH AFRICAN, ARAB

Cuz our distinct stories stretch back 2 African Lucy mother of us all. **Cuz** we met/fought/traded/fucked long before whites noticed there was a world outside their door. **Cuz** before whites came, Asians & Arabs came 2 Africa for ivory, spices, gold, & slaves. **Cuz** this contributed 2 economic growth & wealth in their own lands. **Cuz** African slaves were sent 2 Indonesia, Gujarat, Diu, Goa, China and Malaysia. **Cuz** Malik Ambar, an Ethiopian, led a slave revolt, takin' over central India & ruling from 101-1626. **Cuz** do u really believe that the DNA & cultures of these people just vanished? **Cuz** none of us are pure anything but it's still hard for some 2 admit they're part Blk. **Cuz** ain't it clear why some Asians and Pacific Islanders look the way they do? Cut in Africa 2day many Asians occupy a middle ground of relative privilege & power between white & Blk people. **Cuz** in the Americas many of these relations still exist. **Cuz** many of ur communities still have more economic/class privilege than Blk communities do. **Cuz** Asian shopkeeper shootings of Blk youth is ur problem too. **Cuz** police murders of Blk men and public strip searches of Blk wimmin should be a woman of colour issue. **Cuz** when they done with us they comin' for u. **Cuz** neo nazi bashing and murders in ur communities effect us too. **Cuz** our white oppressors don't treat Blk & Brwn people as 1 coloured people. **Cuz** there is a continuum of oppression. **Cuz** there is a difference between reservations/slavery/genocide/indentured labourers. Cut we're all affected in different ways by classism, ageism, ableism, racism, light-skin privilege, imperialism & the myth of the model minority. **Cuz** Blk dykes need 2 know where myths of the caring Blk mammy, the sex-crazed Blk slut & the intimidating Blk bitch go when Blk a Brwn dykes gather. **Cuz** we're the wimmin ur families & communities warned U about. **Cuz** U & white gyals are the wimmin our beauty is measured against. **Cuz** readin' our books, quotin' our words in essays & dancin' to our music hasn't taught u how to cope with Blk wimmin when we speak. **Cuz** we tired of U callin' us rude, abusive/angry when our words make u uncomfortable. **Cuz** diasporic African definitions of courtesy may not always be urs. **Cuz** we won't be judged by ur cultural attitudes. **Cuz** our ways of being are distinct & valid. **Cuz** if Blk wimmin are gonna share our cultures/our music/our pain & o2rr words we're gonna need 2 see urs. **Cuz** we can learn from ur history, ur issues & ur mistakes if u're willin' to share. **Cuz** we ALL livin' fat on First Nation's land. **Cuz** there are Blk people of the First Nations. **Cuz** runaway Blk slaves were sheltered by People of the First Nations. **Cuz** we have comfortable homes & some of them need 2 beg on corners all over their own fucking country. **Cuz** we must support their fight for sovereignty/ autonomy. **Cuz** histories of colonization affect how we relate in North America. **Cuz** hangin'/fuckin' will not end the animosity/tension between Blk & Brwn dykes. **Cuz** callin' ourselves 3rd world/ world majority /of colour hides our differences & our privileged 1st world status. **Cuz** Alice Walker & Pratiba Parmar needed 2 give their money & camera equipment 2 African wimmin to film their own warrior marks. **Cuz** why do we often speak for/about our sistren in other parts of the world when they have their own voices? **Cuz** in us there is the capacity 2 love each other greatly. Cut only whites gain from us not doing so. **Cuz** difference=strength. **Cuz** if we don't start truth tellin' & stop actin' out real dialogue can't happen. **Cuz** truly united our people's can never be defeated! **Cuz** this is the time 2 air ALL the dirty laundry.

GYALS. DE POONANI POSSE EXPECTS THE SUPPORT OF SOUTH

Two Poems

LOS ANGELES: April 1992

the snake moves
in concentric circles,
in orbits that are decades apart,
with its venom,
an old argument,
always in the center

and when it strikes
the whole city dresses in yellow and orange,
and red, which is the color of rage

there is no reveler in the street,
no child with wreath and olive branch:
they are sleeping in the chamber of the snake's song

the buildings are dressed like widows,
they are wearing black hats of smoke,
the street is a river of glass

it is a night we shall always remember

in the distance, as far as Golgotha,
the sound of hammer has robbed the women of speech;
the sap of all wood is stained.

ETTA BAKER AT THE CHAMIZAL: October 10, 1992

full moon over El Paso
full as a child's step in the grass
as Etta Baker picks on the guitar strings,
and there is a sense of something accomplished
beyond the music, something that redefines the world
in the mind, in the glass,
and the fields once more are safe
for the young girl dancing in the grass.

the eagle above soars, soars
above the sluggish Rio Grande,
carrying the moon in its talons,
the music in its wings,
and below, not far from the Chamizal,
not far from the October crowd and the festival,
a cacophony of human voices at the bridge,
marks the people as they come and go
back and forth between hope and sorrow.

and Etta sits like a sculpted saint
suddenly sprung from an epiphanous fissure in the earth
and picks the music locked
in the metal in the rocks:
strong music that strongly hides the pain,
but remembers the ground where the house stood
before it took the color of the sun.

the music gently rocks the world to waking,
and I wonder does it cry the path that brings us here,
or is it simply a ragged child's window to a beautiful world.



every stanza is a knuckle / a poem strikes back

on the occasion of Nelson Mandela's visit to Oakland, California, 1990

AMANDLA!

To this sea of fists, add mine,
brown, young, virginal as fists go,
having never delivered a punch
yet
clenched tight

To these voices, add mine,
but no song will be enough
unless its rhythm beats tough,
steady as fists against steel
so, raise the chorus
note by note, to a revered punch
even their deaf ears must feel

We learned early:
hands outstretched soon turn to fists
bitten fingernails digging into the palms

This poem is the back of a hand
(you think you know me like it)
ready to be kissed
but behind it are 10 typing fingers
ready to spread across your red necks,
to pummel your full stomachs

You told me violence was not the answer
I never said I would hold back under attack
or that there was another outlet For this rage
I do not say these words to make you afraid
but because I hurt, they are true,
and violence was the question you asked
AMANDLA!

the classic white flight

makes it sound like
a flock of graceful doves
soaring up & away like a Motown melody,
a blue sky over a clear blue river

but really
the river's dead liver grey
& a huge black fist labelled Joe Louis
hangs down by Hart Plaza
& you see

this strange phenomenon
is more like the small white rats
my father showed us at the college pharmacy labs,
red-eyed with fear,
scurrying every which direction

poisoned in individual
and collective ways

*[for Detroit, named the most racially segregated
metropolitan area in the United States]*

right (as in "yeah, right!")

Yes, we have hung our cotton ropes from brahmin oaks
out on the spacious green lawns of the projects.

Sipping lemonade, we observe our gardeners
step 'n' hoe, fetch 'n' mow.

Everything smells fresh like laundry,
wildflowers, or white women's armpits.

No bullets roar
in our children's ears.

Ah, we are swinging from the trees
like monkeys. Quota queens of the jungle.

And every day these beds of rope wrap us tighter, tighter,
luxurious as compassion.

*[for California Governor Pete Wilson, who proclaimed
to great applause at his inauguration in January 1995,
"Welfare should be a safety net, not a hammock"]*



The Carpet

This excerpt is the

closing movement

from part one

of a long novel,

The Carpet.

This passage is a

hallucinatory dream

which one of the

major characters

Sam Hallam

experiences

when he falls asleep

in a park

off of Bloor Street

in Toronto

on a very hot

and humid day

...in this grass where the light shone across the slope, the insects gathered searching for food in the desiccation brought on by the heat, children's voices called from the playing field, they played scrub baseball in the grass and dirt like it was an ancient ritual of a green tribe with a magisterial poise before the arrival of strangers, the children's heads tilted upward in meditation of the sunlight, their eyelids half closed, daydreaming in the heat waiting with a metaphysical patience for the bat to hit the ball and roll across the green. In this heat and shade, Sam felt the weariness and rested on the grass fading away as the child hurled the baseball in the air like a sphere flying through the light and rolling on the earth that was roundness upon roundness, Kaboto discovered sailing across the Mediterranean sea east to Misr and turning down the Nile River past Fustat searching for maps and navigators in the suqs crossing over by caravan to the Red Sea coast, boarding ship at the port of al Qulzum and sailing across the rough salt waters past reefs and docking at Jeddah, travelling inland with his guide and tarjoman to that city of symbols, signs, cubes, and cycles where he endeavoured by circumnavigating the sacred black stone, to square the circle with his astronomical imagination, Kaboto came upon the gifted navigator on his umrah, Shihab al Din Ahmad ibn Majid who took the burtugali navigator out into the desert at night and pointing at the spheres, told him by the stars, this is the way to bilad al hind, bilad al fars, bilad al sinn, spoke of Socotra, Sarandib and Malindi, Cabot bought ibn Majid's navigation book, Kitab al Fawa'id [Book of Benefits], Buzug ibn Shahriyar's Kitab

'Aja'ib al Hind [The book of the Wonders of India] and the merchant Sulayman's Akhbar al Sin wa al Hind [Reports on China and India] in the suq al warqan and ibn Majid's rahmani. And returning west, Kabot bought on the black market certain forbidden Arabic nautical texts and charts from the Inquisitors' enforcers who had been ordered by the Inquisition in Andalusia to collect all texts written in the Arabic script from the Moors and burn them if they held infidel thoughts. Caboto bought from the blackmarket book racketers rahmanis, dafatir and suwars of Muhammad ibn Shadhan, Sahl ibn Aban and Layth ibn Kahlan the three Lions, smuggled them out of Spain to Venice where Caboto found himself in the libraries of Genoa and Venice with his Morisco translator decoding and comparing texts from the mushrak and maghrab where among them was ibn M—, who wrote: we had travelled west across bahr al Zuhumat through the circumambient waters al bahr al Muhit to arrive at the sacred city. And we arrived in the east in a state of thirst at Kanfu and Milinda, and docked there until we waited for the rains to pass then we headed out again, one hundred and twenty days voyage until we arrived in Mecca with god as our guide to the stars. Let no man say otherwise the earth is round. Johan Caboto Montecalunya returned to Valencia where he spoke with sailor boys flowing in from every port in the Mediterranean hearing new and old rumours of the Isle of Brasil and the Island of the Seven Cities. In the south the captains wandered about in Palos, Seville and Cádiz talking to the Moorish sailors. Montecalunya the Venetian went on seeking backers in

a

Letter

Seville and Lisboa but was turned back. Da Gama got drunk with Caboto in Lisboa who told of his trip to Mecca and his time with ibn Majid. He spoke of an old sailing story that had circulated in a street once called by the Moors, darb al mugharrirun, the Street of the Adventures and a captain Raqsh al A'azz who disappeared. And hearing stranger tales of Khashkhash and of the Sultan Mansa Musa among the unconverted Moors and Jews bought as slaves in the market places of Castile and Valencia and sold into Portugal, Vasco de Gama had a spy question them and then bought one, and took him on board ship and sailed that way, half lost following the western coast line of Africa around the horn up the east coast of Africa until he found the great navigator, himself, ibn Majid again in the suq at Malindi hiring him on as pilot and with open sea sailing they crossed the Indian Ocean, ibn Majid leading de Gama east to the spice isles where greenness was a virtue. The green one guiding the Portuguese through the torrid zones of the ocean, an ant in a circle of fire until they arrived in Calicut. Gazing at the heavens he witnessed a falling star and recalled the adventurers from his own town of Genoa, the Vivaldi brothers who had passed through the straits of Gibraltar. Reading the knowledge of the stars as in a book in which Cabot came to ynglaterra, secured support among the English, he sailed out from Bristow with letters patent for the isle of Barazil and the Seven Cities, and Cipango and Sarandib, the Island of Rubies. Again in a restless search for a north west passage to the isles, and he fell into tormented sleep upon leaving Bristow from which he could not escape and he had a

dream of a strange figure with smooth ochre skin pacing the shoreline in the green light with feathers upon his head, the stranger wore Cabot's ruby ring upon his finger, two silver Venetian earrings upon his ears and carried gilt sword with majesty as he walked upon the shoreline which he showed to Spanish sailors docking on that cape, Cabot awoke in restlessness and torment as the Atlantic waves swirled around them, he heard in echo the chant of the Arab sailors who had sung in couplets of the broiling of the waves of the Indian Ocean: Barbara wa Jafuna wa maujak al majnuna, Jafuna wa Barbara wa maujak kmatara, that he had heard in his days of his Red Sea voyage, and he said to his Morisco translator the one he called mio piccolo Turco or my little Turk, or Little Othman or more briefly, Othello, bring me now the navigation books of ibn Majid and ben M... and open the infidel texts and I pray thee read, decipher, and interpret, and Othello the Morisco opened the books and revealed the gilded illuminated miniatures of beasts and humans from every tribe upon the earth coupling in passion and as the ship gliding west on that second voyage, Cabot's dragoman read: falling under the influence and force of passion, so that the human gave a stare deep into the eyes of a stranger revealed the self and desire, and this ebony wisdom penetrated into the fibres of his flesh and revealed the hours of loneliness, discerned the hiss of the snake, the tide of humans that had passed through his form, the foods which had sustained them called the sacred and the taboo, for a moment that ebony centaur heard dionysian hunting hounds howling on the winds of

thought...and what Cabot saw in the illuminations of the Moorish book tormented him, the corruption of the flesh and against the law of man and beast and gods as the miniatures revealed humans copulating, plunging downward, consumed and swallowed into the whale belly, love in the water, human beings loving each animal as mirror reflections, their blood congealing with the earth, air and water, the Celt under the shadow of the green oak and poisonous mistletoe plunging his sight into the merciful eyes of his lover hounds, the children of Kikuyu and Mumbi allowing their seeds and eggs to burst against the thighs of the billy goat and nanny goat and mingle with their seeds and eggs in the shadows of the jungle of Mount Kenya, the Arab flying and following the constellation of nomadic stars deep into the heart of the camel while beneath the calligraphy of the cherry tree's bough, the Chinese scholar was binding his flesh to the pig a gift from heaven, between heaven and earth which was the tariq, the Greek embracing the ewe, the apollonian maid pursuing the bull, the Egyptian woman in cotton gown kissing the lips of the lion, and clinging to the thighs of the crocodile, the Coptic priest embracing the cat, the Tartar, the Mongol and the Turk struggling for love of a filly, the Gothic warrior fighting against his own flesh in his copulation with the wolf and stag, the Inuit casting her soft flesh, her hips against the hide of the seal, the Anui sinking to the bottom of the oceans to rest his memory in the womb of the dolphin, the Haida maiden leaping upstream on the Fraser with salmon to their sacred spawning grounds mixing her eggs with their egg, the Nootkas embracing

open
the infidel texts
and i pray thee
read, decipher, and interpret



the bear hand to claw, foot to paw, flesh to fur, snot to lips, the Lucumi hero growing in the monkeys soft womb, the Mandingo maiden heaving in the limbs of the shy ape, the Quechua losing himself in the knots of counting time through the gentle movements of the llamas and the alpacas, the Aztec against the lips, wings and claws of the condor plunging his generous heart and mouth against them, the Maya entering the realm of cyclical time, observing zero's phases and returning free of confusion in the gaze of the cougar. In the margins of that travel book Cabot observed each mother's son spilling their seeds into the daughters of the soil while each mother's daughter was opening wide her thighs to receive the generations of beasts in the green leaves soft, thick and layered upon the earth. The soft soil, grass and sand these were their beds to comfort their acts of loving, there came from each tribe of humans those who mixed their form in the forms of creatures that crawled on their belly, each blind person having their own way of seeing...and the dragoman Moor read on, he had only silence for the understanding which had been given to surpass knowledge of the light that flooded men and women with the rhythms of earthly love, hip gyrating against hip with fur on flesh, flesh on feather, feather on wool, wool on leather, leather on scales. In flesh, there was comfort in the forbidden, in sleep the quiet embrace of the lover's arm around his shoulder in the grass, the wing of the phoenix across his breast, his hand about the waist of the bear, the traveller faded downward into the love tide, seeds and eggs swimming through time and flesh to achieve sleep until

he arrived in that sacred place where actions recur and oneiric lovers whom cannot recognize one another embrace each another, strange lovers guided by a navigator without a name swimming through green water and yellow light. And Cabot cried out, enough of wicked knowledge and infidel sorcery. Othello, what book is this? Take this book and put it in the fire. Did you not declare yourself a New Christian? What corruption and lust haunts your memory? And the Morisco read no more, closed the book, while Cabot went to the deck, his throat aching with thirst, he had not drank in three days, and walked in haste and restlessness to escape the mirages of couplings in bestialitee until he retired to his cabin, lay upon his bed in desire, rolled about until he obtained sleep and dreamt of the Arab navigator, ibn Majid, the one with a green smile, kohl beneath his eyes, and Cabot longed to sit in the circle with the sailors of Yemen who sang and chewed quat. Ibn Majid circumambulated the black stone, and with ibn Majid as his guide, Kaboto ascended through the light to the circle of the stars until they came to the verdant gardens of Socrota where the poet, Qays al Amru sat in the shade guiding a reed pen on papyrus which had been brought from the land of the Copts, wrote of walking in love through circles of fire until the heart burst into flames like a burning mirror and he beheld the image of a hunter with skin of shaqra who walked upon the new found land shore and discovered washed upon the rocks a gilt sword with a broken blade, a ruby ring and two silver earrings which he gathered up and returned them to his shaman who took them into the

fasting lodge and while studying them the wise man committed himself and his memory to a fast which he endured four nights and days until he gained a vision on the dawn of the fourth day and he emerged from the sacred hut, sat in the circle and smoked tobacco in ritual with the elders and said after the sun had reached the highest point in the heavens, the strangers who came from afar in the past to lay waste our land and brought the seven diseases of the cut grass and sharp stone, broken birch and water, cod and seaweed and the purple bird as our elders from ancient times have prophesied to us, will soon arrive again at our shores, we must ready ourselves to turn them back or a white shadow shall pass across the land again until no Beothuk walks upon this green earth. While in the emerald isle of ynglaterra, it was written by one Polydore Vergil a Briton that it is believed that Cabotus the Venetian, the Great Admiral—though some write he was Genoan like Colonus who sailed under the Spanish flag—had found the new lands of the mighty Khan called khanland or others called the isles of Khanada (or as some have been heard to pronounce khan nada) and Malinda or briefly known as Cipango but it appears that Kaboto discovered them nowhere but on the very bottom of the ocean, to which he is thought to have descended together with his crew in his ship, and since that second journey the Venetian has not been seen again anywhere. And clearly it was only a dream that he had made such fantastic discoveries.

**take this book
and put it in the fire
—what corruption and lust
haunts your memory?**



Himani Bannerji

a Letter from the Gulf

Dearest,

Sitting in cafes and museums of Europe, Amsterdam to be precise, places where you have not been, nor where the dark and the green that is in you, in the delicate lines of your face, the curves of your eyes are ever reflected, I carry you in the lines of my palms.

Except perhaps in their Tropen, colonial museum, where you lie fragmented, in pieces, in the objects which they have torn apart from their history, like limbs from the body and put on display. There, my sweet, in clay, wood, beads, pieces of bamboo, your humble body is offered to my sight as artifacts. I cannot touch you — this is Europe, you are a museum piece, a million miles of distance by air, a fantasy framed in airline posters and shatterproof fibreglass which preserves the death of our everyday lives to create their civilization.

And, now, there is spring in Europe. The sweetness of the purple crocus, the white of the hyacinth, the blue of the iris melt you with their sun. Trees whisper their green secrets and in the official museum of the city they display their prizes, horrors, visions of war and peace, in an exhibit of photojournalism. For decades Europe nurses its sores. When they heal they are photographically provoked to bleed, to let some pus of memory ooze out. Europe remembers its nazi past. In slow rhythm strikes chest, forehead, forces tears, grimaces.

But behind this collage of guilt, memories, predations of the past, Tropens, British Museums, Nazis later — sends bombs, cameras and transforms a war into light shows and video games, your body arab, indian, black, vietnamese, chilean, panamanian, nameless, dark — splinters, cracks into thousand pieces, thrown up into the sky by jets of oil. Every pore of your body visible to the radar eye of the dark. The wind of peace blowing from the operation desert storm whistles through your singed skin. A hundred thousand sorties without blood!

Dearest, the soles of your singed feet, your child's body charred, a charcoal graffiti of history, your old man's unruly tears and swollen veins in the hands, your young woman's defiant curse, your old woman's hands raised to Allah who has fled the sky of starwars and taken refuge with the mesopotamian gods.

Ya All, ya Hassan, ya Hussein. Karbala in flames a second time. A horse runs wild with hooves of fire through the bombed streets, and the good King Haroun al Rashid, once upon a time in Baghdad in a child's book, flees with Duldul into an ocean of loss. A cry rips apart the television screen will no one stop this American war machine? My sweet, say nothing to them, nothing has stopped their march of civilization, while their blind hearts whisper tales of our savagery and their strategic adjustments. Let us hold each other by the hand and walk together through our myriad lives.

In this terror of a golden spring, where the clay jar holding the ashes of our ancestors, the gentle hand of time reaching out to be held is smashed, crushed, thrown into the grime of betrayals, wars, cynicism, let us, my love, go together into that cave, where others await us in the dark with a secret sign, where darkness holds the key to dawn, where conspiracy sings in the wind the courage to create again a new world — where your body, smile, sweet reserve, breaking the glass of the Tropen will be re-membered in all the shapes of our good earth.

March 1991
Amsterdam

Himani Bannerji



out-takes by
Arif Noorani
& kevin d*souza

flesh as a colour

self-porn and the brown gay male body

plot 1

It's inappropriate to talk in a bathhouse.

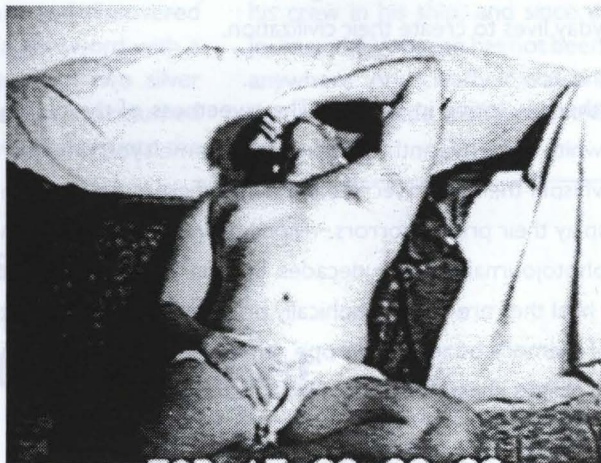
it's well past midnight. I'm ready to leave. twelve dollars for a locker, wasted. my feet ache for I've circled the corridors sixteen times and peeked into every open room. not much really. two snow white calvin-boys, one gymbo and one snooty asian. their eyes don't acknowledge my anonymous existence. three married-looking-business-men-whose-wives-don't-know and one arcane chutney chaser. none of whom really interest me. what's more the towel I've rented hardly fits around my tired brown body which I make a great effort to camouflage.

then i sight him. the classification process is immediate: mexican? brazilian? indian? his brown eyes manage to clarify intentions. he beckons to my rented room. the connection is made. he knocks. i let him in. my skin hunger seeks instant nourishment. hand on body on lips on hand. he enters quickly and my shy body becomes language—babu english? dangling modifiers, exploding exclamation marks! squirming comas, italics mine. his fingers extend over my words, across margins uncovering my hidden volume. my own teeth hold his tongue close, preventing translations. suddenly, without informing he withdraws before exploding. A master of symbolism. in exchange i offer a moan. not a word spoken.
it is now ten past three.



The men I cannot be I name vain.

Their muscular chests, rippled abdomens, bulging biceps, throbbing triceps, turgid quads; All these over-developed bodies make me dogmatic: Oppression occurs when the physical body is co-opted to be a resource for domination. I repeat. At night I fantasize about what my ethics will permit without guilt. I conjure up these bodies in my mind while I trust my hands on my cock. At night, the men I cannot be, I do.



for me the behavior of fucking has always been inextricably bound to power/violence/ possession/



violation. One of the reasons for this is that my notions of fucking and subsequently my fantasies have always taken cue from a reality that is based in male heterosexuality. It is expected that if you're a man then you fuck. And if you don't fuck then you're not a man. And fucking has always meant claiming possession over property, over the other.

Plot 2 relinquishing control

We are together in the parliament building, rocky mountains, corporate headquarters, park, kitchen.

You can be the reform politician, RCMP officer, business man, brother. I will be the immigrant, arrested activist, nir, father.

I will be the immigrant, arrested activist, night-cleaner, brother-in-law, father's best friend.

We are alone, we are begin watched.

You beg me to rim, rape, fuck, bind, fist you.

I refuse, react, comply, deny, oblige.

We keep going until you are satisfied, exhausted, exhilarated, bleeding, wasted, spent.

We then switch roles and start over.

I have always hated my body. The roll of fat around my waist has been an embarrassment, a bit too much flesh for this Ultra Slim Fast world. Going through the gay phone-cruise-lines, I omit myself from many live one-on-one connections. Hi guys. Hard bodied white male looking for slim Asian man... (skip) My interests are going to the gym and... going to the gym. (skip) Hot top, 8 1/2 inches uncut looking for submissive muscular bottom. (skip) Looking for a guy with a smooth toned hair-less body (skip).

Same here. i have learned to dislike my body ever since i started developing a sense of body awareness. Intellectually i know why. My mind understands the theories, attributing it to being different. Not just being brown but being too skinny; Not being buffed, muscular, prairie-grown or grain-fed; Not occupying enough space as a "man"; Attributing it to racism, white supremacy, sexism, etc. But, my physical body does not respond to this logic. i've discovered that my physical body needs to be actively involved in creating myself (and other brown men) as desirable. Hence using video, photography, paint, text, etc, to create tangible evidence of our sexual existence. It may seem trite, simple and even self-indulgent but, it works and that's what matters.

We want to see ourselves in media/print/TV in positions not generally afforded to brown queer men: raunchy, sexy, romantic, cheezy... putting our own queer men: raunchy, sexy, romantic, cheezy...putting South Asian boyz in the scene. Living out our fantasies, re-casting low-grade porn with our own bodies.

Fairy tales really—not just the Fairy tales really—not just the sexy ones but the ones about liberations, a new life, a different existence—can come true. The world is not unshakeable, unbreakable. We can remake it to fit the pictures in our head.

Very True. It's then about my body needing to inventing itself (and other men of colour). Documenting my own brown male queer reality through self-pornography. A different kind of self-assertion. A way of making space for reflection: This is me. This is assertion. A way of making space for reflection: This is me. This is my body. This body for itself.

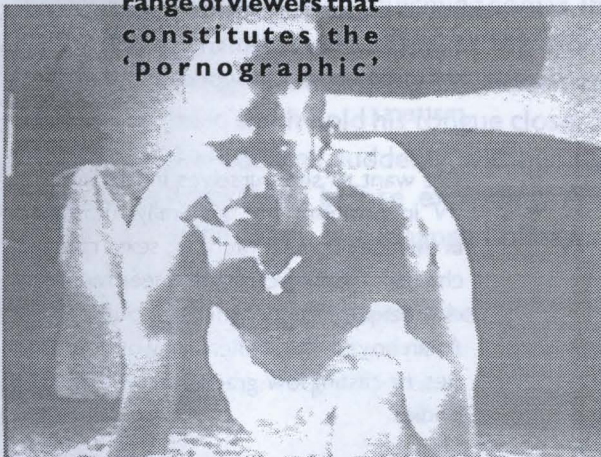
It is different from “mainstream” gay porn which is about repetition and unadulterated masculinity. I remember freeze-framing a scene where two men kissed. This brief intimacy, not the torrent of blow jobs and ass fucking, intensified my longing.

In my view all porn is about objectifying—about big dicks, tight asses, hard bodies. So porn with black/brown men follows suit—about dark meat, exotic locales—fetishizing our ethnicity, our body parts become the modern-day spice trade.

At first glance, the images we are creating don't seem so different but it's the process not just the final product that counts. We are forced to confront our own issues: low self esteem about the size, colour, shape and look of our bodies.

bad art? most pornography comprises of low budget production and hack Freudian psychoanalytical narratives about desire and conquest.

However, it is not the images themselves but how the images are contextualized and decoded by a range of viewers that constitutes the 'pornographic'



What turns us on? Is the representation of

'the other' always about repressed aspects of self?
 “Do I face racism?” a white gay lawyer, specializing in corporate/consumer relations asks me.

Is the other both an object of desire and contempt?

No comment.

“Will you be my boy”, he murmurs into my ear.

This (my) body and identity is only understood

we both grope each other at the porno bar.

from outside as produced in relation to difference

me: 22 him: 30-something.

because this, (my) body is constructed in the language

“are you into role playing?”

of the colonial state. However, this (my) body has created

says another guy.

a language of its own. It transgresses its prescribed

socio-cultural inscriptions to reveal dark & chaotic

or high school chum.”

interiors desires. It has the potential to betray and disrupt.

plot 3

the performance

turn over, he ordered. rubbed my thighs with lube. his cock slid between my thighs. “my fantasy is to be with two dark men,” he says. I was only one—I imagined a friend in for the ride. “I’m gonna push it in hard.” Push it it where? Between my thighs? He imagine-fucks me, I moan along with the thrusts. I hope he is enjoying this. His cabbage breath blows into my ear, turning my room into a compost bin. Afterwards, he asks me if I speak Hindi...or Punjabi. “No” I say, “Only English and a bit of French & Spanish.” “Qu’est-ce que tu fait maintenant,” he says, trying to test me. “Au revoir,” I respond shutting the door behind him.

As it has been said & heard before, although gay porno may look like het porn it is not necessarily used in the same way nor does it have the same social effects. To straight viewers some gay male porno, may seem misogynistic in that is often contains derogatory references to "feminized" male. It is usually these males who get "fucked", And getting "fucked" equals being a women. But, that is only because the straight viewer bring to it his notions of sexual roles of power & powerlessness that have been defined by patriarchal society.

To a gay viewer these images are not a one way transaction: between the gay man and the object (i.e the one getting fucked); For many gay men there is often a switching that happens. From identifying with the "bottom" and the "top" and vice versa. This switching of identification is fluid and changing and hence works at depolarizing the heterosexual binary of "masculine" and "feminine", tops and bottoms.

Where does racism fit into the picture?

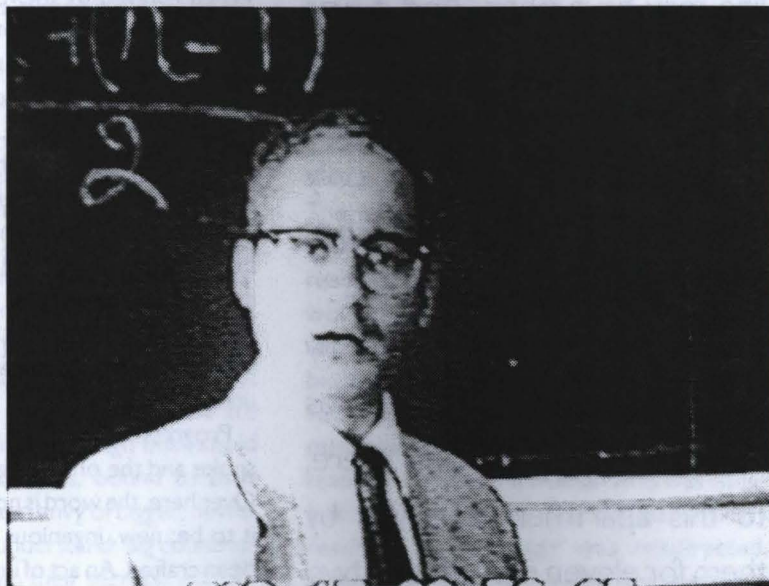
This is a tricky question. Most of the gay porno has been created by white men for white men. The obvious is that I am not allowed into that space except as an object.

What's confusing is that at times I am angry at the production of images of brown/black men by white men and at other times I am so turned on by them. At these instances the question arises: do i want to do these men or be these men? And if I want to be these men am I operating from a colonial mind set?

And then there is the reality...even if I do find South Asian men sexy its hard making connections. There seems to be a missing sense of solidarity among South Asian brown men. Unlike the shared nods, knowing glances and sense of brotherhood common among black men. It seems that by acknowledging each other, South Asian men will lose their honorary place in the white gay community. Their self-identification suddenly illuminating their skin colour for all the world to see.

Excited as I approach a man of colour acknowledging our need to connect, belong, form some type of community. But, my longing more often than not is met with a turned head. I want to yell, "Hey, aren't we family?" instead I remain silent.

It is about sex because we are queer.



It is here because we are bodyphobic



A LETTER NOT POSTED

Rabindranath

Maharaj

Dear Harold

It's now exactly two months since I moved to Islington. Does the name ring a bell? Remember the poem in primary school about a mad dog that had bitten an Englishman? I believe the last line may have been, 'And it was the dog that died.' Well, this is a different Islington. There are no mad dogs here and the only Englishmen are those from humid, dust-ridden countries.

The letter you posted to my old address in Etobicoke was rerouted by my relatives there, to this apartment. I stayed by them for eleven months and two weeks. They are the kind of migrant you see in movies or read about in books. Husband working night-shift in a factory, wife working day-shift in a packaging plant. Proud of their labour, ennobled by their sacrifices and humbled by their good fortune. They were both teachers in Trinidad.

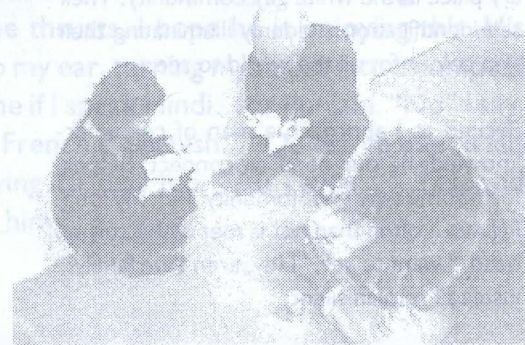
They rarely spoke to each other or to me. When I stayed by them, I used to think that newcomers, migrants, from a lack of practice, might soon lose the gift of speech, but then, their two children, who were away at summer camp, returned and I saw how they wielded their accent like a weapon, frightening their poor parents. Still, I feel that the fright is a necessary prelude to the pride. I watched them cowering before their shrill, garrulous children, afraid of what they were seeing and comforted by what they couldn't understand.

Progress. It was the only word they spoke and the only thing on their minds. Over here, the word is not what we know it to be; new, ingenious definitions have been crafted. An act of involuntary suffering; a moratorium on pleasure; a postponement of life.

I know all of this sounds rather ungrateful and it has occurred to me that my assessment may be unfair. For all I know, they may be able to see things that I cannot. These same obsequious teenagers may grow into doctors or lawyers or engineers. Still obsequious, but rich. And their parents might be no different from those, who, a hundred or so years ago, were forced into the same sacrifices. Different land, same illusions.

But they depressed me with their tight, pungent dreams and for half the time I stayed there, I was planning my escape. I went out, studied the other foreigners, tried to start conversations, and then I discovered that there was another kind of migrant. Those who continually nourish their wounds, tear away the scabs, and offer their bruises for inspection. Such an elaborate preparation for sympathy, yet offended when it was given.

There were nights when I thought only of returning. I can't tell you the number of times I mentally packed my bags and headed back to Trinidad. But I couldn't return. I had burnt my bridges: resigned from my job at *The Gleaner*, told my friends goodbye, accepted their congratulations, made foolish promises.



I know what you are expecting to hear, Harold, but I'm not a poet or a writer

I could easily have panicked. Then, as so often happen in times of desperation, salvation was granted. Granted by Marsha, the mother of the child I was tutoring. English lessons. Can you imagine that? Me, with my thick West Indian accent, barely able to pronounce Etobicoke, an English tutor? But the mother was grateful that anyone, even at a price, was willing to direct some attention to her son, who, as it turned out, was as dense as a slab of concrete. She brought me to this place, spoke to the superintendent and acted as my guarantor. She brings her son twice a week, on Saturdays and Sundays, and while I'm struggling with him, she arranges the food she has brought, in the cupboard.

She believes her son is suffering from an attention-deficit disorder, which may be true because he fidgets and stares all over the room while I am tutoring him. It is very distracting. The mother also believes that I eat badly which is why, I suppose, she brings her weekly gifts of food. She is worried about me. I am worried about her son. The world is filled with worried people.

Marsha looks exactly how you would expect a Marsha to look. Nice hair, good teeth, large sympathetic eyes, prominent chin, and a bit of fat revealed only in the dimples at the sides of the lips and in the softness of the neck. Attractiveness and plainness positioned so closely that a simple shift of the face, a confession of light on some feature, or a shadowing of another, could propel her in either direction.

I know what you are expecting to hear, Harold, but I'm not a poet or a writer: self-delusion is not part of my armoury. If the opportunity presented itself, I did not view it as an opportunity. To me, she is simply the mother of the child I am tutoring. My bread and butter.

I still remember what I told you and Sandra at the airport's bar. That the world is what we make of it; our lives not just the excess of another person's dreams. I know that Sandra was deeply offended and hurt, but I thought it profound then. In any case, I was drunk from the beers and hours from leaving Trinidad.

I didn't know what I would find. In Trinidad, the only Canadians we knew were the exchange teachers who taught us at Mon Repos Secondary and the Presbyterian missionaries who came from Nova Scotia. I didn't know what to make of them; they could have been paler, plumper, quieter Americans. And now, so many years later, after one year in Canada, I'm in no better position to answer the question you posed, so innocently, in your letter.

To put it simply, I just don't know. Despite what we in Trinidad thought, they are not Americans. I could say that Americans are malignant and Canadians benign but I could be wrong. Small societies, bound to their longing and disgust and envy of bigger, newer things are easier to understand. Big countries are more elusive with their secrets.

I have realized, too, that we judge people from the perspective of our own distress and assign qualities which they may not really possess. Do you remember the mansion we passed in Charlieville on our way to work and the rumours that we shared, adding our own fanciful touch? A refugee in Canada about to be kicked out, winning millions in a lotto and a repentant Canadian government offering him immediate citizenship if he remained with his new wealth. But he had suffered too much, we said, been humiliated too often.

He took his money, returned to Trinidad and built his mansion. The rumours became more than rumours. They clarified our vision, offered superiority.

In so many ways, Harold, the tyranny of the weak is more grotesque than the casual aggressiveness of the strong. And because of this, I cannot, at this point, give a truthful answer to your question. In any case, I'm hardly ever out these days. I leave once a week to buy my groceries and occasionally, I go to a free reading at the Harbourfront or at the University of Toronto Bookstore. A little over a month ago, I went to a reading by a very young writer who had published his first book. He read with bristling anger. The words fell like fire from his mouth. The audience was rivetted. At the end of his reading, they rose and applauded. An old woman standing next to me wiped her eyes. After-wards, in the train, I too felt like crying, because his writing was so horrible. But he had read so passionately that I wished it were otherwise. A week later, I attended another reading, this one by a woman who was either from India or Pakistan. She also was an angry reader but her anger was misdirected, scalloped, I saw her losing her audience. She became angrier, and in the end, it was all she had left.

Whenever I go to these readings, I feel extremely guilty and for the next few days I submit a number of applications to various newspapers. So far, I haven't received any replies and I worry that the little savings that I have, will run out before I get a job. Marsha advised me to apply for the position of a supply teacher but that too led nowhere.

And so, the days tumble over one another, while I, alone in my apartment, think of a well-respected journalist who had inexplicably left everything behind and I try to understand the reasons for his departure. I have come closer,

Meanwhile, **time** passes, and I have done nothing. I am **conscious** of every day that goes by, all the **scattered** hours and minutes.

I think, to understanding Sandra's bitterness, but nothing else.

I have analysed my life here and I have concluded that it's inertia, not boredom, that punishes me. Boredom, you see, is a quality that we invite into our lives; it suggests that there are other things we could do if we choose. It's an aristocratic affectation resulting not so much from laziness as from a disregard for everything and everyone. But inertia is different. It stifles and paralyses and it draws your weakness around you like a dead fog that thickens each day.

In these situations, little distractions take on a romance of their own. I stopped shaving. Every morning I saw a lunatic staring at me. The beard itched and tickled but because it reminded me of someone I felt I hated, it could not be removed. Every day, I questioned the mirror. Three weeks later, while I was purchasing my groceries, I saw the young man, bearded, who had laughed when I spoke the name of a Trinidadian ground provision. I shaved that night. Small things rub me the wrong way. Romance dies easily in such situations.

So I spend my time waiting, not sure what I'm waiting for. In the stillness of the night, my appliances throb with the power of the alive. When I concentrate, I can hear the amplified heartbeat of the clock, the belch of water filling the toilet tank, the phlegmatic wheezing of the fan, the groaning of the fridge. I could think I'm in a sanitarium but my own breathing is melodious. Cavorting, thrilling birds rise from my nasal passages, crickets and grasshoppers from my throat. They have enlivened my suffocation, given music to my congestion. Maybe romance is not dead after all.

Meanwhile, time passes, and I have done nothing. I am conscious of every day that goes by, all the scattered hours and minutes. In Trinidad, I, you, wrote our articles about government corruption, the complicity of the police in the drug trade, about the bribery, nepotism and inefficiency which had embedded themselves in our culture. Our dreams were modest; we didn't change the world but we knew who we were and what we were doing. And we made enemies, the one sign of progress in Trinidad.

Over here, in my apartment in Islington (I still can't think of the name without remembering the Englishman) I look at television and I see wealthy and powerful men and women with gleaming teeth, speaking of the new world they are creating, and I see those excluded, fretting with an effete indignation. I watch the other face of progress and I understand how unsophisticated and backward, we, with our false notions of morality, are. I remember a time when the days were whole and the nights glistened with drunken discoveries. I remember when we closed the village bars and on our way home, half-jokingly discussed all we had spoken that evening, dismissed our concern for the dispossessed as the conceit of the colonial, but in the morning, shadowed by the guilt of our sudden sobriety, we wrote our minds. It was hypocrisy but it was sincere. I remember those times and I

seethe at my own powerlessness because I am now denied even this modest conceit. I am an interloper in this place, Harold. Not because of colour or culture or accent or anything like that, but really because I am unnecessary. I am not needed. It is a horrible discovery.

On my grocery days, I observe men and women and children chatting and cycling and driving and smiling with perfect teeth and I think that their lives would be exactly what they expect it to be.

Sometimes, I'm afraid that I might grow into one of those strange, prying old men. The kind that you see in bus stops and street corners, unconcerned about their appearance, their sharp, oily eyes slicing everything before them. I can see you shaking your head and smiling while you are reading this, but I have changed in ways that I never thought possible. Innocence can be punctured in a single minute or it can be eroded, day by day, until you are no longer sure whether it's there or not.

I know that I have not answered your question and I wish that I could have ended this letter on a more positive note but I must finish here. In a few minutes, Marsha will arrive with her son and I must again be the diligent tutor, at ease with the world and smiling at my minor misfortunes.

She really told me that, using these exact words, smiling radiantly with her perfect teeth to show me it could be done. Perhaps there's the answer to your question. Canadians are people with good teeth.

Yours truly,
Robert



A letter to The Maru

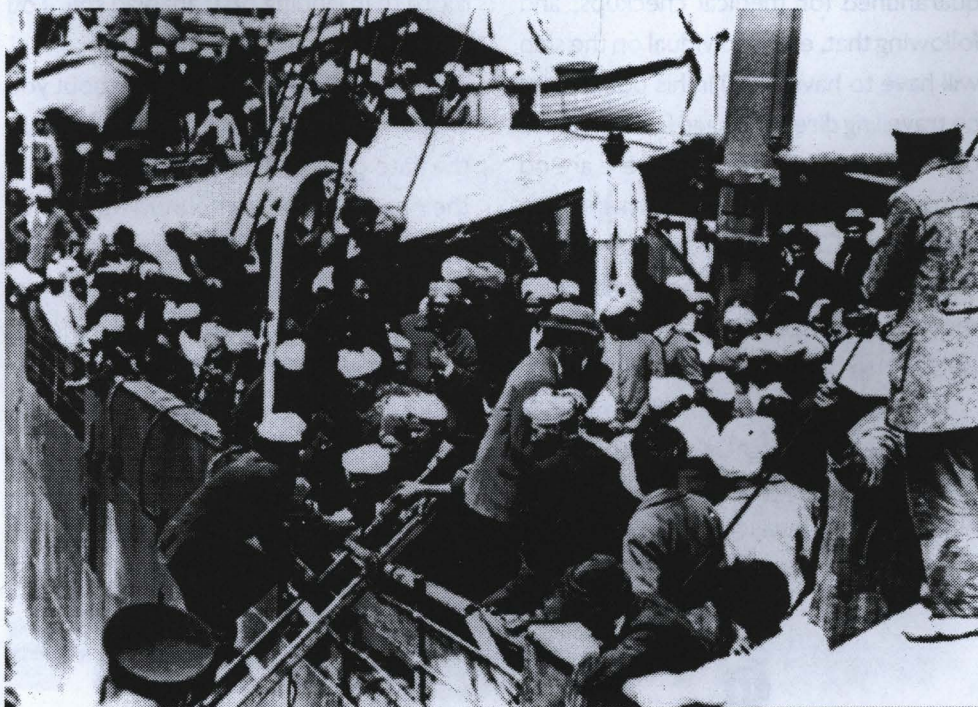
1914, Dated 1994

To the unknown passenger,
who I will name Ranjeet...

When you arrive in the early hours of the morning, you will not see the grey-green sheath of The Georgia Straight, you will look into the darkness and know you have entered a new land. You will see the dark foaming waves as they cut against the rusty old ship. The distance offers a few waking lights streaming on the dark

waters, and in that moment, you will drift in to waking slumber. The sweet air, remnant of spring, will be familiar to your lips, and the past seven weeks at sea—an unfamiliar rite of passage—will have been worth it. The day is May 23, 1914, and the ship that carries your dreams is named *The Komagata Maru*.

When the ship's anchor drops, your eyes draw to the rising land mass known as North Vancouver. Awake. Awoken. The dawn plays tricks on your eyes. You start to see shapes taking form, colossal shapes, square shapes that hulk over the harbour like figures to be reckoned with, while your mind still sees your farm as it was in your boyhood, before you took your place in the British Armed forces and before serving the British Raj, where you waged war in the Sudan, in Somaliland, in China and at Saragarhi, on behalf of your master. You remember the corn, rice, red peppers and sugar cane at the farm, knowing the meaning of the season and the blood that rages through your body is the same life force that drives the roots up into your fields. You wonder why Mathaji sold two parcels of your land for you to journey to this new place, why your family still could not afford to keep you, without sending you away into a world unknown. And the remaining two parcels of sugar cane you



harvested will be income to the local government; the vizeer, the mayor, the British civil servant.

Not knowing how much you were impoverished by your master. That the annual drain on your home cost your home millions of pounds annually, of which 17.5 million was drained away without a penny's return.

Not knowing during that time, your home paid England's debt at about 244,000 pounds sterling since 1900 with annual increases. You will not know that the compounded interest amounting to 72 and-a-half million sterling was the key reason for India's famine; not failure of rains, or over-population. Awful poverty caused by enormous foreign tribute, and an equally expensive tribute to the Indian Durbars; royal families that squandered away your culture.

This letter is to you my friend, because you have unwillingly sacrificed yourself to the greatest of endeavours: the song of freedom, as you try to find ways out of the complete poverty of your arrival in the new land, and the living poverty at home on the farm.

You will not know these things because these points of light have not been shone in your eyes. You, the unwilling event that once again gives birth to the idea of freedom and self determination in your homeland; the idea, not the death.

As you place your foot up on to the plank and look to feel the earth again under your feet, a voice from the shore line will shout out to you "Keep off the land," or, "Drive the beggars back to the Ganges." You comply, 70 years have seeped into your actions, your thoughts



Meanwhile, time passes, and I have done nothing but conscious of every day that goes by, in the scattered hours and minutes. In

—you comply to every demand and order meted out by the European. You will step back and take your place amongst the others and await for the next move. In front of you will be the charterer who convinced you in Singapore that life in Canada will be one of good living. Gurdit Singh asks the shore man: "Immigration Inspector Malcolm Reid, why the delay?" Reid replies: "The whole boat will be quarantined for medical checkups, and following that, each individual on the ship will have to have \$200 in his pocket and be travelling direct passage from his place of birth." (Implausible since there are no ships travelling non-stop from India to Vancouver, Canada.) You will step back, deprived of community and wait out a medical check up lasting over ten days, as opposed to the customary 24-hour check.

The rations on the ship will diminish in the following fortnight. As day turns into day and your ship becomes Vancouver's marine zoo, you will have nothing left. By this time a 3-shift watch consisting of two

armed police guards will keep an eye on your every move, as you slowly descend into yourself and feel your whole world has been squeezed into this ship. When asked for food by Gurdit Singh, Inspector Reid will say it is Gurdit Singh's responsibility to feed the passengers, knowing Singh has as much mobility to move and acquire funds for foods as the rest of the ship. In effect, this will have denied you more than landing on Canadian soil. You have been denied your humanity.

On land, the stories written about you will never reach your ears, yet you see the hate on the mob's face and read it in their actions. *The Vancouver Province* will run stories saying "the right-thinking people know that the natives of Hindustan...should not be allowed in this country, except for circus purposes...We do not think as Orientals do. That is why the East Indians and other Asiatic races and the white race will always mis-comprehend each other..." or "The Sikhs are like the Irish raised to nth or the fourth

armed police guards will keep an eye on your every move, as you slowly descend into yourself and feel your whole world has been squeezed into this ship. When asked for food by Gurdit Singh, Inspector Reid will say it is Gurdit Singh's responsibility to feed the passengers, knowing Singh has as much mobility to move and acquire funds for foods as the rest of the ship. In effect, this will have denied you more than landing on Canadian soil. You have been denied your humanity.

dimension. They are remorseless politicians and disturbers. They are complex and quite unaccountable... For the sake of the picturesque I am glad to have a few specimens. But those who came last (on the Komagata Maru) are not quite up to the sample. They must be returned as such."

On your behalf, there are those in the Indo-Canadian press who applaud your arrival. The Hindustanee paper published by Husain Rahim: "We extend a cordial welcome to Bhai Gurdit Singh and his party of 375 East Indians on board the Komagata Maru which arrived in this harbour. All kinds of spectacular and alarming stories in which the arrival of this ship has been termed a Hindu invasion have been indulged in by the local press day after day in their sensation mongering dailies, while the Empress boat, bringing 650 Chinese at the same time, was welcome...."

Again in a week, and after days of negotiations for food, you will have received provisions, but in the height of summer, you will parch, as the fresh-water supply runs out on the ship. Amidst the politics of whether the community of South Asians living in Vancouver should foot the bill, or whether the government who have imprisoned you as innocent people on the ship should foot the bill, your mouth runs dry and you find yourself drinking "bad dirty water, in which you become sick with cough and throat sores." When the dirty water is finished, you will have to wait till the politics subsides, and Inspector Reid having accepted and then deferred his legal responsibility gives the City of Vancouver the legal choice of deciding whether your parched life is worth helping under the Public Charges Act.

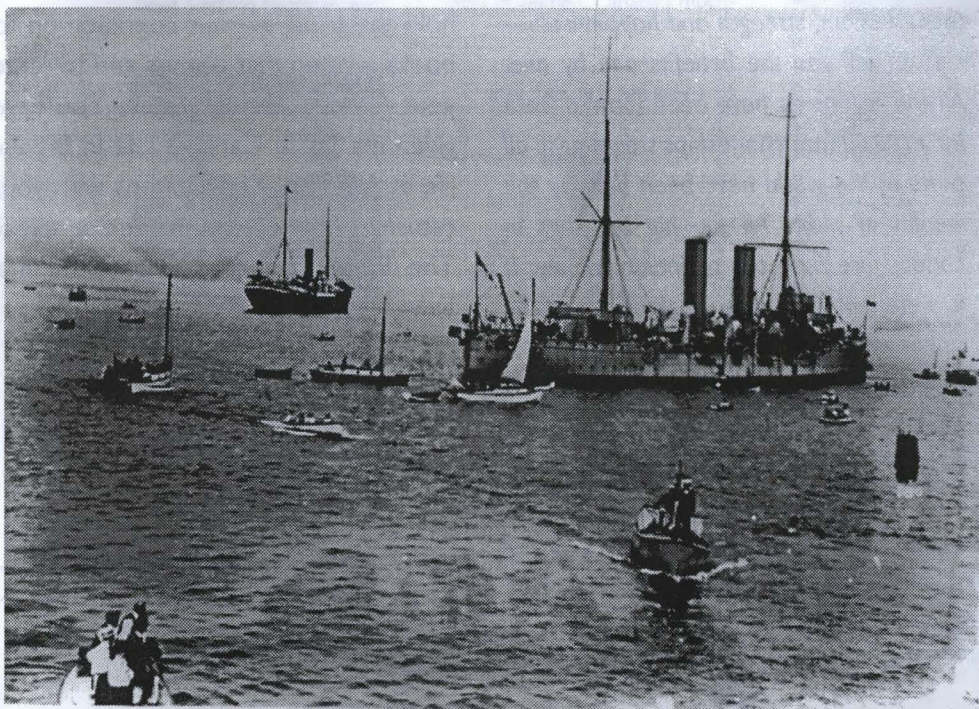
By now you will again look at your surroundings and the faces will tell you all.

You are in a run-down freighter without drinking water, with a poor diet of food items and a claustrophobic life cramped in filth-ridden captivity.

Dominion Day smiles will be your misery, as more onlookers crowd the harbour enjoying the spectacle of your misery as recreation. You are left with one meal a day, consisting of potato soup and rice, which leaves no water supply for drinking. By July 9, it will be for saving Reid's public image that you are supplied rations that will last a few days. Because you are undernourished, pangs of hunger drone on in your mind and stomach as your heart shrivels a little day by day. The battles you fought in will not equate to the misery and degradation that is now your life in the new land.

The Battle Of Burrard Inlet will not begin by your actions, and will not end with your surrender. On July 19, at 1:30 am, the assault begins against the beaten body of the old Maru, that still has not lost spirit. Through pangs of hunger and a parched mouth, you look for what would defend you from the state-terrorism that prevails upon the scene. With fire-brick, pieces of machinery, hatchets, coal, iron bars, and make-shift clubs, you defend yourself against a jet stream of fire hoses, and you know shots do sing by your scalp. Though the night report will say that you had the pistol and they decided not to use gun fire.

You succeed in one thing: to have been victorious in one battle for the freedom and equal movement within your notion as a citizen of the British Empire. In this act you are politicised as a martyr for the cause, though your eventual journey to imprisonment and death still awaits across



changing waters.

Defenceless, still a pauper you will see from the distance a warship coming your way. The HMCS Rainbow, arriving at 8:15 in the morning, will anchor 200 yards away from your freighter. The whole of Vancouver will be out to see your demise as their morning's entertainment. The Rainbow's arsenal consists of two six-inch and six four-inch torpedo tubes. The ammunition supply consists of old fashioned shells. The tubes are aimed directly at your head, along with this is the Vancouver Militia including the sixth regiment and the Irish Fusiliers and Highlanders. And all you have in your freight is coal.

Why...Why...a life laid down for the British Armed Forces, you say to yourself, as the lunar light cut's across the wave and lingers on in your mind? A question asked out of exasperation leads to the heart of revolution. Once an ally, now the enemy.

The irony is well suited, Dr. Skeltou writes to Sir Wilfred Laurier: "this nucleus of the new Canadian navy was first used to prevent British subjects from landing on the British soil."

You drift out to the sea at 5am in the morning on July 23 1914. You have provisions, your sleep will be at ease, but the final sacrifice awaits you at Budge Budge, India where as a criminal you will lay down your life as 177 rounds of .303 bore pierce your group and the first shot fired from the ship is quickly droned out by the hissing of the Royal Fusilliers.

There, you have been killed because you protested enforced repatriation. The massacre which many say go beyond the official count of 26 killed,



will not go unnoticed.

I offer this one last piece of information in your memory—a quote from a British Loyalist Sir John Roberts—dated Jan 5, 1914:

"What good has India done us? First it has increased the small island of England to the largest empire in the world, and has given them wisdom, strength and happiness.

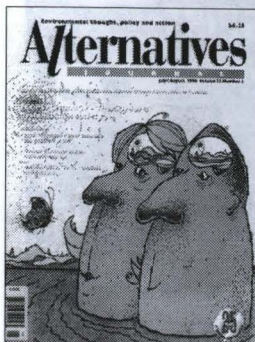
I will tell you the benefits one by one. All the regiments have been formed from India. All our merchant ships steaming in all ports of the world have been built by the wealth of India. All the big buildings in London are built out of Indian money. If it were not for India, England would be unknown today. The modern towns of Edinburgh, Cheltenham and Bath have all been built with Indian money. It was by the help of the Indian merchants and Indian money that we were enabled to fight Napoleon Bonaparte. It was only by the help of Indian money that we were enabled

to defeat and bind him and deport him to an island in the Atlantic Ocean. These benefits have been done for England by India, but the Indian people are not aware of their strength."

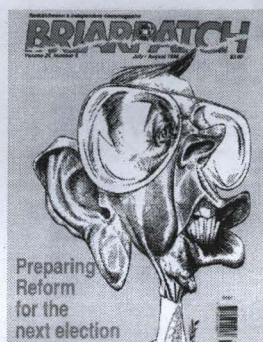
Ranjeet, your life is of the greatest value, and your sacrifice will live on. I write this to share your breath, and to hold the truth of your condition up to books written that dismiss and trivialize your Canadian contribution. You have given me life in Canada. Life in Britain, life in America. Your actions with your return to India, was one more example of The Empire's injustice, and the fuel towards self rule in India.

With love and respect
Phinder Dulai
Vancouver, British Columbia, 1994

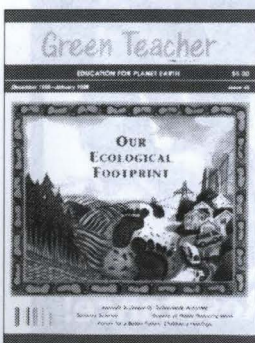




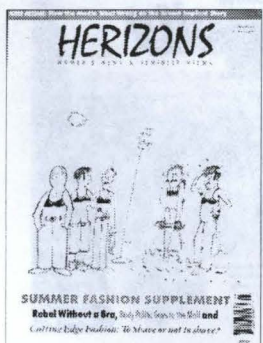
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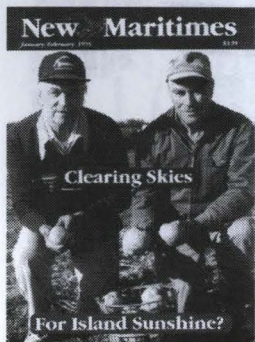
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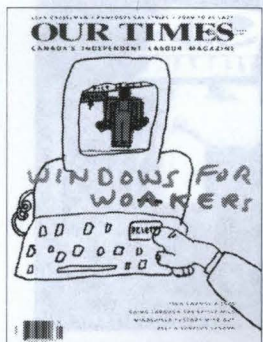
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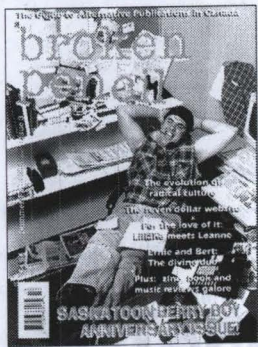
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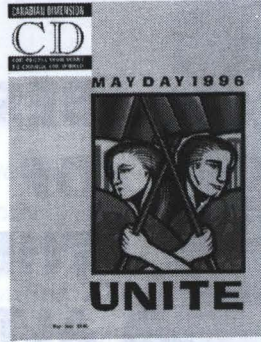
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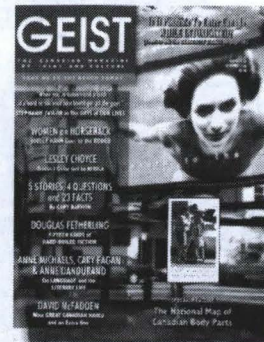
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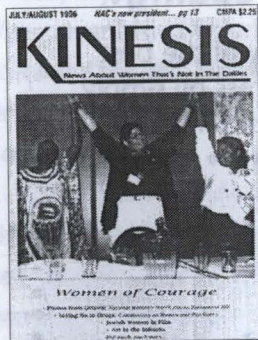
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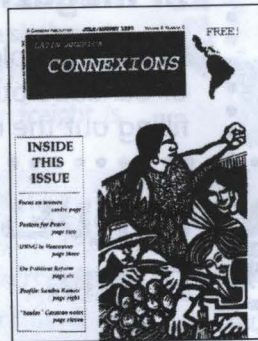
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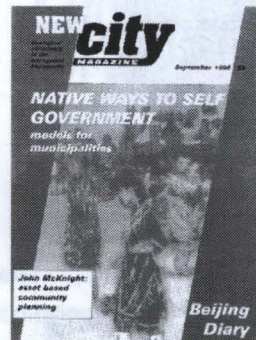
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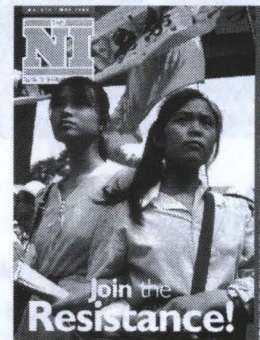
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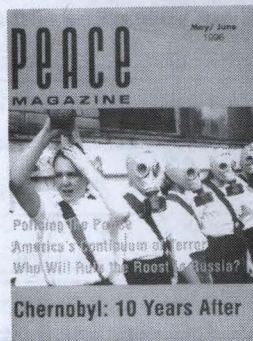
NEW CITY MAGAZINE believes in a distinct and sustainable Canadian urban culture and identity. Featuring articles, stories and histories about the city and its people, it is a critical forum on the modern city. *New City* strives to build a better understanding of urban maladies and the possibilities for change.



NEW INTERNATIONALIST magazine turns the issues inside out and explains what's really going on. It's the best guide to the major issues from the arms trade to AIDS, from human rights to hunger. Each month, *NI* tackles one subject, and gives you the facts and the arguments. To influence what's happening to you, you need to know what's going on.



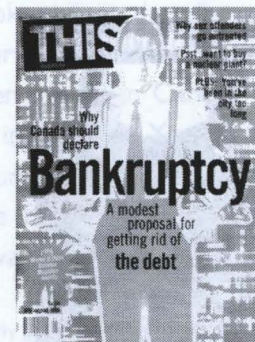
OUTLOOK provides a Jewish secular-humanist perspective on political and cultural issues. It features original articles, stories, and reviews by writers from Canada, the USA, Israel, France, Germany and Eastern Europe. Promoting peace in the Middle East and the world, *Outlook* supports multiculturalism and promotes self-determination of all peoples.



PEACE MAGAZINE is a multi-partisan voice for peace, conflict resolution and non-violence in our homes, in playgrounds and between nations. For over a decade, our magazine has been a forum on how to create a more peaceful and just world. "Your solace in conflicting times." - *Broken Pencil*



One of Canada's hottest independent literary quarterlies, **SUB-TERRAIN** features the work of writers, artists and photographers from Canada, the US and foreign locations. Each issue is a stimulating fusion of fiction, poetry, graphic art, commentary and book reviews. "Eschews geography in favour of a borderless world" - *Vancouver Mag*.



THIS MAGAZINE is a 30-year-old national magazine of politics and culture. A 1996 winner of two gold and one silver National Magazine Awards for investigative journalism and political criticism. *This Magazine* prints fearless reporting, showcases groundbreaking literature, and critiques culture – high and low – with attitude, personality and style.



