

FUSE

MAGAZINE

ISAAC JULIEN'S CHILDREN:
BLACK
QUEER
CINEMA after *Looking
for Langston*
by Rinaldo Walcott

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Movement by DJs by Christopher Smith **Being Black** reviewed by Jennifer Harris
Interviews with Joanna Das, Richard Fung and Jamelie Hassan
Vice Squad reviewed by Kelly McCray **Freestyle** reviewed by Michelle Jacques

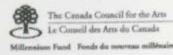


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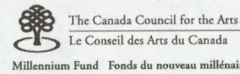
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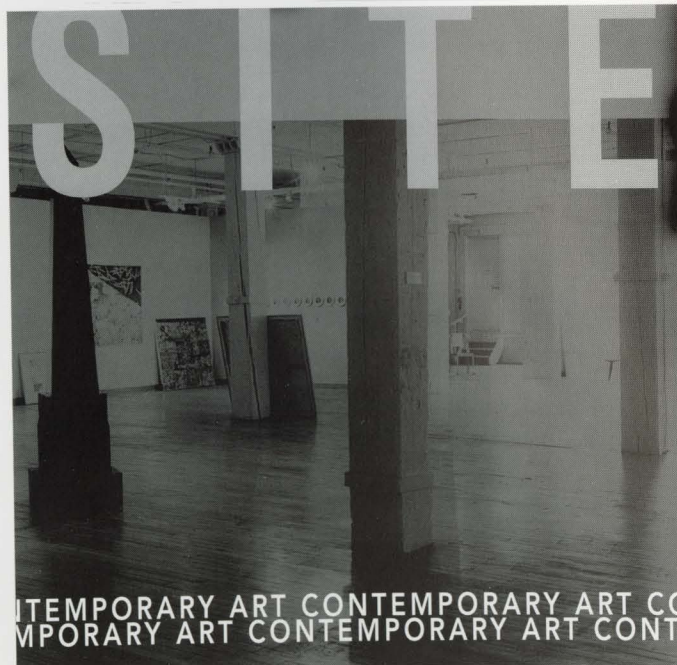
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6 Editorial

7 Column

Movement by DJs
by Christopher Smith

10 Feature

ISAAC JULIEN'S CHILDREN: Black Queer Cinema after Looking for Langston
by Rinaldo Walcott



Film still from *The Watermelon Woman*, Cheryl Dunye, 1997, 35 mm. Courtesy: First Run Features, New York.

20 Interviews

Kathak, the Classic Indian Art Form: Renuka Sooknanan Speaks with Joanna Das
interview with Renuka Sooknanan

29 Richard Fung and Jamelie Hassan speak about their recent honours
interview with Meera Sethi

18 Artist Project

June Clark

47 Short Fuse

The Boomerang Effect
by Jamelie Hassan

Reviews

VISUAL ART

34 Vice Squad
Review by Kelly McCray

37 Freestyle
Review Michelle Jacques

BOOKS

39 Mixed Identities and Other Fictions
Michael Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost* and Grant Farred's *Midfielder's Moment*
Review by Tess Chakkalal

42 Being Black
by Althea Prince
Review by Jennifer Harris

44 Writing to Legacy
Rachel Manley's *Slipstream* and Ken Wiwa's *In the Shadow of a Saint*
Review by Gamal Abdel Shehid

contents



Prayer Ties My People, Jane Ash Poitras, 2000, mixed media on canvas, 152.4 cm x 243.84 cm. Courtesy: Mira Godard Gallery, Toronto.

Cover: Video still from *Sometimes*, Susan Smith-Pinelo, 1999. A video installation of variable dimensions from *Freestyle*, The Studio Museum in Harlem, New York, Spring 2001.

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Editorial

Money. Money. Money.

The recent announcement by the Heritage Minister and the Prime Minister in Toronto,

(in the atrium of the CBC, an institution they also killed) of an infusion of "new" money for the arts and culture sector was greeted with a bit of welcome relief. It's been a long time coming. But those of us in the alternative arts and culture scene can't yet celebrate. Not much of this new money is targeted at us. It will be mainly targeted at the arts and culture sector of the elite. In short, our struggle to survive may become even harder (if that's possible). For the alternative culture scene that does so much to maintain a national art and cultural presence in this country, the question "Where's the money?" remains imperative. It needs to be asked again and again.

When the Ontario Coalition Against Poverty (OCAP) launches its fall campaign, "The Long Retreat Is Over" (to "kick the ass" of Mike Harris in Ontario), those of us committed to alternative art and culture should participate. There is little difference between Ontario's "restructuring" of the art and culture sector and the federal government's decision to target the mainly elite arts with "new" funding. Don't get me wrong, we're not trying to suggest that some great contest should occur to determine who gets the money. No. We would just like to see it spread around differently. If the heritage ministry's federal arts framework policy paper is to have any impact, it will have to promote funding decisions

that benefit alternative art and culture venues, practices, performances and artists since it is through these cultural producers that a national art and culture character is derived.

The publication of *Money Value Art: State Funding, Free Markets, Big Pictures* (YYZ Books) is a series of thought provoking essays that raise many of the concerns hinted at above (look for a review in an up coming issue of FUSE). Congratulations to editors Sally McKay and Andrew Patterson. We hope that the heritage minister and her bureaucrats each get a copy. With this book and OCAP's fall campaign, the arts and culture community has some useful tools to resist the restructuring of our lives and pleasures in this moment of an increasingly vicious capitalism. New times are coming.

Over the coming months Fuse will shift and change, but we will continue to strive to serve our community of readers well and even better. With this issue we seek to open up the question of both old and new times, and to continue to engage and dialogue with a range of art and culture practices, but not divorce from the politics that make humans human.

The Editors

Movement by DJs

By Christopher Smith



Flyer for "Movement," originally held at The Rivoli, Queen Street W. and relocated to Roxy Blu, Brant at King Street, Toronto.

MOVEMENT

In step

I sit in the sand, kicking off
the shoes that forever bring
me back to my beginnings.
I am grateful for their
protection, yet I long to take
journeys of my own direction.

— Deanna Bowen

Writing subcultural theory in a Canadian context is interesting but difficult work. This difficulty arises because the better part of useful subcultural theory has developed within specific national contexts, such as the work done through the CCCS (Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies) in Birmingham, UK.

In addition, subcultures in Canada occupy a peculiar position because, for the most part, Canadian subcultures originate from "elsewhere," so mapping their origins is a challenge. Whether we speak of punk, dancehall or rave culture(s) in Canada, for example, inevitably the initial source of inspiration is an established subculture in another geographic locale. Or is it?

In Canada, multiculturalism is lived as a complex reality tantamount to what Paul Gilroy calls "cultural syncretism." As a result, Canadian (sub)culture in urban centres is a configuration of the desires and articulations of a vast amount of people(s), from other places. As such, "elsewhere" is always present and needs to be accounted for.

I believe that the very notion of "elsewhere" as a static and knowable place has inhibited fruitful, radical work in the study of Canadian subcultures, and the study of subculture in general. Granted, the research put forth by the Birmingham School has established a "grammar" for thinking about subcultures, but various questions need to be asked.

First, why is the study of subculture framed within "local" or "national" contexts? Second, why are aesthetic articulations dismissed as "play," while overt gestures of working-class youth are understood as having "political" implications?

I shall begin my journey by taking what Rinaldo Walcott describes as a "detour" in the hopes that I can establish a "nomadology" of sorts. As part of this "nomadology," I shall put forth a case study of "Movement" (a monthly party at Roxy Blu), which will illustrate the complex shifts in Canadian subcultures.

By using Canada as the site and destination of this detour, I will illustrate the need for a reformulation of our observational strategies, so that we can better account for the social desires of (Black) Canadian youth and their various cultural "movements."



Detail from a flyer for "Movement," held monthly at Roxy Blu, Brant at King Street, Toronto.

The detour

One of many questions that must be asked is why is the study of subculture predominantly concerned with "political" implications and not "cultural" or "aesthetic" ones? Furthermore, why are "aesthetic" challenges seen as lacking "political" implications? And finally, would it not be more fruitful to see subcultural sites as a nexus wherein social actors perform, disrupt and protest the meaning in style (of performativity, of life)? As Michel de Certeau suggests, we are "walkers" and "voyeurs," we communicate not only with words but other forms of gestures that serve as "speech acts."

Movement: A case study

In October of 1998, I began attending a monthly party at Toronto's infamous Rivoli, called Movement (which later relocated to a larger venue, Roxy Blu). Movement is a configuration of various musical genres ranging from samba to afro-beat, alongside post-modern fusions of house with the rhythms of Brazilian and African musical forms.

The crowd is an ensemble of various social bodies that differ in their racial, ethnic, class, gender and sexual identifications. In spite of this barrage of "differences," the crowd manages to exist in relative harmony.

I was first informed about Movement though word of mouth, often the most reliable source of information about underground scenes. As a friend told me, "Movement is this new space where the DJs are playing this amazing African stuff." One glowing account from someone who knows my taste was all I needed. And I was not disappointed.

Upon entering, I immediately understood the underlying influences that gave birth to this new configuration. As an avid clubgoer of fourteen years, I was able to trace back the "syncretic" processes

that remained somewhat intact since the evolution of the underground house music scene(s) in Toronto in the mid-eighties.

House culture in the eighties was a highly syncretic space where Toronto youths (ranging from teens to those in their early thirties) could fashion "new" forms of identity and performance through clothing, styles of dance, as well as forms of bodily movement (proximity/distance). In effect it enabled "new" sets of relations between bodies.

The intertextuality of house music, fusing genres ranging from disco, gospel (ie, garage), hip-hop (hip-house), and salsa (salsa-house) enabled both access to and the reformulation of "blackness." In this sense, then, "blackness" was not performed (through gestures of signification) solely by black bodies. This is evident in the acceptance of "voguing" by both white and black men in the late-eighties Toronto house and gay subcultures.

The case of Movement differs from earlier subcultures only slightly. Movement is an attempt to form a new aesthetic of subcultural form, by offering styles of music that call the body to move in new and different ways. The motivation behind such a cultural "move" is twofold. First, a growing population of Toronto clubbers are listening to "world" musics in their everyday lives.

Second, this desire for the "outside" is not new; in fact, the "ambiguity" of house music and subculture provided the foundation for thinking of "other" worlds either "real" or "imaginary." As such, it affected the modality of young Canadian listening practices, as well as the manner in which they navigated social landscapes.

In my youth I too sought out "other" worlds, primarily because other available black musical subcultures did not speak to my divergent sense of "blackness." As a result, I can identify with the strategies employed by the Movement collective (DJs Jason Palma, Aki and A Man Called Warwick).

In this sense, Movement exists on a continuum of subcultural forms where the (sub)cultural logic is rooted in earlier subcultural

movements. Movement draws from both current subcultural trends, as well as "historical" ones, simultaneously. This is evident in the "revival" of afrobeat (championed by late Nigerian artist Fela Anikulapo Kuti), which was the sampling source of many tribal house tracks in the late eighties/early nineties.

Most important though, what is quite intriguing about Movement is the commitment to a plurality of "blacknesses." This is evident in the visual culture of Movement. Take for example the imagery of the flyers. The images range from a photograph of a DJ, a samba player and a trumpet player, wherein each image makes reference to a different black musical form, as well as different cultural contexts that exist both inside and outside Canada.

On the surface, the media strategies of the Movement flyers could be read as a marketing ploy that speaks to white audiences' consumption of "other" cultures and their "demands" for authenticity, but the critique should not stop there. The mere fact that the concept of a plurality of "blackness" is even intelligible to a multi-racial audience should be seen as a progressive turn of events.

Further to that, the current trend in appropriation of "other" cultures by Canadian youths poses a challenge to subcultural assumptions about cultural exchange. In multicultural urban centres, Canadian youth partake in, and learn about many cultures in their lifetime. As such, the "rituals" or "signs" of a given culture, once "sacred," are now subject to alternate meanings.

In the case of Movement, black gestures and articulations have multiple meanings, but in spite of this, "blackness" has a permanent presence. As a result, of the performativity of "blackness" has become a more complex form of communication because various "racial" or "ethnic" bodies utilize "blackness" (as a signifying gesture) in their subcultural articulations. This relationship is further complicated because this "blackness" is not only "local," it is also "outer-national."

Young Sole Rebels

Anyone who has observed the evolution of subcultures in Canadian urban centres (and I am speaking specifically about Toronto) must account for the dominant presence of black musical forms as a necessary component of club life. Whether we speak of the relationship between musical forms such as that of jungle to the rave scene, or house music to gay nightlife, "blackness" always has residency. Black music(s) and articulations are central to the consciousness of Canadian youth, and as such these musics provide the soundtrack for their everyday lives. This is evident in the increased sales of hip-hop records and "World" music to young consumers.

Canadian youth's access to "blackness" is enabled through various

technologies (community radio, music videos) and from cultural exchanges between social actors. A perfect example is the program "Sounds of Young London" on CKLN radio, which gave rise to a rare groove scene resembling the "soul boy" era of seventies London.

Indeed, these are just a few of the technologies that enable "blackness" as a cultural sign and style to permeate concepts of national, racial, as well as psychic boundaries. As a result, black performativity draws from various cultural artifacts and gestures in complicated ways that are often overlooked.

If we observe the prominence of "blackness" in subcultural forms as a totality rather than as isolated manifestations, what is inevitably revealed is that "blackness" is at the heart of what we might call a "Canadian identity."

This is evident in the bodily performances of Canadian youth who imitate the physical gestures (walking) of black rap artists, or the appropriation of black hairstyles (i.e., dreadlocks, otherwise known as "crusties"). Taking this further, the appropriation of "queer" aesthetic practices (i.e., blond hair, clothing) by dancehall participants suggests that the appropriation of cultural signs is not limited to "ethnicity."

What this new set of relations suggests to me (and this is a work in progress) is that we as cultural theorists need to rethink our positions. If subcultural forms are indeed forms of "signification," what kind of conversations are taking place? Who is speaking, to whom, and why? It is not my intention to interpret these new conversations at this time, I am merely suggesting that we must account for these shifts in subcultural exchange. As I envision it, this process must develop a "grammar" for thinking about Canadian blackness and should not assume that this blackness is either indigenous or foreign to Canadian social landscapes. Rather, it is part of a communicative flux that is diasporic, and at times intent on transgression.

Christopher Smith is a graduate student in Interdisciplinary Studies at York University.

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ISAAC JULIEN'S CHILDREN: BLACK QUEER CINEMA

AFTER *LOOKING
FOR LANGSTON*

by Rinaldo Walcott



Video still from *Welcome to Africville*, Dana Inkster, 1999, 15 min, 16 mm. Courtesy: V Tape, Toronto.

INTRODUCTION

Since 1989, black queer cinema has not been the same. Isaac Julien's *Looking for Langston* premiered in North America and black queer cinema was changed forever. *Looking for Langston* is a film about history, memory, the archive, sex, race and the fetish — I could go on. It is also a film about History, that is, with the big H: the history of the Harlem Renaissance and one of its most important figures: poet, lyricist, playwright and essayist Langston Hughes. *Looking for Langston* is not a film concerned with writing a “big H” History of either the Harlem Renaissance or Hughes, but rather refers to itself as a meditation. It is a meditation on the place of sexuality in the official history of the Harlem Renaissance and

more specifically a meditation on the place of queer sexuality in black diasporic cultures.

Langston Hughes's sexuality is invoked and cited in the film as what Michael Taussig would call a “public secret,” in an effort to delve into the confines of the black diasporic closet and to find what might be useful for a reconstructed black public memory, a black public memory that might take queer sexualities as constitutive of its imagined body politic.

In this sense the film is a search for the unknown of black queer desire and exposes that desire in a “poetic mediation” on an easily recognizable figure of an important historical period, to pry open the black closet and to open up the machinations of how the black closet works.

Looking for Langston is a film that constructs a black queer sensibility and community transnationally, challenging us to think about the ways in which the closet, memory and history work across a range of black diasporic and black national politics. The film is a black diasporic text, inaugurating a cinematic vision of what a black queer perspective might bring to the writing of the history of the black diaspora. *Looking for Langston* inaugurates a signal moment in black filmmaking that requires us to think carefully and closely about what is at stake when questions of sexuality are at stake in black public histories.

ISAAC JULIEN AS DADDY

Isaac Julien is a black British filmmaker whose work has been instrumental to contemporary independent black filmmaking and to black diasporic theorizing more generally. Julien made his most dramatic debut in North America with *Looking for Langston*, but before that, he had made a number of films that received wide critical acclaim in independent film circles. As a founding member of Sankofa Film and Video Collective, Julien made films like *Territories* (1984) and *The Passion of Remembrance* (1986), which showcased his hybrid avant-grade filmmaking practice and the ways he combined and worked through multiple cultural inheritances to produce an unsentimental and non-essentialist “black art.” This art is founded in the difficult relations of placing and articulating black diasporic people's complex place and position in the making of and the cultural politics of modernity and/or late or post-modernity. With *Looking for Langston*, Julien stood out as one of the most accomplished articulators of a black diasporic sociocultural presence in cinema. After *Looking for Langston*, Julien made a number of other groundbreaking films. In particular, *A Darker Side of Black* (1994), a study of misogyny and homophobia in rap music and dancehall, and two different versions of his controversial *Frantz Fanon: Black Skin White Masks* (1996) stand out in his oeuvre. Most recently his practice has moved into the art gallery scene, with a recent video installation housed at The Center for Curatorial Studies Museum, Bard College and the Studio Museum of Harlem. Julien also made the fictional feature-length film *Young Soul Rebels* (1991). He is often referred to as “Britain's preeminent black filmmaker.” In this scant assessment of Julien's career as a film artist, I hope to give some indication of the enormous influence that this Black British man of Caribbean descent has had upon black diasporic filmmaking. His influence extends beyond Britain as both filmmaker and as a teacher and lecturer.

The problem of nation and community — not to mention the lingering and in some cases continuing troubling

assertions of racial difference, and the ideology of what Paul Gilroy calls “raciology” — drives Julien's work and makes him an important black diasporic intellectual. Julien's film art has given birth to a black diasporic queer filmmaking whose engagement with rewriting histories moves beyond the sentimental and the simply nationalistic posture to inaugurate a more supple and subtle recounting of positionality within and across nations and communities. In short, Julien has helped to usher in a black diasporic cinematic archeology of knowledge. I'd like to address the work of at least two of Julien's children: *Watermelon Woman* (1997, US) by Cheryl Dunye and *Welcome to Africville* (1999, Canada) by Dana Inkster. In this essay, I look at the ways these films complicate history, memory and the official and public formations of communities and nations. These films engage an archeology of knowledge, which acts as a counter-narrative to normalized, mythic narratives of communities and nations.

Let me say that it is not surprising that Julien's children happen to be women. His critiques of masculinity and in particular black masculinities raise difficult questions that might position many men in a difficult place *vis à vis* a political identification with Julien's film art. That is, in essence, the importance of his work — no mere nationalist nor masculinist solidarities can be easily made; instead, points of political identification emerge and allow an articulation of political commitments, affiliations and potential solidarities. Julien offers a radical vision that could be used to envision a different kind of democratic future.

NATIONS AND DIASPORA

The films under discussion in this essay all take the local as their incitement to discourse. But they also take the outer-national or transnational as an important point of dialogue, constitution and engagement. This kind of positioning is characteristic of diasporic desires, identifications and politics. But to stop there would not be sufficient. It is the kind of politics, political identifications and affiliations to which these films lend themselves that I find most interesting and exciting. Each speaks to the locality of their perspective nations, and something more. Each takes incitement from an event, a debate, a political formation — and each engages with official histories, problematizing those histories and rewriting them or in some cases creating whole new histories. These films engage and articulate a cinematic archeology of knowledge, which reframes the ways in which we might think about blackness within the context of modern nation-states.

Diasporic positionalities in their encounters within the modern nation-state always represent a contradiction of

Video still from *Welcome to Africville*, Dana Inkster, 1999, 15 min, 16 mm. Courtesy: V Tape, Toronto.



sorts. Diasporic subjects are always looking beyond their respective nation(s) (if they have one) and simultaneously making demands of their nations. This contradiction is in effect one aspect of the condition of the diaspora. Diasporic desires for a nation-state always find those nation-states wanting, the boundaries restrictive. Yet nations offer possibilities from which a diasporic politics of political identification, affiliation and solidarity might be launched.

Isaac Julien's *Looking for Langston* and *The Attendant* (1993) both articulate relations to political formations taking place in black Britain and the wider black diaspora. These films react against the crystallization of black nationalist and Afrocentric politics that position black queer sexualities as anathema to a potential black liberation in a post-slavery world. Cheryl Dunye's *Watermelon Woman* and Dana Inkster's *Welcome to Africville* bring to the terrain of black public histories and memories the politics of lesbian desire and articulate its absented presence for a more ethical accounting of what black community might be.

In a war of position these films all call to attention the ways in which the crystallization of black identity politics in the 1980s and 1990s have foreclosed the possibility of articulating a range of black diasporic complexities — especially when sexual difference is at stake. But these films also speak to the tensions and problematics of representability in a world apparently more at ease with queers.

Thus, these films do not stop with merely an articulation of a counter-narrative to black communities and their histories. They show their solidarity and affiliations with political projects for the liberation of the subaltern of all kinds by explicitly engaging with the boundary-limits of modern nation-states. More specifically, each of these films takes up the place of black people and queers within their respective nations. Inkster's film is made within the context of the thirtieth anniversary of the destruction of Africville, Nova Scotia, a black settlement dating back to the 1800s. Reflecting upon what can only be characterized as state-sponsored and sanctioned racism, Inkster sheds new light on what other histories/desires and unspokens might have been

destroyed in the demolition of Africville. She commemorates blackness in Canada when the state does not.

Similarly, Dunye articulates how and why a search for an archetypal black lesbian in the US might not be sufficient for satisfying contemporary black lesbian desires for foremothers. Her search for Faye Reynolds, a minor black lesbian actor of the 1930's/40's, uncovers the deep, conflicting and disappointing encounters of the archives. Working against Spike Lee's masculinist interventions, Dunye articulates an inside/outside position that questions what makes history usable in relation to community desires. Both Dunye and Inkster cite Julien's film art in their work and in this respect they might be considered his cinematic children. These filmmakers question the blind spots and restrictive boundaries of community and national formations.

In *The Writing of History*, Michel de Certeau writes: "The nation is normalized into a society of orders arranged around a throne, which furnishes both its center and, as in a mirror, the possibility of self-representation." De Certeau is critical of this approach to nation as professional historians attempt to represent the nation to itself and its members. What is at stake is that the ability for any nation to self-represent is always founded on all kinds of violence. Isaac Julien's work has continually engaged the moment in the nation when it is incapable of replicating its mythic self-representation, its mirror image, as if it is ever possible, but particularly in relation to the black and the queer — yes, as types.

These types, the black and the queer, pose problems not only for nations, but also for the communities to which it is assumed they logically belong. In each of the films that I will discuss, the potential for self-representation is rendered null and void. What is at stake are the politics of political identifications, solidarity and a radical vision of a different present-future. These films take as their *mise en scene* something we might call with shorthand doubt: black and queer histories complicating the place of the "black queer" as a type within and across nations and within and across the black diaspora. These films obliquely, and in the case of Isaac Julien explicitly, engage the place of diasporic black peoples in the formation of the modern and in the idea of modernity.

CINEMATIC HISTORY LESSONS AND THE BIRTH OF GIRL CHILDREN

I believe that African American filmmaker Cheryl Dunye draws on Julien's radical vision of community in *Watermelon Woman*. *Watermelon Woman* is Dunye's first feature film after a number of shorter films. The film lends itself in interesting ways to what I call a diasporic reading practice.

A diasporic reading practice does not only decode and encode the diaspora in a text. Texts are also read for their repressions and disavowals of diasporic histories and consciousness, a kind of excavation. This is a reading practice informed by the peregrinations of an Atlantic consciousness — one that can tolerate the fact that what



Film still from *The Watermelon Woman*, Cheryl Dunye, 1997, 35 mm. Courtesy: First Run Features, New York.

is at stake in our reading of any text has much to do with our interactions within, across and outside our given localities, regions, nations and continents. It is an economy of reading that attempts to read for "blacknesses" and to understand how national and outer-national practices and desires inform our readings. But equally important, it is a reading practice that seeks to be transgressive in the contexts of any and all official readings of blackness. This reading is crucial to making sense of what I call the diasporic queer speaker. It is above all, however, a tentative and ambivalent reading.

Diasporic reading practices are both local and beyond the local. Such an insight means that we understand that the nation is not the only sign of belonging. There are other signs of belonging as well and a diasporic reading allows for uncovering and returning these other signs, spaces, places and sites of belonging within and beyond national belongings. One might argue that the transmission and circulation of various images within and outside nations is one habitus of diasporic belonging. How folks make use of these images locally, regionally and nationally is never the same. It is usually a repetition with difference, even when the difference is minor. It must be stated that diasporic belongings are not always lived and imagined as politically progressive — Afrocentrism is but one instance of this dilemma. *Watermelon Woman* beautifully and brilliantly enacts a much more progressive politics — while parodying black lesbian nationalism.

In *Watermelon Woman*, Dunye sets out to find Faye Richards, a black woman actor who played minor roles in some films in the 1930's/40's. She turns to the archives to find Faye and rescue a usable black lesbian history and hero. Not unlike Julien's *Looking for Langston*, history, fiction and the question of the archive is up for grabs in Dunye's film. Each of these films (Julien's and Dunye's) is a meditation on both the personalities they seek to find, but more importantly on the conceptual possibilities and limitations of memory, history, desire, pleasure and disappointment — not to mention the archive. These films are a celluloid irreverence to history as salvational.

To paraphrase Gates, who suggests, when you look for Langston in *Looking for Langston* you find Isaac, the same might be said for Dunye — you look for Faye and find Cheryl. The practice of meditating on history is not the only instance of Dunye's citation of Julien, as I will point out below. Both Dunye and Julien make the past touch the future. This is not done only to be pedagogical about the past, but rather to shed light on the past relation to the future and to pose the question of the "beyond." Their relation to history, both cinematic and otherwise, is to open things up in a flow of suggestive floats. Jacques Derrida in *Archive Fever* cautions us that we



Video still from *Welcome to Africville*, Dana Inkster, 1999, 15 min, 16 mm. Courtesy: V Tape, Toronto.

might always think of the archive as an opening rather than the end — these films achieve that moment of opening up.

I would suggest that Dunye's film is a quintessential diasporic artifact, or at least we can read it as such. The film might be said to screen a certain kind of diasporic consciousness. It is a film about the screened pain of History. But it is also a film about the lack of salvation in the historical narrative and the archive. Dunye returns to the archive to uncover Faye Richards's life and to turn Faye's story into a heroic narrative. Dunye plays herself, a filmmaker seeking to make a triumph documentary about Faye that would fill the space as a proud representation of a black lesbian foremother and inspire other black lesbians; a narrative that might be useful for contemporary black lesbian existence.

Instead, the archive — that bedrock of genealogical promise, the place where one trace leads to another and the possible fulfillment of some special promise — fails her. But all the archive can really offer us is the ability to play more carefully with another kind of trinity: history, memory and fiction. What then is at stake is desire — that "beyond the boundary" feeling. The Faye whom Dunye finds in the archives and in the speaking voice of Faye's last living friend cannot offer Dunye the kind of affirmation of a black lesbian nationalist existence because the character discovers that Faye was involved in an inter-racial love affair.

For a black lesbian nationalist politics, Faye cannot be role-modeled. Faye Richards was apparently romantically involved with the white woman director who made most of the films she appeared in. By uncovering this aspect of Faye's life Dunye is able to question black lesbian nationalist politics and to parody the search for foremothers and to problematize the discourse of role-modeling.

Dunye's film peels back the layers of history, memory and fiction to reveal a black lesbian desire. The possibilities for inventing, fabricating and literally processing the public scripts for black female life in Hollywood are laid bare in the process. As film and cultural critic Kass Banning puts it in *Borderlines*, "*Watermelon Woman* transforms the search mode into obsession and turns "truth" on its head-shaping desire into fiction." Diasporic celluloid history is not only obsessed with the lost person/persona but diasporic cinema is obsessed with the archive, as well. Here I think of Marlon Riggs' *Ethnic Notions and Color Adjustments*, and the less obvious *Black Is, Black Ain't* (where the metaphor of gumbo is in effect an archive).

These are some films that are in many ways occupied with the archives about and for black people. These films leave the archives open. One might say that a certain kind of archive fever is one of the transnational maladies effecting diasporic celluloid fantasies and desires. For black people to enter the archive is to enter the world of fiction. Which is really to enter history — because that is all black people really are — a fiction. It is no wonder that these films enact a hagiography, which bares traces to the real — but never produce or require closure.

Given this, there should be no surprise that Dunye's film is situated between a Spike Lee "joint" and an Isaac Julien "normal" film (the names of their production companies). Dunye cites Spike Lee in loving and critical ways. In the tradition of Lee as director/writer, she is an onscreen presence, resignifying the question of who gets to address us in cinematic speech acts. Her citation of Lee's *School Daze* is explicit. Her reference to Lee grounds her film in the locality of a certain (African) American or US cinematic politics and history and gestures to how her locality informs what kind of dialogue and conversation her cinematic tour will take. But the tour is not only national.

In fact, Dunye is involved in a transnational dialogue. Her citation of Julien and in particular her citation of *The Attendant* is an important diasporic signal. In a scene in the film which is quite contentious, Dunye must negoti-

ate between her friendship with two black women and her love affair with a white woman. Dinner sits on the brink of impending disaster. The citation of Julien here is interesting because he, more than any other queer diasporic filmmaker, has brought the question of inter-racial desire and the making of inter-racial queer community to our screens. In this particular scene the citation of Julien through a poster for *The Attendant* telescopes the difficult relations of the history of slavery, raciology and racism, alongside the complex dynamics of desire, intra-black dialogues and political formations across race, sex and politics.

Searching for Faye, Dunye, like Julien before her, found the interesting and complex politics of identity and community. The question of unmaking and making community is then central to the film and its mode of address to its audience. These films bring with them no romance or sentiment, no heroic histories — easy affirmation is out. The discourse of family and its various metaphors are dysfunctional. The unworking of community and the simultaneous struggle to make community is front and center as an ethical demand.

The confrontation with what sort of community, and at the expense of what, is forged through the difficult history and memory of diasporic black peoples' insertion into modernity as what Paul Gilroy has termed the counterculture of modernity. Thus, questions of how to make community remain crucial for black diasporic peoples because the ideals of modernity remain an unfinished project for them. In short, liberty and freedom remain beyond the reach of many black diasporic people. It is a confrontation with the ways in which discourses of history form and make bodies and thus communities, that the debate concerning cross-racial desire and attraction in a film like *Watermelon Woman* offers such a poignant signifier of the complexities of making transracial community in the late modern period.

However, these filmmakers have an ability to return life's representation in complex and resisting ways, moving beyond painful cultural moments and rendering those moments useful for thinking about the ways in which black peoples lives remain meaningful and joyous without sinking into the depths of its pain and victimhood. In fact, Dana Inkster's *Welcome to Africville*, which remembers the thirtieth anniversary of the destruction of one of black Canada's oldest communities founded in the 1800s by ex-African Americans is exemplary of this dilemma.

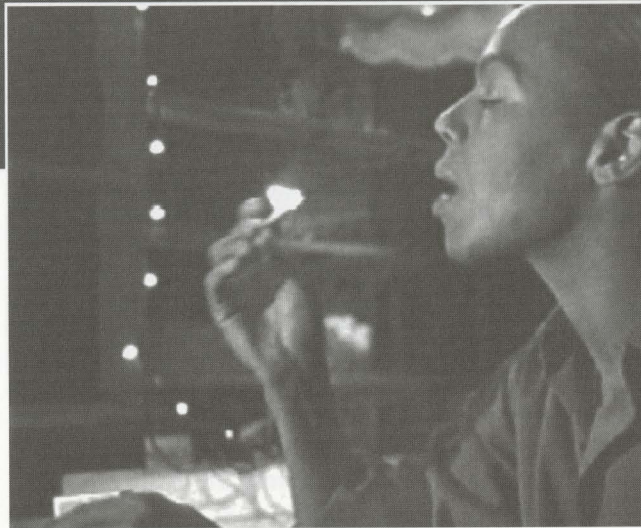
The narrative of the destruction, or rather the interruption in the narrative of the destruction and dispersal, is told through three generations of Dixon women and a male bartender. These actors do not tell the why of the

destruction — they refuse to do so — they tell the why of their sexual practices, desires, disappointments, pleasures and adventures, as well as their loss. The grandmother (Anna Dixon) tells of a strong desire to have what she calls a "numb love," being too old for anything else. Her daughter (Dusty Dixon) tells of her sexual adventures in the big city and her fantasies — "a big lust," as Dionne Brand would put it. And the granddaughter (Mary Dixon) tells of the possibility of finding love. The bartender (Julius Johnson) details the possibility of finding love too, with a commentary on masculinity. Some of the images in the video — archival footage of the demolition of the community — tell the story of the Canadian state's racist action. The actors' stories arrive through an off-screen interviewer's attempt to gather response to the impending demolition. The video opens with these lines: "Yes they making us move...but I don't want to talk about that...history will tell the story."

This is an interesting refusal of history because it is not a refusal at all. It is rather an insightful and revealing way of moving to the other side of the story — the unspoken of history. The characters in the video tell the story of a black history of erotics often demolished in heterosexist acts parallel to those of racist acts. The characters tell of love, loss and desire, defying what kind of history and what history can tell as a necessary part of black community.

One of the ways in which communities make sense to themselves and to others is through various narratives of history. These narratives, often contested from both within the community and without, offer a basis from which some kind of common conversation might be conceived even if different political positions are at stake. It is the history of Africville and what might be at stake in the writing of its history, how it might be remembered and how its memory might be put to use and in the name of what politics its memory might be put to use that Inkster's *Welcome to Africville* opens up and simultaneously troubles. Hers is a radical renarrativizing of the black pain that the destruction of Africville represents. And in this radical renarrativizing she asks us to not only remember differently but to remember what has not yet been represented in our memory of the destruction. How can Africville's destruction help to us to remember, and maybe even acknowledge the active presence of black lesbian erotics and desires in the Canadian context?

What makes Inkster's video insightful and provocative is not only its complex layering of the writing of history but the way in which Inkster queers the history of Africville, making something queer happen to viewers and forever extending the narrative of what other evidences and memories have been destroyed by its demolition. But the



Video still from *Welcome to Africville*, Dana Inkster, 1999, 15 min, 16 mm. Courtesy: V Tape, Toronto.

video also opens up the place of hope to reimagine and to narrativize into that now-open space all of our various losses, desires and memories (for, after all, Africville is now a public park).

Inkster tells the story of Africville through the voices of at least two generations of black women who love other women. Anna Dixon, played by Kathy Imre of *Shaft's Big Score*, is the grandmother. Me'shell Ndegeocello, the African American musician, composed and performed the original bluesy, soulful musical score. The video brings together a cast of black diasporic players to tell a national story of pain and loss, which not only gestures to the historical dispersal of black folks across US borders — before and after Africville — but echoes further across the black diaspora. The video participates in a rather large project — a project of diasporic desires and connections — but is still able to productively engage its local context, to call for a national accounting. It is a product that, through fiction, is able to complicate the historical record of blackness. By telling the now sacred story of Africville through the eyes of black lesbians, Inkster creates the opportunity for reflecting differently on historical context and memory, and not only what is remembered, but who gets to remember and how. She tells the sex of memory. Hers is a queer memory with much significance for interrupting the not-quite-citizenship of blacks and queers, of black queers, not to mention the deeply fraught gendered making of modern communities and nations and the histories they write of themselves.

Welcome to Africville not only cites *Shaft* by having Kathy Imre play a part in the film. It also cites *Shaft* in its cinematic style. Some of the shots mirror and copy the still

photography that is associated with *Shaft*. In this way Inkster is willing to engage in a conversation with popular culture in her imaginative history lesson. This challenging approach to representing and re-presenting history is important because I believe that Inkster might be read as attempting to connote all the ways in which historical and cultural texts are read, often through the popular, and importantly how historical and cultural events take resonance in our lives — how we remember and make use of memory — through the popular.

This then is a cinematic writing of history that attempts to place black Canadian pain as an instrumental part of the popular cultural imagination. The video confronts us with the dilemma of what we want to remember and what we don't want to remember. In this way the references and citations of *Shaft* might be understood as a strategy designed to call to mind what it is possible to remember about black North American culture. The place of the black popular is secure in North American culture, but what about the conditions that give rise to those now commodified black popular expressions — like, for example, the music of *Shaft*?

By citing and directly engaging with the style of a popular film like *Shaft* Inkster is not just dabbling in the current trendy citations of the seventies, as in some other quarters, but rather grappling with the difficult politics of what often becomes acceptable memories of black life in North America and Canada more specifically. The kinds of ghettos that the superhero *Shaft* protected are supposed to not have existed in Canada. But just suppose that Africville had survived into the seventies — what would this black community with no running water, electricity or sewage facilities mean? Would it have spawned its own homegrown Shaft-type superhero?

Additionally, the video also takes its immediate influences from Isaac Julien and Marlon Riggs's meditations on history and black queerness. Inkster is however closer to Julien than Riggs in the subtlety of her cinematic styling — her shots are posed like photographs, tableaux — much like *Looking for Langston* and *The Attendant*. Importantly, she is among a group of black les-

bian artists returning to the archives and opening up the archives in challenging ways. The black queer living-dead is being placed to rest with cinematic love and care. These queer cinematic returns and departures are forcing new kinds of questions concerning nations and diasporic connections. At the same time, these returns make something queer happen to all of us. In many ways, *Welcome to Africville* is in conversation with Cheryl Dunye's *Watermelon Women* and Julie Dash's *Daughters of the Dust*. At the same time it engages the many documentaries chronicling Africville's demolition and moves away from them to bring a different or queer look to black Canadian historiography. In addition, Inkster's video art fixes a black lesbian feminist gaze on critical cinematic diasporic representations, in particular the chronicling of black queer histories that have been overwhelmingly male in cinematic presentation.

In this regard, *Welcome to Africville* shares much in common with Cheryl Dunye's *Watermelon Woman*. Both films take history and fictionalize it so that history's possible truths might be better revealed. *Watermelon Woman* takes as its central concern the missing scripts of black lesbian life and attempts, through an imaginative and creative rewriting, to credit that history — even if the credit can only come in its most factual form in the credits of the fictional film; that is, when viewers get Faye Richards actual biography. It is this concern with the tactility of history that Inkster's film shares with Dunye's. Inkster is only able to tell the absence of a presence of black lesbian desire by imagining and creating it as the central thematic of a much better known history of black victimization. By so doing Inkster is able to reveal something to us about the ways in which memory, history and a vehicle like cinema can shape and fashion how we remember and write history and importantly what from those narratives remain meaningful for us. The importance of how we remember and what we remember is crucial for how we engage and read various narratives of history and what we are willing to see and ask of those various histories.

In fact, it is reported that when Inkster's video was screened in Halifax, Nova Scotia, it was a shock to some of the homegrown audience. The audience was apparently aghast that the sacred story of Africville would be fictionalized and told through the eyes of at least two lesbians. Because Inkster refused epistemological respectability by refusing to represent the wound as only the loss of property, collective respect of black folks by white folks, and therefore as evidence of black victimhood, her video was a shock to some. Instead, Inkster's erotics of loss can provoke a different possibility of encountering the demolition of Africville. Africville becomes symbolic of all that is loss/lost when history

forecloses certain kinds of knowledge, especially queer queries and feminists queries concerning the past and what David Scott calls the "changing present." These queries do not only return, recover and correct, but they tell a cautionary tale opening up new "problem-spaces" that can act to effectively allow for a more politically inflected changing present that is in accord with the continued ambivalent and ambiguous nature of nations and their citizen-making projects. Even as nations give way to various forms of citizenship influenced by the latest moments of globalization, black people in the Atlantic zone specifically continue to be in precarious relation to older versions of citizenship. And yet black people are also fully aware of the fluidity of citizenship since we, more than any others, seem always to be written out and written into our nation.

CONCLUSION

These films pose ethical questions about the writing of history. Because they engage the desire for community and its limits, these films require viewers to engage explicitly with the terms of how they understand community, history, memory and a usable past. By forcing us out of a certain complacency about community and nation, each of these films asks that we inhabit the space that Stuart Hall has called new ethnicities. Hall, in a discussion of *The Passion of Remembrance*, argues that these kinds of works produce a "deep ambivalence of identification"; they are, in effect, disturbing. But working through this ambivalence might produce something beyond the cozy bond of assumed sameness.

These films force us to read contrapuntally within and across the communities and nations we assume we inhabit and those that others, logically or not, believe we belong to. This contrapuntal reading fashions a politic, I believe, that brings us into close proximity with what Homi Bhabha has called the third space. Bhabha's third space is an enunciative space bearing some of the qualities that Foucault discusses in relation to how enunciation works discursively in the formation of the subject. These films aid in the production or enunciation of new subjects or subjectivities, and thus to fashion new selves that are the outcome of the just relations of late modern ideals of equality and rights. Or as Bhabha hopefully puts it via a reading of Wilson Harris: "It makes it possible to begin envisaging national, anti-nationalist histories of the 'people.' And by exploring this Third Space, we may elude the politics of polarity and emerge as the others of our selves."

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MISS RUBY USED TO WORK FOR A WHITE LADY ON FIFTH AVENUE. SHE TOLD MAMA THAT ONE DAY SHE HEARD THE DINNER GUESTS TALKING ABOUT HER AND SHE HEARD THE WORD NIGGER. SHE COUGHED UP A BIG WAD OF PHLEGM AND MIXED IT INTO THE FOOD SHE WAS ABOUT TO SERVE.



kathak

the Classic Indian Art Form: Renuka Sooknanan Speaks with Joanna Das

Joanna Das has been receiving a great deal of attention for her work and interpretation in the classic Indian dance genre of kathak. On Monday May 14, I interviewed Das at her studio.



Joanna Das performs Kathak, classical dance from North India. Photo: Paul Till. Courtesy: NOW Magazine.

Renuka Sooknanan: Maybe we can start with a brief history of your particular dance form.

Joanna Das: Kathak is the classical dance form from North India, which actually takes its name from the word “katha” which means “a story.” Kathak is one of the seven major classical dance styles that come out of India and they are all regionally based. There are a number of different varieties from the South, but Kathak’s strongest hold is in the North. However, now with the more modern generations it is going all over the country. You can easily study Kathak in South India as well, which is something quite particular to this more connected generation, I think. But the art form itself has its roots in the temple, as did most of them as a form of devotion bhakti, which is devotion or a means of reuniting with the divine through dance. The whole premise of Indian dance in general, and it certainly translates into Kathak as well, is the religious. At least most people understand it this way.

RS: That’s the sense I have.

JD: Well, yes, and you wouldn’t be wrong. Actually more than being religious, I would say it is profoundly spiritual, the idea being that it’s the body dancing on the earth for reunion with the divine as I mentioned, and it can take many different shapes and form. We have these ideas that in North India it was all one homogenous thing or in South India it was again homogenous. Actually it was quite different. Each temple in the older days acted almost like a community centre for the village or the town and had its own particular culture. There were crossovers that would be similar, but in the early days each temple would have had parts of its own repertoire — maybe it would be to a particular deity — and so most of the activity and dance that would happen within that temple would be focused on that deity. I found that most interesting when I was doing research some years ago because you have this modern-day perspective that North India is North India, but of course it makes sense if villages were quite isolated that they would develop their own particular slant on the culture. The art form, I’m sure, reflected that. One of the things that makes Kathak quite different than the other classical forms that come out of India is that the people who were practitioners of Kathak were actually mostly male as opposed to devdasi, the female. They actually were known as kathakars or “storytellers.” At some point, somewhere around the tenth century, these storytellers moved out of the temple and their practice became more of a means of reenacting dance dramas about the Ramayana or the Mahabharat, the major epics that are morally based stories. They are about giving people, from an oral tradition, a really morally based way to live their lives.

RS: So Kathak is very much a narrative device then?

JD: In certain elements. All of the classical dance forms in India have three main elements: one is called nrit. Nrit is pure or abstract dance or movement with no particular meaning; then there is nritya, which is pure or abstract dance mixed in with some type of sentiment. An example of that could be, perhaps dancing to some poetry or perhaps a song where what you would do in-between is a lead into pure dance passages; then the third element is called natyam, which means “dramatic expression.” This is where you would have the full storytelling element. Kathak dance is a solo tradition, so you would be expected within the storytelling to play and portray all the different characters. We have a device, it’s called a palta (Joanna demonstrates the movement), and that’s when you change character. That is something when I am talking to an uninitiated audience I usually tell them, because it really helps in terms of following the storyline. Certainly musicians and people in India would be familiar with that.

RS: Why don’t you talk a little about your studies: where you trained and with whom.

JD: Yes, but I want to finish one more thing. When the kathakas moved out of the temples, they were nomadic, they were like traveling minstrels. They developed the form still working in its folk tradition and its devotional and spiritual tradition, they utilized and developed forms of kathak to tell stories and myths of the time. There is a very interesting social structure to all these artists. You can imagine, here we are in 2001 trying to survive in some arts field and we see how we are marginalized. Well, it was exactly the same then. To a certain degree there was patronage, but they would have been nomadic people and they utilized this form and developed this form to speak to lay people. As a non-Indian, for me, kathak was the first dance form that I saw (and I’ve now seen hundreds of performances, all of them many times over) and I have to say, Renuka, that kathak is the only one that I would have ever really felt that I could do.

RS: Is there a kind of politically nuanced moment in kathak?

JD: Certainly there can be, because kathak has an ability within its storytelling to tell any kind of story. You can certainly use it as a venue for political maneuvering. It is hard to document all of this, but my feeling is that a lot of these traditional compositions that are handed down from guru to shishyas (who are called shishyas disciples —there is this whole transferral called guru shishya-parampara, which is the one-on-one transferral of knowledge from the guru to the shishyas and the taking on of

that and the development of that relationship) — I'm sure that those people who were politically in a higher position are the ones whose compositions have been maintained today. So what happened with kathak is these bands of minstrels called kathaks moved out and they began to perform the art form to the lay people. Again it is political inasmuch as the only people who were allowed inside the temple were the Brahmins and they would have been the people with the knowledge. They would have been literate, understood all the use of mudras, and held the power in the community. And of course it went all the way down to the Untouchables. If you just cast a shadow on a Brahmin or his son you would be killed in the old days. It was desperate what was going on in the Hindu cast system, the hierarchy.

This is what led me into talking about the idea that because kathak was projected out to the lay people we do use mudras and hand gestures, but it is not nearly as codified. Kathak seems, from my perspective, in terms of the rhythms, the expression and the whole dramatic story line, to be much more human and understandable than esoteric. That's one thing, the second thing is, starting in the 12th century, the Munguls and the moguls started coming into North India and for a three hundred year period they ruled the north. That is what initially brought Islam to India. As they set up their darbars, the mogul courts throughout the North of India, these kings or nawabs, became patrons of the arts. They also brought their music, their dance movement and their sense of aesthetics and art with them. What you see in North India today, in terms of the architecture (the onion-shaped domes, gardens, sense of symmetry), most of that is Persian and Muslim influence — initially Persian. The reason I bring this up is that when they set up these courts as the leaders of the country, they became not only supporters of the arts — patrons within the court structure — but also kathak, as it was, became bombarded by all these different influences and actually absorbed them. So kathak is the only classical dance form that has as strongly the Hindu pranam, both hands together in front of the heart, and the Muslim salam. This is all reflected in styles of composition, costuming and storyline content.

RS: Do you want to return to where you studied?

JD: Yes, but I wanted to bring your audience these historical ideas. My guru is from Calcutta, originally. His name is Chitresh Das. I saw a performance of two of his students in 1977 in San Francisco at an outdoor venue (that is where my guru lived, in the Bay Area). I was there visiting friends for what I thought was going to be a week, and I ended up staying for ten years. It spoke to me, let's put it that way.

RS: What was it that fascinated you and grabbed your

attention with kathak that made you stay in San Francisco for ten years?

JD: Yes, I knew nothing about India. My background was in music, I had been studying music since I was five, I was a classical piano player and then I picked up jazz guitar and flute, and I sang a lot in different choirs. Music and figure skating was my background. I had taken no dance classes as a child, but just prior to going to California, I had taken an Afro-Brazilian dance class. I was living in Victoria, B.C., at the time for about two months before going to California. I really felt that I wanted to study dance but I had no idea what kind. Then I saw kathak in this performance, and I was most taken by the communication between the dancer and the musicians.

RS: That there is a relationship existing there is most interesting to me.

JD: Yes, it is not just fixed, set music. You still play, very much in the solo tradition, this role of kathakar, not only to just tell stories, but to translate that into a bigger picture where your "job" is to take the audience on a journey through the art form. You are, as a soloist, in control and the musician's role is to support you. You make the choices in the dance...

RS: Oh, really, I always thought that the musicians would be commanding what you would be doing in the dance, almost as a way of instruction...no? I guess it's just the opposite?

JD: No, it depends, within the flow of the concert. I would be demanding it, the musician would be demanding it and it would work together to see where it could take us.

RS: But there is a specific kind of language, or grammar that happens in the dance.

JD: Well, there is a spoken language for both forms, for both musician and for dancers. Ritesh, for example [Ritesh Das, a musician and tabla player of extraordinary talent and styling, was once Joanna's marriage partner] has a spoken vocabulary for all the different strokes that happen on the drums and a whole lineage of fixed compositions, what we call traditional fixed compositions.

RS: And does that happen in dance as well?

JD: Oh yeah. Every single step I dance I can speak.

RS: So, it acts like a kind of instruction then?

JD: Oh, yes, absolutely. One starts off, day one, learning

the basic bols, and bols comes from the verb bolana, which means to speak. So the bols can be one word like ta, or it can be an entire composition, it is still a bol.

RS: So, if you said "ta" to your students, they would know what you meant?

JD: Yeah, they would all step on their right foot.

RS: One of the things that I wanted to ask you was...

JD: I didn't speak to you about my studies so much, but it is really important. Can I, really quickly? I began studying in September 1977, danced two days a week for about a year and then moved into a class where I was going five days a week, from 10am to 1pm, Monday to Friday. Plus I was doing some evening classes and traveling around with my guru. By 1981, I was married to Ritesh. Chitresh Das is my guru and Ritesh is his younger brother. There are only two siblings in the family, two sons, Ritesh and Dada (I call him Dada, which means older brother.) Basically, I did anything to support my dance habit. Odd jobs; I'm a Canadian and I didn't have work status, so, I basically did what I could do, in an under-the-table capacity, to support my dance studies.

Studying with Dada, he is a real disciplinarian — incredibly caring and gifted but he demands that you get a sense of the culture with the art, that they can not be separated. There is an intense protocol that one follows. So I have been given — I've come to realize this in the past 23 years — huge gifts, in terms of having a sense of the culture, the dance culture. I went to India for the first time in 1985. When I got off the plane it felt like I was going home. I felt totally comfortable with the culture, how to move culturally in the country. It was fresh and different.

RS: Did you know the spoken language?

JD: I speak some Bengali now, I didn't then. I understand a lot more than I can speak. You know, Dada says an amazing thing, which is absolutely true, "I don't really care how you dance, I care how you walk into the room, how you react to me, how you react to the other people." If that's in line, your dance will automatically follow. For him, without a doubt, it is his way of life, his spiritual way of life. And there are two of us, myself here in Toronto and Gretchen Hayden in Boston. Gretchen has been studying almost 29 years with him and we have schools and we are the two people, two disciples. We've actually tied ghana with him, and we didn't do it straight off the top, we actually did it after twenty years, we did it three years ago on the banks of the river Ganga in Calcutta, with a special puja ceremony.

RS: So, you studied in India then?

JD: I studied in California but Ritesh's mother and father lived in Calcutta, so when we were married, we went and lived in Calcutta for two years. And I did all my theoretical studies there, I got my master's degree. I danced everyday, and I had a very firm basis in the practical movement of kathak rhythmic composition. What I gained there was amazing because Ritesh's dad, who is now deceased, was a renowned dance scholar. He became my theory mentor. He spent two years preparing me theoretically to be able to write the examinations required to do my master's degree and then the other part of that was a practical where I had to dance for an hour in front of examiners, and also have them fire questions at me.

RS: So you finished your studies in India or did you come back....

JD: I'm still studying. I bring my guru here every year and I go to California a couple of times a year. It is a lifelong relationship, it doesn't end, because as he develops through his artistry, he then shares that with me and in a



Joanna Das performs Kathak, classical dance from North India. Photo: Paul Till. Courtesy: NOW Magazine.

small way, it's vice versa. I've come here and done my own creative ideas and I've done my little additions to kathak. In the classroom there are certain boundaries I will never cross with him because he is my guru ... but we also have a really honest heart-to-heart relationship and you know, Renuka, I could call him anytime, anywhere and he would do whatever he could for me. I am so blessed.

RS: You mentioned something in passing about your imaginings, your new shifts, contemporary shifts in kathak, can you talk a bit more about this?

JD: Yes. That happened very early on for me when I came back to Canada. The first thing that happened when I came back here was that I started realizing that here I was, an outsider really, in some terms. You know, I'm more comfortable with the Indian culture than a lot of Indians. I went to Gerrard Street last night for example and I asked for some parthchuttie, I wanted to buy some stuff, and I hear this woman saying "oh, she wants to buy some parthchuttie"...and I just think it is so sweet. Because how do you expect them to feel otherwise, like I'm a blonde white girl for goodness sake, they don't need to know my history. And I can either walk around with a chip on my shoulder which doesn't further anything for me, or I can look at it realistically and say there is no reason in the world why you should assume anything else than I've just read a few books.

But when I came back to Canada, I realized that really what speaks of this land is the Aboriginal culture. So my first project, my first foray into more contemporary collaboration was a piece that I did in 1990 called "Medicine Wheel." I wanted to see the similarities between the whole idea of the cycle of life and the influences in East India and the Native culture. That was an interesting foray, little white girl Joanna shows up at the Native Centre on Spadina, and the doors shut, three or four times... "You do what? From East India...no we can't help you" that kind of thing. Finally I met one woman, who turned me on to two actors and I was at Harbourfront where I met Sadie Buck, who is a sixth generation Longhouse traditional singer from Brantford, Ontario and she was doing something with the Earth Spirit Festival. I approached her and spoke about my project and asked her whether she would sing with me and she responded "yes" without a second thought. And I asked if she wanted to see what I do, and she said, "no, I'll sing, you do." Once I got to the real people instead of the Centre, the bureaucracy, they were very, very open. So that was my very first experience, I got a tiny grant that helped me go into the recording studio.

You know, I'm not really into spoofing the Bollywood culture. I don't know much about it, I'm not a pop culture person. I watch Indian films but not that much. I

don't know any of the CDs or the film scores...I think to be involved in pop culture you kind of need to have that from the time you are a kid, and it just doesn't turn me on. So my slant on what I do in terms of contemporary work is much more tangible, day-to-day like the kinds of situations which prompted *Urban Rhythms*. Ritesh used to be a photographer and we wanted to put a calendar together "Mornings Around the World." Because morning here is what? The alarm clock, the radio, the coffee machine, you're up, you're in the car. Morning in India is going out to the tea stalls, watching and hearing them serve the tea. Where we were there was this one guy that bought a newspaper and read aloud to seven of his friends under a tree right outside our window everyday. For two years I witnessed this, and I was blown away by the different ways to start a day. *Urban Rhythms* came out of that initially. I wanted it to depict the various ways, here, that people move through the morning and for it to have humour.

RS: So, do you see yourself as a pioneer, pioneering these different shifts which are happening in kathak?

JD: Yes. By my simple existence I am a pioneer. Previous to this generation there were no white kathak dancers in North America teaching Indian dance. There may have been some practitioners in Europe earlier on in past generations, but we are definitely pioneers. The fact that Indian dance is now hitting the mainstream, we're all pioneers whether we're of Indian descent or otherwise. Anybody in this generation is doing something that no other generation did before. Basically what happened before is that people would come on tour and perform for an Indian audience and the odd white person would go for a little cultural experience. But now, all the classical Indian dance forms are right up there and contemporary expressions of them are right up there in any dance festival anywhere, so we are all pioneers in that way. I feel like I am definitely a pioneer in terms of exemplifying the philosophy. And by bringing as much integrity as you can to the study of an art form you can transcend culture. You can transcend your own cultural background. But it isn't something that happens with a few short lessons or in a few short months or even a few short years. After 23 years now, many of the things Dada said to me back then are ringing in my head.

I feel totally Western. People ask me, "Are you Hindu?"... "No" ... "Oh, are you Muslim?" ... "No" ... "What are you?" ... "I'm a little bit of everything." I say I'm a dancer and they look at me a little weird.

RS: What is your relationship to the audience?

JD: First of all, I absolutely love to perform and I love kathak. My relationship with the audience, I think, is a

very natural one for me. I just decided a long time ago that I'm not going to try to be an Indian, or dance like an Indian. I'm not interested. I have my own voice. I'm just going to do what I love to do, and dance and be me. But one of the things that I do try to do in performance is give the odd marker for people to get a basis for what it is they are seeing. Because, I've also come to realize that people don't have a clue. And the feedback that I've gotten is... "I've seen Indian dance all my life and I actually understood something today."

RS: So do you take moments in the performance to talk and address the audience?

JD: I do, absolutely. That's a major role of the storyteller, I believe. Traditionally we would recite composition and then render them in movement so the whole vocalization is a part of it. But also, I just love talking, very naturally, to an audience.

RS: Do you think your audiences have any expectations of you?

JD: Oh, I'm sure they probably do. I would think that there would be a real curiosity at first.

RS: Have you ever danced for all Indian audiences?

JD: For sure. I toured India four times.

RS: How do you think those expectations differ from an audience here in Toronto?

JD: Toronto is a very unique place. Torontonians are very well educated. I feel when I perform here it is as Joanna the dance practitioner. I would hope for the most part that the fact that I am non-Indian has ceased to be an issue.

RS: Do you think it continues to be an issue?

JD: I think there are certainly groups, particularly, if I might say, that there are some very well educated, really intelligent younger South Asian people who feel that I am privileged and therefore am taking the potential place of somebody because they are of colour and less privileged than I. I see that as a total crock. When that was presented to me once, a couple of years ago, I said "if I have chosen to be a kathak dancer in my life what is the privilege I sought the first time when I was twenty? What's the privilege in that? What is the privilege that everywhere I play this pioneering role as a non-Indian in this art form... what's the privilege in that?" They seem to think I had "ins" into particular arts councils, but you know what, that's not the case.

RS: What else do you say to your critics?

JD: I say that I was studying this art form ten years before the term "cultural appropriation" was even invented and I'm not on vacation here.

RS: How do they react?

JD: With more respect, I think, particularly after they see me dance. They may think I'm complete crap, but they have to feel my sincerity. If I were to be a folk dancer or a Bollywood dancer, that's a very different thing, because what that is, is totally integrated into a culture, a broad spectrum of the Indian culture. Classical culture is a culture all of its own...classical art has always been for the select few, it's never been something for the masses. And because of that, with its codified set of rules and its codified way of studying presentation, I think it's much easier to get a window in on that. I mean no one says a darn thing when Yo-Yo Ma plays Bach. I actually think that is because it's a Western art form and there is still this political superiority that goes on, that if he had chosen to do a Western art form, yes, he could do it, but it is a Western art form.

These are classical art forms, but kathak has a particular informality in its rapport with an audience. It's very important; we have fixed composition but we don't traditionally come out on stage, dance a fixed item, leave, come out, dance a fixed item. You come out on stage and you are there. You take the audience on a journey through all the aspects of the art form. From the beginning what's called a shtiki, or prayer, whether it be a pranam or a shloka to Ganesh, right through to the end. And traditionally, you would not leave the stage. So, for me, my presentation on stage is as a classical dancer, but I feel my presentation is quite informal, because I am not interested in becoming someone other than myself.

RS: Was it difficult for you to tap into Indian audiences?

JD: No.

RS: Did you find Indian audiences to be accepting?

JD: Well, it's hard to be general. But I have had so few bad experiences.

RS: I wanted to talk a little about choreography.

JD: My choreography is thematically based. It gives me an anchor from which to direct the movement. I use almost exclusively traditional kathak vocabulary, I very rarely go outside my traditional vocabulary, but it is such a varied vocabulary that I don't really feel that I have to at this point. That may change.



Photo of Joanna Das, Paul Till.
Courtesy: NOW Magazine.

I really like upliftment. I like to make people feel happy. I feel that there is enough angst out there in the world that I am not interested in doing something heavy, women's issue kind of stuff. I'll dance and support myself at any fundraiser for women's issues and I've done hundreds of them and I will continue doing political forums, things that I stand behind, ecology days, whatever. Gladly, but at this point, I like beauty.

RS: I wrote a piece in FUSE about mendhi and how it has become exoticized. Do you think kathak, Indian dance, is becoming exoticized here in the diaspora?

JD: I actually think the movement is quite the opposite. I think that in the '60s and '70s it was much more exotic. As I said, there are a ton of really talented young people doing classical forms and well trained in classical forms, expressing things that are vital to them as young people growing up here. As they move out into mainstream dance venues and festivals it becomes less and less exoticized. This I think is a good thing, because exoticism can be a real hiding place.

RS: When you encountered the dance, was there a part of you that exoticized it?

JD: You know I've questioned that in myself a lot, but I am a real tactile kind of person. It was a joyous thing. I certainly felt the depth. I learned a lot of what I know about kathak in the kitchen, chopping onions with Dada. No, and Dada doesn't think it is exotic. I am a kathak dance teacher and it's my way of life and it can be for anybody.

RS: So your students are very ethnically diverse

JD: Oh, I've got all parts of the world in my studio. I was quite taken aback though when I first started teaching here and I taught out in Scarborough and all my students were Indian. I was terrified. I have two white students in my class in Scarborough out of 60.

RS: I know that you have collaborated with people in the past like Esmeralda. What does that do to choreography when you collaborate outside of kathak?

JD: Well, kathak and flamenco share a root. We really appreciate each other's dance. What inspired us was a piece of music that students mutually came up with. It ended up in two full evenings of works, over three years. We were able to work in such a way that neither of us felt that we were compromising our styles in any way. We were nominated for a Dora Award, the music was nominated for a Juno. CBC is doing a documentary on us in the fall. People who saw us, freaked out. We knew our collaboration worked for us, we knew it worked well, but we were bowled over by the response to working together. Women in particular said, which I feel is interesting, that we "like seeing the two of you out on the stage completely supportive of each other."

RS: Talk about your own personal teaching style.

JD: My personal teaching style is very much influenced by my guru. It is about discipline. But I am my own person. People call me Joanna-gi. When students come in to the studio, they bow to the room, we burn incense, we sing shlokas. My style is hard working, I think, supportive and professional. I also bring my guru here every year for workshops. So they see my dedication to the art form. When Dada is here, my students know to follow my lead. It can seem intimidating. I'm taking 15 students to California in June. We are performing at Dada's school and then we will be on a four-day kathak retreat.

RS: What do you see as your primary relationship to your students?

JD: Role model. Inasmuch as kathak is my vehicle, it doesn't necessarily need to be theirs. But I feel very strongly that whatever you choose to do in your life that you need to be very passionate about it. You need to be

dedicated, and you need to go through the rough times and hold fast to the centre. I also hold fast to the idea that if something else came along and swept me off my feet, I would go ahead and do it. I don't feel attached to kathak in that way. Kathak has been a huge learning tool for me and continues to be and it's a vocabulary and an art form that I just simply adore. And students who have walked through my door and have come into my life are some of the most amazing people...I feel very blessed.

RS: When your students leave the studio, what is it that you want them to take away?

JD: Joy, joy and a feeling of accomplishment and self-acceptance. There are too many people out there who are overly critical of themselves, and that doesn't serve any purpose. I'm quite nurturing. I make people work hard. I was used to being screamed at. I give people a rough time, but I do it much more subtly. I wouldn't scream at them, I may make them feel guilty for not knowing their work. I say, "how much patience am I really supposed to have and how many weeks do I have to go over this work with you before you find it important enough to learn it?" That would be my lecture style.

RS: How supportive are you of that student who is having a difficult time?

JD: Very. If there is an effort being put in, I have a lot of patience. I don't like flippant attitudes. And the studio is open to these students to come in and continue practicing.

RS: Do you perform with your students on stage?

JD: I used to do it all the time, but Dada kept warning me that it would be a big mistake to dance with my students. He said, "Get yourself established, show people you can do this art form and that you are not at their level." I didn't listen and then I got called an "aesthetic tourist" in a review. That really rocked my foundation. Yeah, that was difficult. I almost packed-in performance, thinking that maybe I should just get myself a "regular" job and just practice and be done with all this. And for about three months I really battled with the "aesthetic tourist" review. In a summer rainstorm on my front porch, it all came back to me again why I did this in the first place. The root of why I did this art form was joy. But that precipitated me to make some changes too. I dance on the same stage as them but not with them. That may change in the future.

RS: To what do you attribute your success?

JD: My training and my relationship with my teacher. I made him a role model in my life. And to be able to express myself because I am here by myself, he is in

California; he is not dictating everything I do. I've got a very loose rein with him.

RS: Do you think that if you had stayed in India that your dance form would have stayed the same or would the shifts still have happened?

JD: Not nearly as much as it would have here, because the influences and choices and the stimulation is much greater here.

RS: Can you talk a bit about those kinds of choices and *Urban Rhythm* or *River*?

JD: Yeah. If you just take a look at our day, we have so many choices here everyday. You don't want to cook tonight, go out. You don't want to work today, you can call in sick. The extended family is not a huge pressure source like it is in India, where you are all living under one roof. And I did that for two years when I lived with my in-laws. I had a great time because they are lovely people. I was fortunate. But it still had its moments, where I thought I was going to pop if I had to clean the rice one more time at quarter-to-one - I was just going to throw it at somebody. (Laughs).

RS: So there was a lot of stress living in India?

JD: Just because this whole idea of privacy is so radically different. There is none. The whole sense of private space is quite different. Personal space is limited and tiny. I wouldn't say it was stressful, I would say it had its moments. For the most part, I loved it.

RS: Let me get back to this question of your critics. Do you think the media enjoys your work or are they very harsh in terms of their critique?

JD: I think the media enjoys my work. Some do, some don't. You know, I don't think it is "my" work, it is "the" work. If they like "the" work, they can very well like me and like what I do but not like the work. That's their job. It's about the work, not about the person. Since that thing about the "aesthetic tourist," I went out and did my own work and collaboration with others like Esmeralda, everything has changed in my career. It's really funny. These people were approaching me after a performance with Esmeralda talking about how much they loved the work, "Oh, you are such a great kathak dancer, you are incredible." I say, "I'm the same person I was three months ago when everybody thought I was a little white piece of trash." It doesn't matter. Because it's not about that, it is about personal inspiration and I'll be very honest with you: good, bad or otherwise, I'm least interested in reading what critics have to say. I don't even follow the newspapers, even when I am in a show. Even if people say you got

a great review, I say, "good." I might read it some months down the line. That's what happened to me on the front porch. Because it was like "what do I expect from my peers, what do I expect from my students, what do I expect from my community, what do I expect from critics? Why am I at this juncture right now?"

RS: If I may interrupt you...define your community.

JD: Yeah. Interesting. My community is rooted around the studio. Now, I have a larger broad-ranging community and I can go on the line as saying that in the Indian dance community they may think I am sort of snotty, but they just don't realize that I chose not to go to their work, not 'cause I don't want to go, it is because I'm so very busy. I have no life. But I have a very good reputation as a good-hearted person in the community and that is mostly because I haven't depended on them, I've created my own way. I forged my own way and we are a huge community of musicians and dancers and artists who come through these doors, and that is how I've defined my inner community. The Indian community is not my community but there are elements of the Indian community that are. I don't consider white Toronto my community, but parts of them are my community.

RS: Talk about your relationship with the Toronto Tabla Ensemble.

JD: Ritesh and I were married and my background was music for many years before I got into dance. It was a natural segue when he started the band. I knew some things about North Indian music, I studied it at college and certainly for dance you need to have an understanding of the music and the rhythmic systems. Basically, they are like my nuclear family. We are all like brothers and sisters. Not to say that we don't have our rifts, and that Ritesh is not sometimes a really tough leader, he is an excellent leader, but he is also tough. He is very demanding; he is of the same stock as his brother, Dada. But the results are huge. Basically I was attracted to kathak because of the relationship between the music and the dance. It's not so much about me the soloist, I like to be part of a whole creative ensemble which challenges me musically, challenges me in terms of dance and feeds me in terms of community and family and creatively. We just finished out fourth CD and it is a radical departure from our other stuff.

RS: What is the relationship of the dancer to the tabla?

JD: Ideally, one of mutual respect, pretty equally balanced knowledge, musicality and support.

RS: What would a tough moment on stage look like? Maybe for both you and Ritesh on stage working together.

JD: Internally, it is huge. You would perhaps lose sense of where you are. It is a real lesson in ego and consensus. You need to always be willing to give over what you feel is absolutely correct at that moment if it is not flowing with what is happening and it is all very subtle and unspoken. I'm really fortunate because Ritesh is incredibly creative, mentally and musically. We rarely know what we are going to do when we go out on stage.

RS: Is much of the work improvisational then?

JD: A hell of a lot of it is on the spur of the moment. What you do is improvise within the coded parameters of the music, the rhythm and the movement.

RS: So that makes every performance very different?

JD: Radically. One doesn't start out doing improvisation. You spend a lot of time working within the codes, the structure.

RS: Have you ever surprised each other on stage?

JD: Oh yes, and it takes us in a whole different direction that we hadn't thought of and we just play off it.

RS: Has there ever been a rivalry on stage?

JD: I wouldn't call it a rivalry, it's more like an edge. But I always feel totally supported and I totally support. There is a whole protocol, you shouldn't really override the tabla players all the time. Actually, written in as a code into the form is an allowance to give the musicians time to play and as a dancer, you stand there and appreciate. Which to a Westerner may seem quite informal. This is totally part of the kathak experience.

RS: Can you say something about access?

JD: There are elements within kathak that can be enjoyed and accessed. When you asked me earlier about my audience, I want access, I want people to have access. Whatever it takes in a particular audience, and you learn to vibe-out an audience. Some times you are more in tune with the audience, it depends on what you bring to it in your own mindset. But to see an audience and to see what they need so that in some way they can feel it belongs to them. That is very important. I think it is of paramount importance. I'm not interested in "Look at me." I want them to be able to feel part of this because this is the ultimate goal. The spiritual goal is for it all to become one: audience, musicians, dancer. There is an appropriate Chinese proverb: "carry wood, haul water."

Renuka Sooknanan is a Toronto-based writer.

Richard Fung and Jamelie Hassan

Speak about their recent honours

Interview with Meera Sethi



Richard Fung was presented with the Bell Canada Award in Video Art on April 19, 2001. (From left to right: Sylvie Lalonde, Chief Communications Officer, Bell Canada; Richard Fung; and Shirley L. Thomson, Director, Canada Council for the Arts.) Photo: Canadian Press. Courtesy: Canada Council.

It was my pleasure to speak over e-mail to video artist, writer and activist Richard Fung and to visual artist and activist Jamelie Hassan about each of their experiences of receiving the Bell Canada Award in Video Art and the Governor General's Award in Visual and Media Arts respectively. Over a period of many years, both these

artists have made tremendous contributions to the development of politically conscious artistic practices and communities in Canada. Richard Fung's widely screened and collected videos have included *My Mother's Place* (1990), *Dirty Laundry* (1996), *School Fag* (1998) and *Sea in the Blood* (2000). Jamelie Hassan is an internationally exhibited visual artist and activist whose interdisciplinary practice has included working very closely with the local arts community in London, Ontario and collaborating with artists and activists globally. Her commitment to decolonization and transnational feminist democracy is reflected in her various activities from art making, curating and organizing to speaking and writing.

Richard Fung was the recipient of the 2000 Bell Canada Award in Video Art in late March of this year. Since 1991, this honour has been awarded annually for "exceptional contribution by a video artist or artists to the advancement of video art in Canada and to the development of video languages and practices." Also in March of this year, Jamelie Hassan was one of the recipients of the Governor General's Awards in Visual and Media Arts, which are awarded annually for distinguished career achievement. I was interested in learning more about their thoughts surrounding this accomplishment and the impact it will have on both their own practices and the communities to which they belong.

MS: Congratulations to both of you for receiving the awards. How does it feel to win this award?

JH: Happy yet overwhelming and unsettling. I actually entered one of my inarticulate states.

RF: It feels good. Humbling, in that there are other artists who also are deserving, and because previous winners include senior artists like Colin Campbell and Zacharias Kunuk, who has just won the Camera d'Or at Cannes.

MS: Jamelie, how was it overwhelming and unsettling?

JH: Unsettling in that I found it unexpectedly affected me on many levels. Since this is a newly established award in visual and media arts, it came with some unknowns. I remember thinking that John Scott, one of my contemporaries, had received the Governor General's award the previous year and I was reassured that life didn't dramatically change for him overnight. Still this recognition for lifetime achievement and, by my peers, for my creative work is a great feeling. In 1992, I received an award in recognition of my contributions to the community from the office of the Governor General, but that award did not reverberate in the same way.¹ I am so conscious of the outstanding work being

done in Canada that I would not allow myself to even think about the nomination. I was in Paris with my partner, artist Ron Benner, when I received the news of the award. I adjusted to that part and remained happy but silent (hard to do for an activist) not being able to share such great news with anyone and also not knowing who the other winners were.² I took the whole process very seriously and it was easier for me in that I was not at home. Then, shortly after my return to Canada, came the public announcement of receiving the award, which set another series of emotions/demands into play. The public profile that came with receiving such a prestigious national award demanded another part of me just as I was returning to my studio work, leaving me feeling out of balance.

MS: Do either of you feel as if this award is long overdue?

JH: No. I was very pleased when the artist-run centre Forest City Gallery, which includes another generation of artists working in London, proposed this nomination. They felt that my work and my contributions merited this nomination. This acknowledgment from my local arts community was very gratifying.

RF: No.

MS: Has receiving this award immediately changed your relationship with people in the "art world?"

JH: No, not really. I think someone said in a national newspaper report when this year's winners were announced that it was "the usual suspects." This struck me as bizarre as I think that I was in a most unlikely position to receive this award. If anything, I hope that high-profile cultural awards in Canada might actually give more weight in the public realm to the values and principles that many artists share.

RF: My work doesn't really sit straightforwardly in the art world context in the first place, so I don't foresee a huge change. Besides, the media art community is relatively small; there's not much stratification.

MS: Jamelie, why do you think you were in a most unlikely position to receive this award?

JH: My political positions have been unpopular and in the past, to address the issues that have been important to me in my work and life have come at some cost. It is hard to dispel a sense of struggle that is part of an activist relationship to one's various communities.

MS: What is your relationship to marginality as an artist of colour given that you have received such an award?

JH: Hard to say. I think Richard has often spoken about the strategic relationship within the idea/position of marginality. Visibility sometimes elicits negative reactions and responses such as awkwardness, resentment and direct hostility. Having experienced this in my past, I hope I know how to recognize it and defuse it when I encounter it again. Like many, I grew up in an environment of systemic racism. I have always hoped and struggled for something other in our culture: dialogue, enlightenment, emancipation and community.

RF: I have never felt "marginal" in the art community, beyond the marginality of the kind of work that I produce. Though I have a hard time making ends meet, and will continue to do so if I continue to make video, I have never felt that my situation was worse than that of other videomakers of my generation. This isn't to discount systemic racism, which I think is the marginality you're referring to. But as an advocate for equity I have always been clear that my own engagement with the issue is not about getting more money or more gigs for myself. Marginality is only one form — and the crudest form, at that — in which systemic racism manifests itself. Sometimes, the problems are located not in exclusion, but in the terms of inclusion.

MS: Do you think this award is going to label your work in a particular way?

RF: CBC was very nice and did an interview on "This Morning," but the Bell Canada Award, as far as I know, wasn't even reported in the print media, so there's not a lot of labelling of video art going around, period. Every time Cher farts it's in the media, but there is scant attention paid to contemporary media and visual art in the Canadian press.

JH: If you are speaking about being labelled "establishment," one of the congratulations I received was "how ironic that you of all artists received this award as you are so anti-establishment."

MS: Richard, there is a sizable presence in Canada of contemporary film and video festivals, suggesting a large public interest in Canadian film and video. Why do you think there is such resistance in the Canadian press to engage with contemporary media and visual art, particularly video art?

RF: To answer this accurately I would have to do an ethnography of media institutions that goes right back into the schools and what they teach as good journalistic practice. But, for instance, the Inside Out Gay and Lesbian Film and Video Festival of Toronto has just wound up. It's apparently the largest film festival in



Jamelie Hassan being presented with the Governor General's Award for Visual Arts, 2001. (From left to right: Jamelie Hassan, Jean-Louis Roux, Chairman of the Canada Council for the Arts, Her Excellency the Right Honourable Adrienne Clarkson, Governor General of Canada.) Photo: Metropolis Studio, Ottawa. Courtesy: Canada Council.

Toronto outside of the Toronto International, bringing out large audiences in two cinemas over a period of eleven days. Yet it's considered an incredible success if their publicist gets more than one article in each of the mainstream papers. But last week when Pearl Harbor opened, the Toronto Star gave the movie four large articles that took up the first three pages of the Movies section, plus a picture on the back page. Geoff Pevere, whom I consider an excellent film critic, gave the film the lowest possible score in his front-page review, and even in today's paper, three days later, there's an article saying the film has uniformly received poor ratings from North American critics. Yet, the press is an integral part in the hype-making machine that brings the film into people's consciousness and produces blockbusters from these third-rate movies. Why are they doing this? Well, I would say it might have something to do with Hollywood studio power and the advertising revenue papers depend on. But there's also a populist ethic in much of the press. There's a self-fulfilling notion that the public is not interested in critical art. It's also curious how much reporting on art is limited to how much a certain piece fetches at Sotheby's.

MS: Do you feel you are now role models in a different way for emerging artists of colour?

RF: I think that any practising artist can be a role model. But it's particularly important to have more non-white teachers in the art schools. Whenever I've taught, I've gotten a palpable hunger from the non-white students; it's been a poignant experience, that feeling of being appreciated and the responsibility that comes with it. I was in graduate school before I had a non-white professor — and I completed two undergraduate programs, first art school, then, university!

JH: Maybe. It seems getting past the idea that an artist, after working for thirty years in this country, might cease

to be thought of as the baby on the block. Does this have something to do with a perpetual state of insecurity or do Asians just always look young? I have, however, also received very heartfelt good wishes. Remarkable numbers have written from across the country to express that they felt encouraged because I have received this award. Specifically, many in the Arab Canadian community, not only artists, feel that in fact my receiving this award is a landmark.

RF: Similarly, my winning the award also received a fair bit of attention from the Chinese-language media. I'm fourth-generation Trinidadian and don't read or understand spoken Chinese, so it's hard for me to assess how this is being taken up. Yet, this community obviously sees this award as significant.

MS: Are there new forms of responsibility that come with receiving this award?

RF: I'll probably be asked to do more panels, institutional consultations and meetings, and get invited to more functions. Everyone wants to do "cultural diversity" these days, and my responsibility will be to cut through the bullshit and make sure that these ventures really do help artists. My responsibility will be to remember when I was a young producer how terrifying the idea of contacting the Canada Council was. Now, I am on a first-name basis with many arts agency heads. It's important to bring an insider's knowledge together with that consciousness about being on the outside. I guess the change that I've felt for a while — it just didn't arise with the Bell — is that I increasingly feel a personal responsibility toward a wider range of issues, not just race or sexuality. In the context of tremendous cutbacks and attacks on the arts, education, welfare, and the poor in general, I feel a need to link issues of equity in the context of a wider progressive and anti-philistine agenda. Today this also requires more of an international perspective.

JH: Yes. I changed back to Bell long-distance and told them it was because they supported contemporary culture in Canada by giving the Bell Award in Video Art, which my friend Richard Fung received this year! I might add to this by saying that it might be more accurate to call it an increased sense of responsibility. Besides the responsibility to continue to work and produce in my chosen field, I will always continue to work for greater representation of the voices of people with a conscience. I am reminded here of my parents' example. Both, at different times, when faced with the possibility of slowing down, refused the concept. Don't even mention the word "retirement!" My mom, now approaching eighty, continues to work for a non-profit organization in London that is an advocate for refugees arriving in Canada. My dad,

himself, was a young pacifist in his early teens, fleeing military conscription when he arrived in Canada in 1914 from the upheavals in the region of the Middle East and present-day Lebanon. He seized every opportunity throughout his life to educate us, to share his ideas of emancipation and his commitments to peaceful co-existence that helped to shape the earlier Arab and Islamic communities in Canada. Today, I'm not that connected to this community but I am inspired by my parents' example. I am also very informed of the early history of Arabs in Canada, including ties with other Asians and — most neglected and unacknowledged — ties with First Nations communities. I think there is a need for immigrant communities to recognize their often closed mentality and narrow positioning, one that is not enforced from outside, but is self-destructive and exclusive in its self-defining. Of course, this in no way negates the very real difficulties and hostilities that immigrants and refugees often experience in Canada.

MS: What does it mean in the larger development of Canadian national arts for two artists of colour to receive such awards?

JH: I have for many years enjoyed a strong connection with First Nations artists; being recognized by my peers for my creative work, with filmmaker Alanis Obomsawin and architect Douglas Cardinal among the greats in the community, gave me enormous pleasure, but it was also very intimidating. When I received the news that Richard Fung had received the Bell Award in Video Art, I was really ecstatic — not surprised — for another rebel artist of my generation because Richard's work is outstanding and he is most deserving of recognition.

RF: In its relatively short existence, the Bell Canada Award has already gone to Zacharias Kunuk and Paul Wong. Paul was one of the pioneers of video art in Canada, a contribution that has never been denied, so it made total sense that he should be an early recipient. Jamelie has also been a major force in the Canadian visual art scene for years, as both a practitioner and a catalyst: Why wouldn't she receive this recognition from her peers? Juries select these awards, not administrators or corporate heads.

MS: Given that *The Globe and Mail*, for example, can publish an incredibly racist and biased "review" of a prominent First Nations artist — Jane Ash Poitras — how far do you think artists of colour and First Nations artists have come in terms of parity with our white peers? What sort of cultural moment are we in when, on the one hand, two Canadian artists of colour receive national recognition and, on the other hand, a First Nations artist is treated with such disrespect in a national newspaper?

JH: The key word here is "disrespect." I was very disturbed when I read the review you are referring to, when, in fact, the source of so much of the art today that is actually reaching the public and demonstrating its power to communicate is from First Nations artists and artists of colour. Recognition, as I said earlier, does not always bring respect.

RF: I don't think that one can say only one thing about race and Canadian culture, that it's this way or that way. I haven't seen the article you're referring to. It's important to remember that Jane Ash Poitras has received recognition and positive media at other times. She can be panned in the national press, but also exhibited in the National Gallery. It's not a simple exclusion or inclusion. The scene is complex and contradictory, and I think the experience of individual artists is complex and contradictory, too. Mine certainly has been. Yet it's striking how often the pans and praise have to do with readings of cultural and racial difference, how any statement of specificity gets read and dismissed as "identity," or worse, "identity politics."

MS: Do you think receiving a prestigious national award will open up dialogue with people interested in the arts who might otherwise not engage with the work of "rebel artists?"

JH: Yes. But I would be naive to think that this, beyond the award money itself, which has lifted some of the immediate urgency regarding my self-employed status, translates into economic terms for those of us working in culture today. What is valuable is the continued dialogue around the issues and the maintenance of a working relationship with artists, musicians, video and filmmakers, writers and curators in Canada and internationally.

RF: That would be nice, but it's hard to say. The history of Modernism involves a fascination with "rebel" qualities. So it's difficult to decide where it's a genuine engagement with the issues an artist is trying to deal with or another form of commodification, and I don't think it's all that easy to pull the two apart in most cases. If you think of Jamelie and me as "rebel artists," these awards might work to give the work more prominence. And they might boost the spirits of other artists working with edgy political themes. I should add that, in addition to Paul Wong, the Bell Canada Award has gone to several other activist artists including Lisa Steele and Kim Tomczak.

MS: Jamelie, is there a "perpetual state of insecurity" that shadows your practice? Why is this?

JH: Yes, both in the nature of my inquiry and in the practice of art itself.



From *The Well* (exterior view), Jamelie Hassan's site specific installation at the Museum of Health Care/Ann Baillie Building in Kingston, Ontario, from *Museopathy*, June 23-September 9, 2001. Original photo from Tunis, 2001. Photo: Jamelie Hassan.

RF: Can I answer this as well? For me there are several sources of insecurity — financial, artistic and political. The first has to do with the economic returns of doing single-channel video. Part of the appeal of video for artists in the '60s and '70s was the medium's capacity for cheap and easy reproduction. Video was seen as intrinsically resistant to individual or corporate ownership, as opposed to painting or even film. But video artists need to live, and hence we end up working with distribution and exhibition rights and licenses that work against that quality of the medium. It's a larger debate because I think there's also a generalized disregard for accepting what artists do as work. In many film and video festivals, for example, everyone gets paid except the artists. I know of no single-channel video artist who survives solely on the returns from their work. Most artists struggle economically. Connecting this to the artistic and political insecurities is the fact that my work sits somewhere between video art and documentary production. Most of it is not traditionally defined video art in the sense of work by, say, Vera Frankel, Wayne Yung and Steve Reinke, all of whom I admire. But in the documentary context it may seem too mediated, too constructed, too artsy. I've done what I've wanted to do, and I can't say that I suffer that much for it — the award would contradict that assessment — but I do sometimes feel out on a limb artistically because of the way my work falls between the institutional categories.

MS: Jamelie and Richard, in terms of your production, this must be an exciting time for both of you. Jamelie, you have an installation in the upcoming exhibition "Museopathy: Contemporary Art in Kingston Historical Sites," curated by Jim Drobnick and Jennifer Fisher at the Agnes Etherington Art Centre. And Richard, your recently released video *Sea in the Blood* has been screened at the Reel Asian Film Festival, Hot Docs, Inside Out, Cinematheque Ontario and the Toronto International Film Festival. How does this feel? Can you tell us something about these works?

JH: "Museopathy" is very ambitious, with several artists working in different sites in Kingston. My work is within the Museum of Health Care that was also formerly a nurses' residence. While a young art student in Rome and Beirut in 1967 and 1968, I worked in hospitals as a

nursing aid in the delivery area. I will draw on this early connection in my life and the idea of beginnings. The power of symbols also plays a part, as I will bring forward the Red Crescent in its sister relationship in medical history with the Red Cross.

RF: *Sea in the Blood* is hard for me to sum up as it's about a number of interlocking events and issues. The title is the literal translation of the blood disease thalassemia, which runs in my family and killed two of my siblings. Thalassemia has been in the news these days as it's the disease studied by Dr. Nancy Oliveri, who has been in a long ethics battle with the drug company Apotex and the Hospital for Sick Children in Toronto.

MS: What is the next project you both are working on?

JH: I will participate in the first Tirana Biennial that is in the works to open in September 2001, a project with an international team of thirty curators. The Biennial was initiated by the National Museum of Art in Tirana and Flash Art International in Milan. Both see the possibilities that a cultural project — a contemporary arts Biennial — offers within the rebuilding of the nation state, Albania, a country attempting to surface after a lengthy regime of tyranny and regional wars with untold numbers of refugees.

RF: I take a long time between video projects and they always shift and reshape on the way, so I can't really give you a good answer. Wearing my writer hat, I'm working on a book-length conversation project with Montreal-based critic and curator Monika Kin Gagnon. It's for Editions Artexes and it revolves around issues of racial and cultural equity in the arts in Canada.

MS: What are you going to do with the money?

JH: My first acquisition ... I bought gravel for our laneway.

RF: It's going into my living/creative expenses.

MS: Thank you both very much for participating in this e-mail interview. It was a pleasure.

Meera Sethi is a writer, visual artist and cultural critic living in Toronto. She works on the editorial board of FUSE Magazine, and would like to thank FUSE board member Janice Andreae for her editorial contributions to this interview.

Notes

1. Jamelie Hassan was awarded the commemorative medal for the 125th Anniversary of the Confederation of Canada in recognition of significant contribution to compatriots, community and to Canada.
2. The 2001 laureates for the Governor General's Awards administered through the Canada Council and the office of Her Excellency The Right Honourable Adrienne Clarkson are Tom Dean, Jamelie Hassan, Liz Magor (Visual Arts), Alanis Obomsawin (Film), Douglas Cardinal (Architecture), Russell Goodman (Fine Crafts) and Joan Chalmers (Outstanding Contribution).

Vice Squad

YYZ Artists' Outlet
Toronto, Ontario, June 20-July 22, 2001

Review essay by Kelly McCray

Walking alone towards me on the sun-filled sidewalk was a fashionably dressed, sophisticated middle-aged woman. As we moved closer to one another, her facial expressions shifted drastically from her cultured appearance. Wrenched with pain, contorted and gasping to breathe with tears drawing lines through meticulous make-up, her face suddenly filled with emotional agony. I was in shock. Whatever could cause such spontaneous grief? I suddenly realized the slight tilt of her head concealed a communication device. This was a private telephone conversation and whatever was the cause of her private grief was none of my public business.

In his article "Art as Public Domain," Christopher Doswald refers to the "vanishing of the private sphere." He states that "since 1989 — the year in which the armaments industry began to place increasing emphasis on civilian uses for its technological developments — the spread of total visual surveillance appears to have been irresistible." He cites highways supervised by unmanned helicopters, living rooms equipped with video cameras, department stores, border crossings, satellites, etc. all bearing images of the personal domain. In our daily routines we can also include bank machine cameras, public transit surveillance, television "reality" shows like the Dutch-based program *Big Brother*, the CBS counterpart *Survivor* and of course the Internet, which is increasingly being considered a substitute for "public" and sexual space.

In her essay "Art and the Public Sphere," Sabine B. Vogel refers to the oscillating

boundaries between the public and private spheres. She quantifies these zones through the following definitions: "In the nineteenth century the non-public space was described as secret — and this association... has continued into present-day usage. The public sphere, on the other hand, is the sphere of participation, of criticism, of control and decision-taking in social matters and political actions." As the "non-public" or "secret" space becomes increasingly more familiar, there will be a dramatic increase in the amount of criticism and control demanded from the "public" sphere.

A recent *New York Times Magazine* article described our global atmosphere as an "electronic fishbowl." Because of the spread of technology, my business is your business and your business is my business, whether either of us like it or not. This "business" includes globalized sexual practices, sexual preferences and sexual spaces. How do these rapidly shifting boundaries between the private and public space relate to the Toronto gay community and the apparent need from the "public" sphere for policed control?

On a late September evening in the city of Toronto, the fourth Pussy Palace was well underway. The popular event was started two years ago by women who wanted to create a safe environment for women to explore their sexuality, not unlike the gay male bathhouse experience. During this particular night, five plainclothes male police officers invaded the all-woman space for a two hour, full-scale search. On October 6, Liquor Licence Act charges were

announced against two Pussy Palace organizers.

Similarly, liquor offence charges have been announced for Toronto's Toolbox leather bar after a visit from plainclothes officers, July 27, 2000, forcing the bar to cancel their weekly naked nights. And during the summer of 1999, a well-known Toronto porn bar, the Bijou, was targeted by police for a so-called routine liquor licence inspection, resulting in the arrests of several men for indecent acts. These charges were later dropped but the Bijou was forced to close; it later reopened, licenced as a bathhouse.

Many gays and lesbians fear that the recent police activity could escalate into more severe breaches of generally accepted community standards. It is alarming that in a time when previous "secret" personal habits, including sexual practices, have mushroomed into the "public" sector due to technology, that historically accepted sexual practices of the gay community should be subjected to such severe scrutiny.

This head-on collision which continues between the gay community and the Toronto police force seems driven by the issue of standards of acceptability surrounding the public/private domain. These so-called standards of acceptability are defined over the years by the enforcement of laws for the community at large. The laws governing acceptability assume degrees of societal consensus. Public/private sexual terrain and personal boundaries now morph at break neck speed,



Pink Ottoman, Johannes Zits, 1998, acrylic on computer output, 3x6 m. Photo: Kim Clark. Courtesy: YYZ Artists' Outlet.

while law enforcement agents race to keep up with changes which do not yet have a consensus model.

In his recent book *The Pleasure Principle*, Michael Bronski reminds readers that since homosexuality has been defined as a sin, a crime and an illness, there has never been a "right" to homosexual privacy. In many locals, it was and still remains imperative that homosexuality not be public. He affirms that "This state of nonpublicness, however, cannot be called 'privacy' because it was not freely chosen; it is more accurately described as 'secrecy.'" He points out that gay people are only acceptable to society when they are private, not when they are public.

We can assume that sexuality and the hidden or secret history of sexualities play a crucial role within gay, lesbian and transgendered communities. Societal pressures have ensured the use of invisible codes to one another. There has been and continues to be agreed upon standards of sexual practice (such as same-gendered fucking) and public sexualized locations (such as cruising parks and bar "naked nights") throughout gay communities. By targeting marginalized gay community

"standards" which, throughout history, have been undetected by the general public, law enforcers are perceived to be regulating the shifts occurring between the public and private domains. Their obvious impotence remains undetected and invisible to the public eye.

With ongoing legal and very public debates on matters such as same-sex marriage, customs censor regulations, homosexuality in the church, schools and political arenas, one would get the impression that gay issues are very much a public matter. These particular discussions, however, do not penetrate the secret realm of homosexual activity.

A large number of queer artists work with the latent or hidden sexuality — the furtive historical and contemporary sexual locations and sexual codes. Can the work of artists penetrate the "public" wall to impact future decisions as to what should or should not remain secret?

In response to the theme of public/private and to the recent events in Toronto's gay community, two Toronto-based, gay male artists, David Grenier and Johannes Zits, have been curated together for a two-person

exhibition of their work at the YYZ Artists Outlet gallery, June 20 to July 21, 2001.

Throughout his artistic practice, David Grenier has combined his drawing skills with needlework, floral fabric and domestic wallpaper. Grenier's recent wallpaper pieces investigate the conceptual terrain of marginal identity, an investigation which, he states, "marries public with private, euphemism with autobiography, and art with craft."

His drawings, rendered in needle and thread into wallpaper, are at first invisible, camouflaged by the floral ground of the wallpaper. Upon closer inspection, soft lines assemble to reveal furtive forms of clothed male figures leaning, posing — soliciting the viewer from behind the protection of the patterned vegetation; in essence, cruising in public spaces from beneath the domestic wallpaper, meant to be hung in the privacy of the home.

Through a sophisticated and labour intensive process, Grenier's soft transgressions oscillate between private comfort zones and public cruising zones with codes that remain undetected to the public naked eye. Much like the attraction between two people of the same gender, the knowledge is public but only to those who live within the private codes. Grenier's subtle, sophisticated needlepoint men penetrate the public "wall" with desire, fantasy and provocation which become an acceptable standard of communication; of sexual permission.

Johannes Zits has based a solid artistic career on infiltrating/subverting lifestyle magazines such as *Better Homes and Gardens* and Martha Stewart's *Living* by inserting male nude private sex acts appropriated from gay male porn. Zits states that his work "explores transgressions and notions of public and private spaces." In his *Gallery 44* exhibition, *Interiors*, curated by Amy Satterthwaite and Gunter Kravis, Zits presents full-wall projections of room interiors of key cultural figures such as art critic Clement Greenberg, actor James Dean and the father of psychoanalytic theory, Sigmund Freud. Within each projected interior, the

Freestyle

Studio Museum, Harlem, New York
April 28-June 24, 2001

Review by Michelle Jacques

Curated by Thelma Golden and organized by Christine Y. Kim, *Freestyle* is the first major exhibition to be organized at the Studio Museum under the leadership of new director Lowery Stokes Sims and deputy director Golden.

Comprised of more than 80 works by 28 emerging black artists from across the United States, *Freestyle* celebrates the work of a generation raised in an era of multiculturalism, following in the footsteps of predecessors like Lorna Simpson, Glenn Ligon, Kara Walker and Gary Simmons — African-American artists who forged a path of mainstream success throughout the 1980s and 1990s.

In the catalogue accompanying the exhibition, Golden limited her input to a brief forward and an entry on one of the artists. Writers of various cultures and experiences from across the U.S. penned the remaining entries. This kind of multi-authored publication opens up discussion to a variety of voices, creating a large and vital arena for the exploration of work by black artists — work that does not always receive the attention it deserves. Within the exhibition setting, these catalogue entries are presented as extended label texts that accompany each artist's body of work.

The exhibition includes work in numerous media — drawing, painting, sculpture, installation, photography, video, digital media. While the politics of identity infuse much of the work, this generation of artists draws on the multiple histories that define their lives. The variety and complexity of ideas informing each artist's work underscores the



withdrawing room (installation detail), David Grenier, 2000, needle-point on wallpaper, variable dimensions. Photo: Julie Sando. Courtesy: YYZ Artists' Outlet.

viewer's shadow enters a private sexual moment of Jackson Pollock-like figures referenced from gay porn who have no intention of refraining from their intimate activity regardless of the invading presence. Through his choice of historical cultural figures, Zits questions the presence of actual or latent homosexuality in these "heroes of modernism." And through the darkness of the public gallery setting, many of the conversations of viewers attending the exhibition gravitate towards their own sexual activities/histories.

For the two-person exhibition at YZ Artists Outlet gallery, Zits is exhibiting large-scale billboards of appropriated magazine interior scenes with acrylic male nude figures fucking. In his piece, *Place à la Fantaisie*, Zits uses the contemporary domestic kitchen as the backdrop for an erotic encounter between two Jackson Pollock-like

partnered males. Like Grenier's work, viewers must adjust their vision to read the painted forms as figures and then discover the blatant sexual activity merging them. Like Grenier, Zits gives the viewer permission for sexual fantasies, sexual dreams and sexual licence on the public wall.

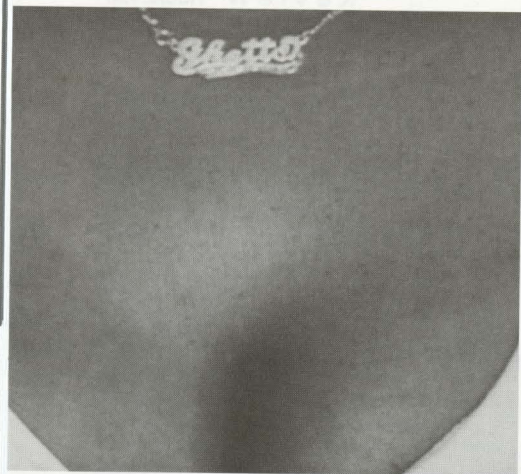
Both Grenier and Zits are dedicating their cultural practice to creating provocative public space for the sexuality that "should not be." In an earlier artist statement, Zits says that his work continues his "examination of the relationship between public and private spaces and notions of what are standards of acceptability, including our fantasies and aspirations". Zits has started to create large-scale public billboard images for site specific public projects in Europe. One of his reasons for moving beyond the gallery setting is to "challenge the viewer to formulate new sets of interpretations."

Like Johannes Zits, I would strongly recommend that image-based art confronting issues of public/private sexualized space be placed in the public realm. Can David Grenier's wallpaper be included in the Toronto Interior Design Show? Can we create public billboard space for Johannes Zits' interiors? Not only will the general public have an opportunity to formulate "new sets of interpretations" as Zits suggests, but the gay community can be reminded of one of our most potent common denominators — our sexualities.

Kelly McCray has exhibited, coordinated and curated extensively in Toronto over the past 10 years. His most recent videoinstallation work, The Gnawts Project, was exhibited in the two-person show Breath Taking at Gallery TPW in 2001.



Untitled (patchwork man stabbing patchwork man), Kojo Griffin, 2000, mixed media on wood panel, 152.4 cm x 121.9 cm. Courtesy: Vaknin Schwartz, Atlanta.



Still image from *Sometimes*, Susan Smith-Pinelo, 1999, video installation of variable dimensions, 2:50 min. Courtesy: The Studio Museum in Harlem, New York.

facileness of stereotypes and simplistic five-minute marketing segments presuming to tell us about "the black experience."

Kojo Griffin's drawings and paintings depict complex narratives inhabited by animal-like beings — patchwork teddy bears, elephant people and bipedal horses — as well as electronic diagrams and symbols of spirituality. With these seemingly disparate images, Griffin creates compositions, like *Untitled (patchwork man stabbing patchwork man)* (2000), that are explorations of the complex human interactions that define contemporary life. His fairytale characters may be cute and cuddly on the surface, but in a commentary on the fact that evil can lurk anywhere, they often carry guns or knives. As Sandra D. Jackson notes in her entry in the catalogue, Griffin is an unmistakable heir to traditional African-American folklore such as the Br'er Rabbit stories, as well as mainstream animated cartoons like Tom and Jerry.

Tana Hargest's digital media installation *BNBN* (2001) very directly addresses this issue of race commodification through the satire-infused activities of her corporation: Bitter Nigger, Inc. (founded 1997). Using an interactive CD-ROM, visitors can explore the products available from the company's subsidiaries — Bitter Nigger Pharmaceutical, Bitter Nigger Broadcast Network and Bitter Nigger Production Division. The pharmaceutical branch offers the drugs Tominex and Privitol. The first is a pill that allows younger black people to "achieve a level of complacency normally reached

after years of deferred dreams and smashed hopes...but without the bitterness," while the second is a dermal patch that helps white people hooked on skin-based privilege to kick the habit.

Some of the artists, particularly Gerald leans, purposefully avoid making political statements with their work. While he opted not to attend art school and is self-taught as painter, leans is by no means a naive artist. Writer Andrea Scott tells us that he is in fact profoundly invested in the study of art history — that the subtle colouring and fluid, amoebic imagery of paintings like *Pink Mosquito* (2000) show affinities to predecessors as varied as Brice Marden and Hans Arp is not accidental.

While boldly establishing oneself as heir to the tradition of American abstract (i.e., white) painting is perhaps a political statement in itself, another "painter" in the exhibition, Mark S. Bradford, is more assertive in his merging of painting and politics. Actually a hairstylist by day, Bradford's paintings are comprised of acrylic over perm-end papers (slips of flimsy paper used to keep the ends from frizzing while hair is wrapped around curlers) on canvas. While the wit in Bradford's endeavour is made clearly evident in titles such as *2* (2000), his compositions also possess an ephemeral beauty reminiscent of Robert Ryman's or Agnes Martin's minimalist compositions.

This first project under the administration of Stokes Sims and Golden focuses on activity close to home, although the mandate of the Studio Museum encompasses production not just in the United States but across the African diaspora. However, the work of Senam Okudzeto, born in Chicago but raised in Nigeria, Ghana and the United Kingdom as well as the U.S., reminds us of the complexities of diasporic existence. *Long Distance Lover* (1999–2001) is an 84 by 94 inch painting executed on pieced-together telephone bills. The painting depicts female figures boxing, subjects that the artist describes in an interview with Trevor Schoonmaker as representative of "conflicting opinions, ideologies and identities within the same psyche." The clue to the significance of the rather ambiguous

imagery resides in the phone calls recorded in the bills. The intercontinental calls trace the physical movements of the artist's family, whose dispersed locations are evidence of the fragmentation that continues today, although it was centuries ago that the displacement was initiated by the slave trade.

One of the first works to greet viewers as they enter the space is Susan Smith-Pinelo's video *Sometimes* (1999). In it, we see the tightly framed bouncing breasts of a black woman who is wearing a T-shirt with a plunging neckline and a jeweled "ghetto" necklace. With the knowledge provided by author Claire Gilman that the artist herself is the subject of the video, and with the additional information that Smith-Pinelo has turned the camera on herself, the work admittedly possesses the hint of critical commentary around the issue of the manner in which women's bodies are commodified in hip hop culture. However, perhaps the real significance of the piece emerges in the viewer's necessary moment of grappling for an element of criticism within the undeniably pleasurable act of watching the subject move to the irresistible beat of the accompanying disco soundtrack.

The significance of *Freestyle* resides precisely in the vagueness of its premise. The title is taken from the realm of popular music, where "freestyle" describes the moments in the performance when the musician or dancer is freed from the constraints of the choreography or score and given free reign to improvise. Golden has invited each artist to do his or her own thing, unrestrained by the limitations of any kind of strict curatorial thesis. Whether the fact that all of the participants are young and black and living in America is enough of a premise to hold an art show together is a question that bears heavily on the mind as one enters the exhibition. That the answer to the question is "yes," because the work of black artists is still so often overlooked or mired in presumption is what keeps you thinking about the exhibition long after you leave.

Michelle Jacques is an assistant curator, contemporary art, at the Art Gallery of Ontario.

Mixed Identities and Other Fictions:

Michael Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost*

McClelland & Stewart, 2000

and Grant Farred's *Midfielder's Moment*

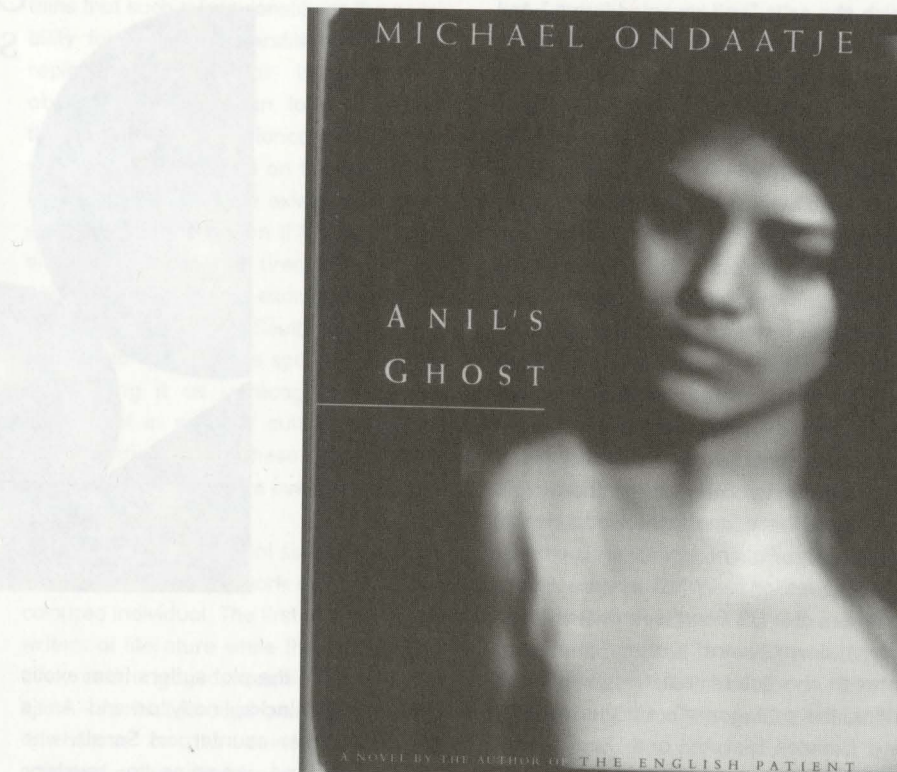
Westview Press, 1999

Review essay by Tess Chakkalalak

The claims against and resistances to theory are in hiatus. Like the passing of deconstruction and its various methodological offshoots from the main stage of social science and humanities programs, the need to denounce the evils of "theory" seems too to have passed. And yet, in this global age, when borders and bodies are more fluid than ever, remaining vigilant of theories that stand outside practice has never been more urgent. In this regard, vigilance of theory does not merely rest on the injunction to always historicize, it insists that we locate the theory in our contemporary moment: where and when is it useful now?

Questions of specificity and utility regarding theory seem less necessary now as the forces of globalization are in full swing and the seeds of postmodernism are bearing the necessary fruit to live everyday life without borders. In this moment comes works of literature that do not just think, but also act globally: Michael Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost* and Grant Farred's *Midfielder's Moment: Coloured Literature and Culture in Contemporary South Africa*. Although still located within and informed by national borders, both works are committed to exposing the inadequacy and debilitating effects of the nation. Whether either work succeeds in dismantling the constraints imposed by national bodies and individual commitments to them remains to be seen.

Following the success of *The English Patient* as both a major motion picture and novel, Ondaatje's membership in the exclusive club known as "the greatest novelists of our time" was all but imminent. John



Updike called the film "dazzling" and waxed eloquent on Ondaatje's "devious spy plot," which brilliantly interweaves the lives of a "subdued" Canadian (David Caravaggio), a Sikh sapper (Kip), an Italian nurse (Hana) and an unidentified burned patient (Count Laszlo Almasy) as they are each forced to set aside national affiliations in the face of a series of international and personal crises. Indeed, the novel's "spooky ennui," "dreamlike and enigmatic prose" and "poetry of smoke and mirrors" made its adaptation to the screen such a success, eliciting, in Updike's words, "one of the more dashing and affecting female

screen performances of recent times." It is no wonder, then, that the absence of affecting female presences and spooky ennui in Ondaatje's subsequent novel, *Anil's Ghost*, has disappointed many of *The English Patient's* admirers.

Anil's Ghost contains a decidedly unromantic plot. The novel's heroine, Anil Tissera, is a thirty-three-year-old forensic anthropologist working for the United Nations Human Rights Commission to investigate war crimes in Sri Lanka. As the story of Anil's investigations develops, however, we learn more of her personal

affairs, which legitimize, or, at the very least, *qualify* her to conduct such an intrusive and labor intensive study of a nation's internal affairs.

In *Anil's Ghost* Ondaatje shifts the focus of his fiction from romantic liaisons and betrayal to the problems relating to the individual's desire for a people. Anil is a member of a forensic team that digs up dead bodies in order to identify their origins and ancestry. There is, of course, a certain monotony to performing such a task. But not for Anil. In these dead bodies, which she calls "half-revealed forms," Anil finds answers to questions that haunt her every act and association: Who has the right to speak for whom? Why is violence the only possible outcome of conflict between people? How do we become attached to others? Must all attachments to others end badly? Because words do not adequately address the questions, Anil finds answers in the remains of dead bodies: that is, the parts of life that cannot be buried despite efforts to do so. Ondaatje attempts to expose the unethical practices of the Sri Lankan government and the gruesome acts of terrorism by rebel forces, primarily the Tamil Tigers; yet the novel's reviewers, those unabashed admirers of *The English Patient*, are preoccupied by other questions. What vexes many reviewers of *Anil's Ghost* is its lack of "character development" and connection between characters. Instead, complain its critics, the protagonist's story is eclipsed by a skeleton that Anil and Sarath — her guide and fellow forensic anthropologist but not lover — nickname "Sailor." Anil and Sarath briefly find common cause in their efforts to reveal the circumstances leading to Sailor's recent, rather than ancient, death. This revelation proves the government's direct involvement in destroying the cultural history and people they have been elected to protect.

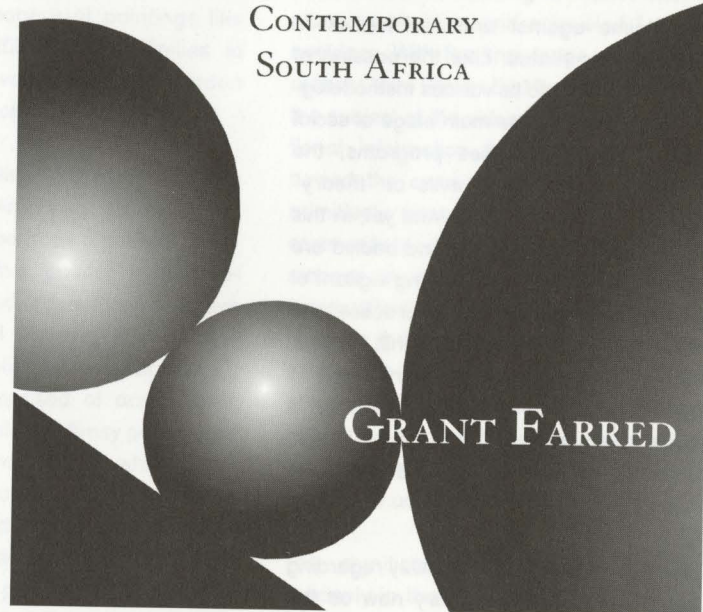
With a skeleton at its center, there is something either "absurdist" or simply "unappealing" about the novel's focus. Reviewers are consistently frustrated in their attempts to pin down what this book is about. Its characters are problematically frozen in the past, the narrative does not

move forward, the plot suffers from exotic detours and it lacks, finally, an end. Anil's fate, unlike her counterpart Sarath who ends up dead, remains a mystery. Moreover, the resolution of the time of Sailor's death seems to have little, if any, effect. It is no wonder then that readers expecting to languish in the beauty of Ondaatje's prose and sink into the depth of his characters' emotional and sexual escapades are, to put it mildly, disappointed. In this, Ondaatje's third novel, characters take a back seat to issues. The driving force behind *Anil's Ghost* is not, as many of its reviewers rightly contend, character development and the relationships between them, but, rather, the problem of making new links between people given the necessary and inevitable dissolution of national boundaries.

The erasure and transgression of boundaries have numerous consequences upon the liberalization of the market, increased consumer consumption because of the low costs of goods, reduced unemployment in countries where labour is less costly and, conversely, its increase in nations — primarily in the US and Canada — where labour continues to be protected from facing the challenges of a more liberalized, global market. But little is said of how these new "global subjects" are constituted and how they see themselves in relation to others who are no longer so Other. Since literature most often makes sense within the context of particular nations, either upsetting the status quo to create a new one or conserving the traditions that constitute its cultural history by practicing them in print, the function of literature within a

Midfielder's Moment

COLOURED
LITERATURE AND
CULTURE IN
CONTEMPORARY
SOUTH AFRICA



GRANT FARRED

global context remains difficult to pin down. But surely, critics unimpressed by the new context of Ondaatje's fiction contend, digging up dead bodies to record the circumstances and identities erased in the act of burial is no way to understand these new subjects or their relation to one another. Critical investment in the plot and characters of *Anil's Ghost* misses its central point. The question *Anil's Ghost* begs does not concern its characters or the narrative's trajectory. Instead, Ondaatje's latest work of fiction, a far cry from the gushy beauty and captivating sexuality of Katherine Clifton and Count Laszlo Almasy, asks a different and altogether unsexy question: how do we hold non-elected leaders responsible for meeting the interests of a global population? Well, one way, suggests *Anil's Ghost* is for leaders to know, or at the very least, *get to know* this new constituency that we are calling, for lack of a better name, the global population. Anil's heroic virtues stem from what she does, rather than what she is, for a living: an expatriate Sri Lankan, 33 years old, female, single, lacking any visible sign of familial or social bonds. Ondaatje provides readers with a female hero who is defined wholly by her job rather than the form of her feelings and the physical apparatus that goes along with women in love.

Ondaatje's Anil occupies a space between lovers, nations and, finally, brothers. Her name is a clear sign of her in-between status as it is bought from her brother in exchange for "one hundred saved rupees, a pen set he had been eyeing for some time, a tin of fifty Gold Leaf cigarettes she had found, and a sexual favour he had demanded." The high cost of Anil's name signifies the result of tariffs deemed necessary to protect national interests and further names the beneficiaries of such an unequal exchange. While Anil gains a name to begin life outside of the constraints imposed by familial and social authorities, she loses much in the way of material wealth and well-being. For every boundary Anil attempts to cross another holds her back, prohibiting her access to information. Anil then is not a character in the conventional sense of the term, instead she is an affect of the contemporary shift

from the national to the global, a shift that must first deal with the unburied remains of national allegiances in order to move the globalization plot forward. *Anil's Ghost* is an example of literature that is written and read outside or against the constraints of national borders.

To theorize this new literature, Grant Farred gives us *Midfielder's Moment: Coloured Literature and Culture in Contemporary South Africa*. As Ondaatje expresses the loss of national culture through the figure of Anil, Farred maintains that such a loss constitutes the possibility for a new, "interstitial" culture to replace the national investment in absolutes. Rather than look at culture through the socio-historical lens of the nation, Farred focuses on the interstices; because such a space exists between or even against the nation it is "precarious, embattled, under- and (frequently) unrecognized." Through his examination of the coloured community in South Africa Farred sets out to open up this space, not simply recognizing it as unrecognized by our investment in national culture but gives those living within these non-national communities precedence over the nation.

The book is comprised of six essays, each marking the life and work of a particular coloured individual. The first three focus on writers of literature while the latter, more lively and engaged, examine the role of sport — football (soccer) and cricket — and its heroes on the development of a coloured culture that transcends national barriers. The importance of sport to global relations, according to Farred, cannot be underestimated. While "the highly politicized role of sport in South African society has always been recognized as crucial" Farred examines those aspects of the sporting world that are missing from the national narrative. As he states in the introduction and exemplifies in his discussion of Benni McCarthy, a symbol of coloured identity and South Africa's most-loved footballer, playing football was a way for South Africa's disenfranchised communities to distinguish themselves from the apartheid practices of the nation. In Farred's words, "nonracial sport resisted

the strictures of apartheid by reaching outside the geographical boundaries of South Africa to the football culture of the English metropolis."

The specificity of Farred's analysis is, in some sense, beside the point. While there could be no critical analysis without an original text or culture, the significance of the analysis lies in what coloureds symbolize. These coloured texts and bodies put the idea of hybridity into practice. According to Farred, coloured cultural practices are not simply informed by the discourse of hybridity, they could not exist without it. Coloured culture does not so much belong to and in South Africa; instead, their very existence is inconceivable without thinking of contacts and crossings. Reading the coloured experience is not possible without thinking and acting globally.

Whatever aspect of coloured culture Farred happens to be examining in these essays, each of the texts he analyzes is used to develop a method of reading culture that refuses to be bound by or to a national paradigm. Because a coloured identity is not recognized within the black-white terms of South African national identity it has been twice buried: first by the apartheid regime and then again by the ANC in present-day post apartheid South Africa. Therefore, claims Farred, a reading practice is required to read the culture of this particular interstitial space. But, as readings of Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost* make painfully obvious, not only coloured texts benefit from such a reading practice. Instead, Farred's examination of coloured culture benefits all texts whose aims are buried by the demands of national governments. *Anil's Ghost* and *Coloured Literature and Culture in Contemporary South Africa* find common cause in their attempt to reach an audience despite persistent efforts to delimit their affects by resisting the disappearance of national borders.

Tess Chakkalakal is visiting lecturer in American and African American Literature at Williams College, Williamstown, MA. Her dissertation, The Figure of Uncle Tom in African American Fiction, is forthcoming from York University.

Being Black

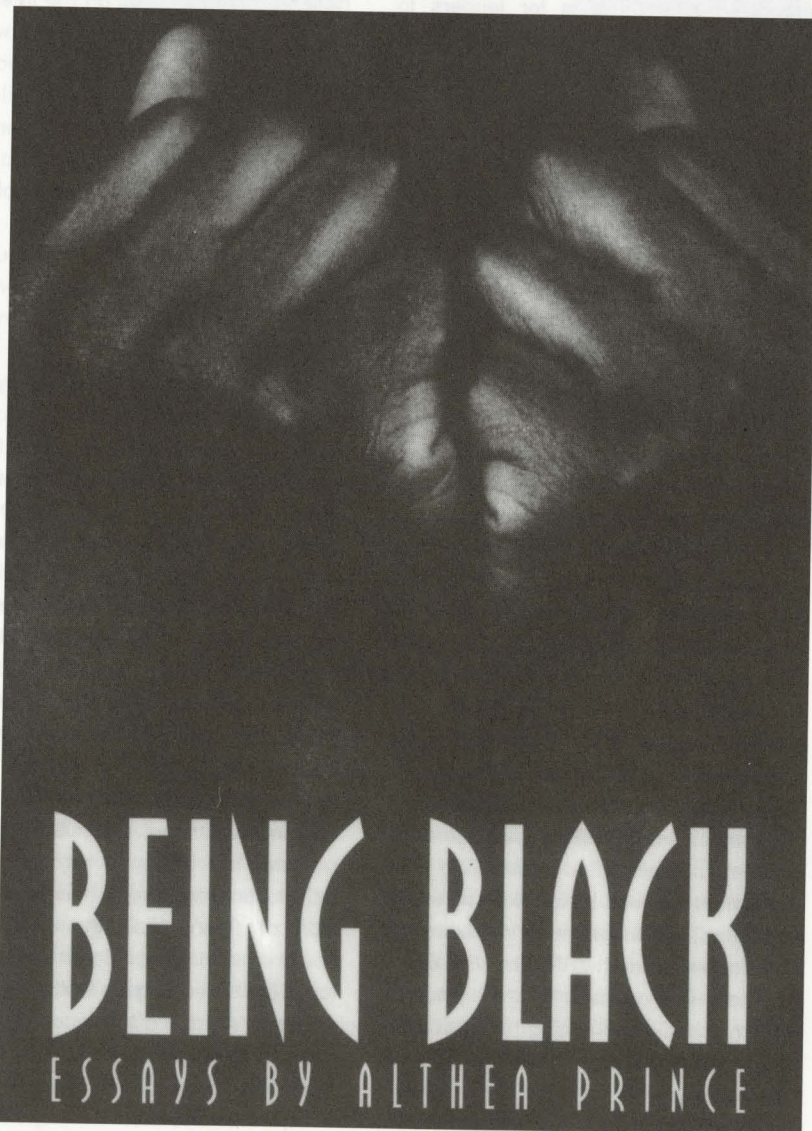
By Althea Prince

Insomniac Press, 2001

Review essay by Jennifer Harris

Althea Prince is a Toronto-based creative writer and academic who arrived in Canada from Antigua in 1965. None of these things is incidental in her first collection of essays, *Being Black*. While certainly having national resonance, *Being Black* is very much located in the experience of Toronto's Afro-Caribbean community, evident in her discussion of Caribana, as well as the search for an "authentic" Caribbean voice. The specificity of Prince's experience as an academic and writer further shapes the particular concerns and events addressed in this book, including the much-contested 1994 Writers' Union of Canada Conference, "Writing Thru Race," and the 1998 launch of the Centre for the Study of Black Cultures in Canada. Other essays contained in the volume address Toronto's Caribbean community in the 1960s, the narrowness of Black history month in Canada and the politics of language.

Uniting all of these discussions is Prince's concern with "the work to be done" in changing the relation of Black Canadians to, and within, the nation. She posits that this can be accomplished in a number of ways. First, Prince foregrounds the importance of historical knowledge of African peoples and their achievements. Second, she calls for the incorporation of Black history and content into Canada's educational system and a re-evaluation of the ways in which those of African descent



have traditionally been incorporated into/by the nation. Third, Prince insists on the need to take control of definitions of blackness and the direction of Black Studies in the academy. Fourth, and most importantly, Prince asserts the need for a politically unified Black community to back these goals.

Prince's call for a unified Black community draws attention to the specificity of her vision for Black Canada. While she acknowledges the existence of historic Black settlements on the East coast — Africadians, as named by fellow writer and critic George Eliot Clarke — and gestures to the existence of Blacks in other spaces in the nation, Prince does not consider how her analyses might differ according to the contexts of these populations. This does not mean, however, that her analyses are faulty. Rather, it draws attention to the "work to be done" that she foregrounds, particularly the need to complicate thinking about Black Canada beyond the nationally authorized narratives of Caribana and the Underground Railroad, both of which Prince discusses for exactly this reason.

However, a posited Black community rears its head in a more difficult fashion in her essay "Black Like I and I." Here, Prince writes of the founding colloquium of the Centre for the Study of Black Cultures in Canada, at York University in Toronto. Prince takes issue with the event, which she posits as the product of a "lone white faculty member" and lacking the presence of "York University African Canadian faculty." That Prince does not mention the co-chair of the event and co-founder of the centre, an Afro-Caribbean professor from the humanities department, is intriguing. That she remains displeased with the "postmodernist visions of the work to be done," as articulated by Black graduate students, is not surprising, given the ideological split evident in the crowd that day — the old "theory/practice" divide that academics must always negotiate.

Prince closes her essay by writing that "the future appears to be shaped from outside of us...It feels disgraceful to have the study of African-Canadians handed over on a

platter to the service of an agenda in which all of us are not participating. It is as if the collective voice, by exclusion, is herded to the rear." This suggests that those of African descent who engage with post-modern thinking about blackness are not authentically engaged with race, and are speaking out of turn. While I support Prince's assertion that white gatekeepers should not be dictating the future of Black Studies, this statement suggests that the faculty member and graduate students who spoke that day were "inauthentic" in their racial identities, and deliberately isolating themselves from the reality of race — a charge I suspect they would all deny. Furthermore, it suggests that work that offers pragmatic solutions that can be immediately applied is the only scholarship of value, as opposed to that which asks questions about how the ideologies that sustain racist practices and racial divides evolved, function and are perpetuated.

This is not to elevate one method of scholarship above the other — both must be held accountable. To engage with post-modernism also does not necessarily defy that all-pervasive injunction in contemporary society to "keep it real," as any post-modern understanding of race cannot (or at least, *should not*) happen in an ahistorical vacuum. The central tension in "Black Like I and I," for me at least, was the lack of a vital generational continuum between senior Black Canadian faculty and the students themselves. While Prince cites the existence of African Studies and Caribbean Studies programs at York, neither of these departments is centered explicitly on Black Canada, and so junior scholars in the area are left for the most part without courses or a wide variety of Black faculty mentors within their own disciplines. This reflects the hiring practices of the university — why is the eminently qualified Prince still contract faculty? I would be interested in hearing her perspective on this — and on the reality that many of those whom she cites as influential in the 1960s and 1970s did not necessarily pursue academic careers. This means that the projects of historical recuperation and community building that Prince cites as central to the advancement of Black Canadians are, in

the academic world that is responsible for producing scholarship, tenuous at best.

Being Black is therefore an important intervention in its documenting of "what came before" in Toronto's Afro-Caribbean community of the 1960s and 1970s, and in its discussion of the revelation of activism of earlier Black Canadian communities. Most importantly it creates a continuum between generations and their activities, and outlines Prince's strategies for ongoing intervention in the nation. The "party-party" people will be disappointed to hear that Prince advocates abandoning Toronto's annual Caribana festival, an admitted repository of "nostalgia and idolatry," in favour of a cultural festival that will allow "African Canadians to converse through art, with each other, and with their fellow citizens." Just as bell hooks argues that "loving blackness" is the most dangerous thing African Americans can do, Prince posits that "putting a cultural festival to the service of a community's self-definition" is the most dangerous, and therefore useful, thing that Toronto's Afro-Caribbean community can do.

Althea Prince has first-hand knowledge of how such dangerous, transgressive and therefore potentially liberating, such activities can be. Her account of the "Writing Thru Race" conference documents the public outcry in response to the news that some portions of the event would be open to writers of colour only, resulting in the federal government's withdrawal of funding. Yet, in the face of the difficulties caused by emotional strain due to external, internal, and financial strife, the conference proceeded and the writers triumphed. This narrative of success in the face of opposition is repeated throughout her essays, even as she records moments of exhaustion. These moments of exhaustion serve, however, to remind us that there is still much "work to be done," and Prince repeatedly reminds us in *Being Black* that there will always be those present to hold us accountable.

Jennifer Harris is a PhD candidate at York University, Toronto, and an associate editor at *Alphabet City*. Her work is on American literature and culture.

Writing to Legacy

Rachel Manley's *Slipstream*

Alfred A. Knopf, 2000

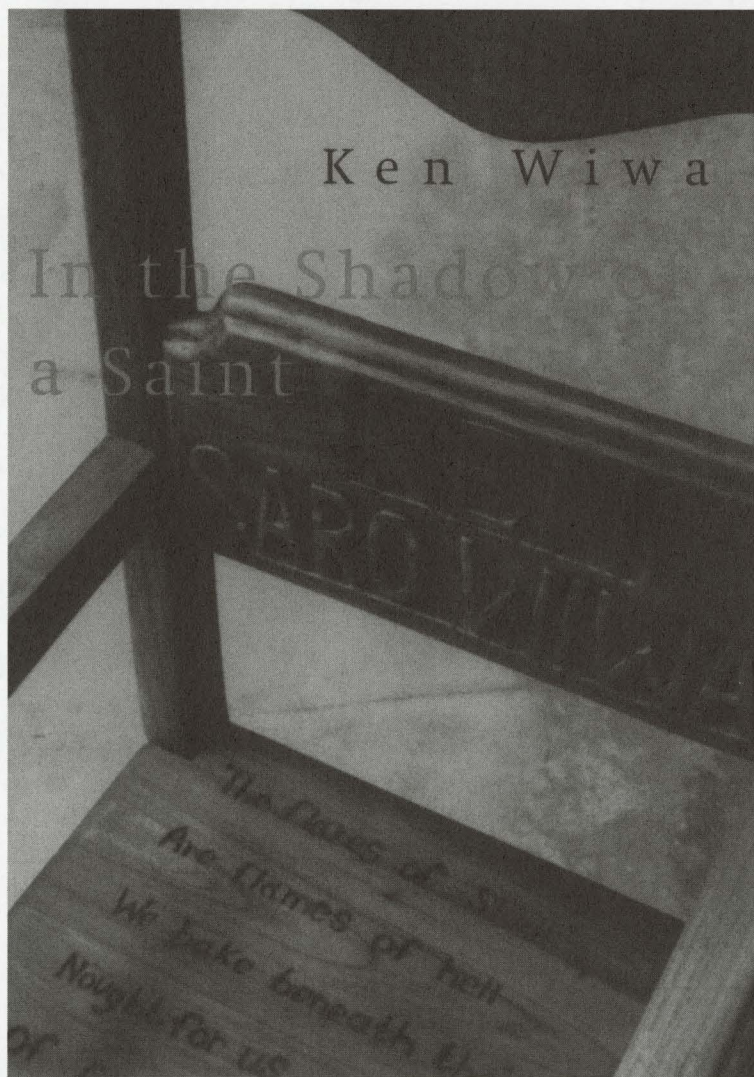
and Ken Wiwa's *In the Shadow of a Saint*

Alfred A. Knopf, 2000

Review by Gamal Abdel Shehid

Ken Wiwa's *In the Shadow of a Saint* and Rachel Manley's *Slipstream* both tell the story of a man; in each case, the author's father, Ken Saro-Wiwa and Michael Manley, respectively. But these works, published in the span of a few months in the fall of 2000, are also linked in the broader political sense, in that they tell us more than the story of the iconic figures that are the impetus for recollection. These stories enrich the historical archive of the struggle for justice and self-determination in the post-independence and post-colonial Black Atlantic, and provide informative and provocative memoirs of life in political families.

To some extent, the books' titles are interchangeable. Each book could have been given the other's title, given the similarity of the contexts and form of each. Rachel Manley and Ken Wiwa grew up in different eras and continents, yet they both grew up in political families whose work was defined by a general anti-colonialist sentiment and the imperative for self-determination of oppressed peoples. The form of the books allows a chance to read Michael Manley and Ken Saro-Wiwa as vulnerable and fallible men first, and as icons second. As a result, this form forces a re-reading of the legacy of each man, given that we are forced to deal with some unpleasant aspects of each.



Rachel Manley's *Slipstream* might best be described as a series of frames, or rather a series of frames within frames. The dominant frame is that of Michael Manley, and the specific occasion for the narrative is Manley's battle with cancer in the early to mid-1990s, a battle that ultimately took his life. Within this frame, Rachel Manley moves back and forth, at times providing a glimpse of the history of the Manley family, their encounters with Jamaican politics over the last fifty years, and the relationships between the various family members. Ken Wiwa's *In the Shadow of a Saint*, while not organized in frames, is also a multi-layered text. Many audiences occupy Wiwa's imagination, ranging from passionate activists interested in finding out more about Ken Saro-Wiwa, to those who spread posthumous misconceptions about him as a result of his political stance, to the author himself. In addition, *In the Shadow of a Saint* is an attempt by the author to come to terms with Ken Saro-Wiwa's death in order to find out, "where does he (father) end and where do I (son) begin."

Both books, perhaps inevitably, deal with fathers who have at times been absent, aloof, and difficult, often more focused upon their public lives than their families. Beyond what we might call "the usual" anger and resentment that many of us work through with our fathers, the fame and enormity of Michael Manley and Ken Saro-Wiwa adds a particular element to the anger and resentment. Wiwa writes:

I had a difficult and troubled relationship with my father, and although he was rarely around, I grew up in awe of him, intimidated by his achievements and haunted by the passions he stirred in both men and women.

Stylistically, *Slipstream* is a stunning piece of work. Manley deploys her style to render what Austin Clarke (on the book's back cover) calls a "testament to love." While this might seem like high praise, I couldn't agree more with Clarke's assessment. The book is beautifully written, and betrays Rachel Manley's considerable skills at poetry and prose. The many breathtakingly

poetic passages ultimately help her, and us, come to terms with the enormity of the memory of her experiences. The following passage conveys Rachel Manley's skills at conveying a sense of place:

The patio was the gentlest place in my father's home. Night choruised around it, prepared to follow whichever liturgy we chose.

Style may be Manley's most effective political weapon, especially if we consider the use of poetry within the larger project of revolutionary politics, and the fact that the connection between that project and poetry is intimate. Manley herself notes this on a couple of occasions in the book, where she notes that she was told both by her grandmother and her father about the political relevance of poetry, and that she was someone particularly skilled at it.

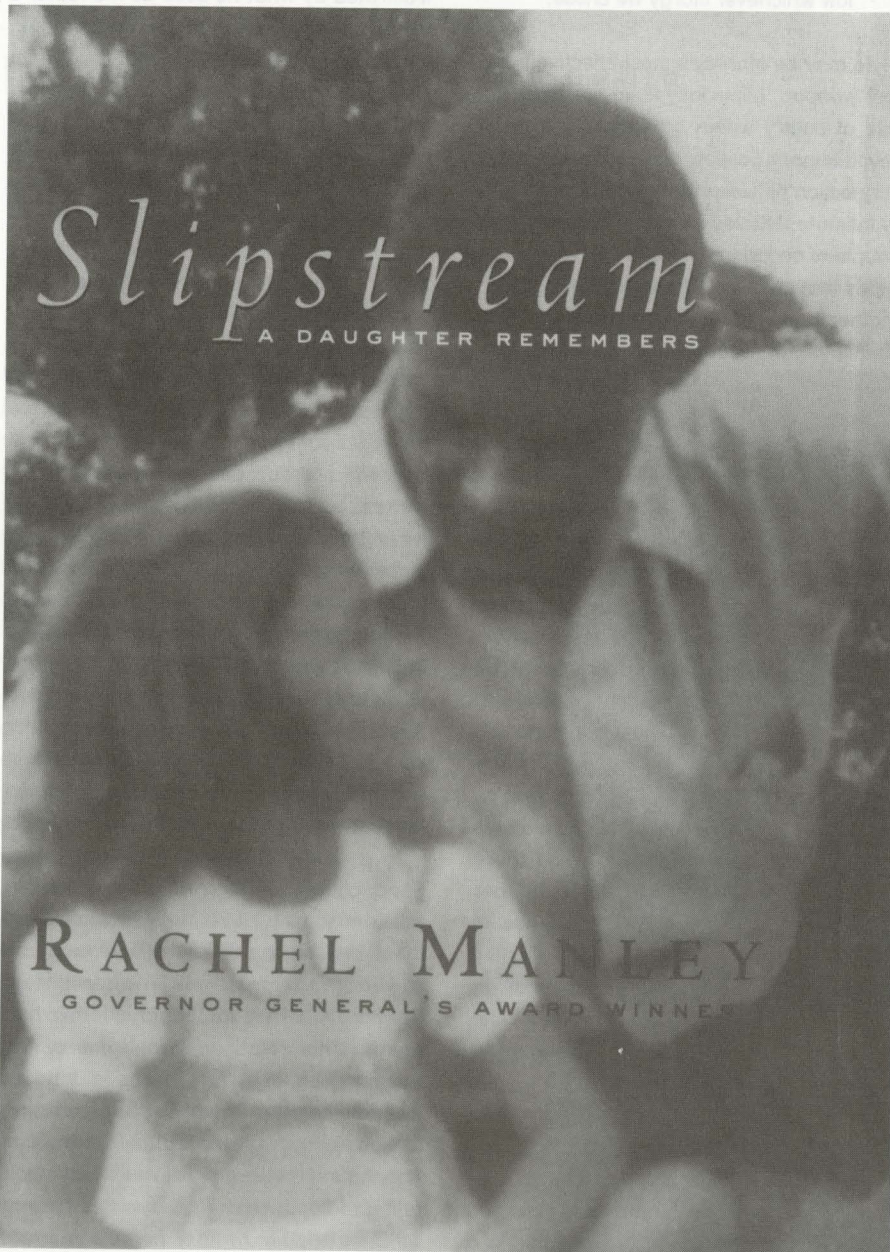
Manley's style, as well as that of Wiwa, adds a crucial element to traditional ways of writing politics such as political science, sociology or anthropology, which all too often seem beset with trying to fit human life into rigid categories and paradigms. The style allows Manley to bring her characters to us in plain vulnerability and in all of their humanity, whether she is referring to her father, her grandmother, nicknamed Mardi, or her brothers and sisters. The book is so evocative that at times it is as though you can hear "Joshua," and his methodical bassy voice. And while there are difficulties between Rachel and her dad, what comes through is a sense of mutual respect and love. Manley poignantly illustrates this when detailing the last moments of her father's life. Reflecting on the similarities between a story and a life, she notes:

You stand at the end of a story, quite unable to turn the last page. You have read too much and you have not read enough. Too late, you realize that all the parts you skipped over and dismissed should have been cherished... You would like to read it over again, but in the living time of the first read, of the first writing.

While Ken Wiwa is not quite the stylist that Manley is, he succeeds in rendering a disturbing and dignified portrait of the man who became a worldwide figure for activists almost overnight. Wiwa acknowledges that the relationship was a difficult one. Saro-Wiwa was an unrelenting critic and impassioned observer of the lives of his children. More to the point, Wiwa was constantly frustrated by what he sees as his father's unreasonable expectations around life, family, education, career and so on. On many occasions, Wiwa tells us what it is like to be caught in a double burden — which includes being both the son in a family, but also in the awkward position of the inheritor of a movement.

While it is a moving portrait, Wiwa's shortcoming is that he often resorts to father-and-son clichés in order to tell a story that is ultimately very particular. Clearly, the issue of Ken Wiwa's relation to his father is a heavy one, and one that causes a great deal of anxiety. But I wonder to what extent the anxiety would have been lessened had there been a more critical approach to the narrative of fathers and sons, which ultimately frames the kinds of questions that Wiwa is asking in limiting ways. Wiwa places far too much importance on the journey to "find" his father, that he indirectly minimizes the voices of others who played a key part in the journey, and who could have helped him piece things together.

Specifically, I am referring to the women in the family, who have far less voice than those in *Slipstream*. For example, while on a number of occasions Wiwa registers disapproval of the fact that his father had extramarital relations, the frame of the book (which often prioritizes a kind of journalistic reporting of the facts relating to Saro-Wiwa and his troubles with Sani Abacha's dictatorship) prevents him meditating in depth on the relation that he had with his mother, whom he refers to as Nene, nor does it allow for a detailed glimpse of this woman's life, and her experiences. In that sense, the book is far more a story of Ken Wiwa and his dad, and less a story of the entire family and their history.



In addition to being an important document to try and make sense of the political situation in post-independence Africa, as well as more specifically the Nigerian case (and thus being worth reading alongside Wole Soyinka's recent *The Open Sore of a Continent*), the book has another focus. At another level, it is worth reading Wiwa in connection with previous writing by black men on their fathers. Wiwa is clearly aware of this since he chooses to open the book with a moving and thoughtful passage from John Edgar Wideman, which refers to the necessity of forgiving and forgetting when it comes to remembering fathers.

The citation of Wideman is useful here, and promises to put Wiwa within this larger tradition of writing by black men (many of whom are gay; I am thinking notably of James Baldwin, Joseph Beam and Marlon Riggs) about the troubling and constrained conversations between themselves and their fathers, given the often punishing restrictions on black masculine intimacy. Wiwa's work is clearly an interesting, if unintended addition to this literature, and it helps to continue the dialogue about black masculinity and the silences surrounding intimacy and vulnerability within black political culture that have been brought to light by black feminist and queer activists of the last fifty years.

Both books offer important readings of political culture in the black Atlantic from the other side of heroism. As a result, the stories of Ken Wiwa and Rachel Manley offer us new and interesting possibilities to imagine ourselves in relation to the often daunting themes within black political culture such as legacy, fathers and tradition. In addition, the fact that these works lie somewhere between history, memoir and autobiography may give us some methodological clues as to how to go about it.

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short
FUUSE

The Boomerang Effect

by Jamelie Hassan

On May 15, the *Toronto Star* published "Kudos for Phillips on Ipperwash" by Alison Blackduck. A reporter for Nunatsiag News in Iqaluit, Nunavut, Blackduck writes of her brief telephone interview with Gerry Phillips, the Liberal MPP for Scarborough-Agincourt, who has persistently demanded that Ontario's Premier Mike Harris call a public inquiry into the suspicious death of Dudley George at Ipperwash Provincial Park in 1995. She writes that her interview with Phillips "renewed her faith in politicians" and that "it gave her hope that Dudley George will receive the justice and dignity that, ideally, should be everybody's due."

The next day the *Globe & Mail* published, under the headline "Nothing's sacred in the peyote tent," Sarah Milroy's review of visual artist Jane Ash Poitras and her exhibition, "The Shaman Experience" in Toronto (*Globe Review*, May 16, 2001). The review is more revealing of the writer than of the artist's exhibition, for in no way does Milroy's writing substantially contribute to an analysis of this artist's work. A capable writer, formerly at the *National Post*, Milroy is dragging the excess baggage of the neo-conservative Alliance Party's mouthpiece into the pages of the *Globe and Mail*, pushing those same "white bread" attitudes that Alec St. Marc recently examined in his Short Fuse "Going Postal" (*Fuse* Vol. 23, #4). Alec St. Marc concludes his media critique of the *National Post* with this statement: "It makes you realize how far away we are from having genuine diversity represented in mainstream print media."

Based on her review, Milroy can certainly continue the *National Post's* agenda and at the same time step into the boots of her predecessors at the *Globe and Mail's* cultural desk, one of whom has made the toady leap to Washington. She may well outdo them.

Milroy's writing on Poitras can certainly sit among the best of those who cultivate a sometimes invasive curiosity in the lives of artists. She describes her visit with the Edmonton-based Cree artist during the opening of a successful exhibition in one of Toronto's uptown commercial galleries, narrating in rapid succession the details of the artist's difficult early life with a breezy and dismissive style, later to deliver her report card (though she has earlier stated that "art critics are not in the business of handing out report cards for personal demeanour"). Further on, she makes this pronouncement: "All the ingredients of her experience are there, but it somehow doesn't feel like art."

She finds that Jane Ash Poitras is a receptive interview subject who will accommodate the media interest in her work, which Milroy describes as "feverish." Let me give an example of their published exchange:

Sarah Milroy: "I tell her I will be writing a review of the show, and, at my request, she offers her cell number."

Jane Ash Poitras: "I always have it on, even when I am in the peyote tent."



Prayer Ties My People, Jane Ash Poiras, 2000, mixed media on canvas, 152.4 cm x 243.84 cm. Courtesy: Mira Godard Gallery, Toronto.

Sarah Milroy: "It's hard to describe just what it is that jars about this kind of statement, which Poiras makes constantly."

The photo caption for the image of *Portrait #9*, on the front page of the *Globe Review*, sums up Jane Ash Poiras's commitments as "boil-in-the-bag politics." The larger black & white image on the inside pages carries the caption: "The show's centrepiece, entitled *Prayer Ties My People*: a simplistic inventory of suffering, redemption and displacement."

Using the voice of the knowledgeable and caring art critic who respects and understands the work of First Nations artists, Milroy assigns herself as protector of values: "I feel offended for her community, who rightly hold these things dear." Milroy is brazen (again borrowing from the reviewer's own vocabulary) in passing off Poiras's work with statements such as: "If these paintings were made by a white artist, they would be derided as pandering both to stereotypes about noble savages and clichés about artists as spiritual seers." Milroy's vehement barrage, let us not be mistaken, delivers a direct attack on the artist's identity and the historical trajectory in her work. Her language is riddled with the

ugly, stereotypical verbiage that has often been used to characterize First Nations peoples: "lazy, garish and clichéd" (positioned in the byline under the headline) boomerang against Milroy, exposing her Euro-Canadian values and her rigid ideas of what constitutes First Nations art. When will the outdated idea of the critic who can, cloaked in claims of sincerity, dispense the stamp and measure of "authenticity" be finally put to rest?

Hey, you enlightened journalists and art writers! We are counting on you to cut through the prejudices of reviewers like Sarah Milroy. It is imperative to put political questions that threaten Mike Harris back into the discussion of the cultural work of artists in Canada who are giving voice to their immediate, political histories — artists like Jane Ash Poiras, who deserve better than this.

Dedicated to the memory of Geoffrey Rans, friend and supporter of the arts who died on June 6, 2001.

Jamelie Hassan was recently awarded a Governor General's Award in Visual Arts for distinguished career achievement (see the interview with Meera Sethi on page 29).

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