

WINTER 1993•94 Vol. XVII No. 2 \$4.50

FUSE

MAGAZINE

**M. Nourbese Philip on
Show Boat and the Media**

PLUS

Call Out the Tropes

Miss Saigon

Undergoes Analysis

by Richard Fung

Richard Fung interviews

David Henry Hwang,

author of *M. Butterfly*

The Rising Sun in

the Media

by Scott McFarlane

Rocking the Show Boat

by Sharon Lewis

Reviews and a **Profile**

of *diaspora* magazine

founder Peter Hudson

**sinking:
6 million dollars
& still counting**



Robert Flack

October 14, 1957 – October 20, 1993

When Rob Flack died of an AIDS-related infection in October, his career as a visual artist was in full stride and new opportunities were opening up for him. This success was hard-earned as there was considerable resistance to his overtly gay, camp-inflected work in Toronto where a sober structuralism still dominates the discourse.

Rob was a graduate of the Fine Arts program at York University. Associated with artist collective General Idea at the end of the seventies, he published an artist book through Art Metropole while he was working as a graphic designer for FILE magazine. In 1981 he exhibited sculptural works that incorporated silhouettes of models from male physique magazines of the sixties in the inaugural "ChromaZone" show. After that he exhibited in several local and international ChromaZone-related exhibitions, most memorably a prescient two-person show with Chrysanne Statbacos in 1983. His work of the latter half of the eighties became increasingly homo-baroque as he created more and more elaborately layered, complex drawings that explored nuances of Queer aestheticism and desire.

When Rob shifted his production into the medium of photography, his work began to get the attention that it so richly deserved. Working with his brother John Flack, he constructed complex photographs by layering light and images through various collage and montage techniques. This work coincided with an inspirational journey to India, which the spirituality of Tantric philosophy began to inform his photography. His immaculate craft and the archly irreverent dandyism, however, prevented these series from falling into the muddy slew of New Age banality.

Rob Flack was part of the founding collective of Cold City Gallery; he also exhibited at Garnet Press Gallery in the last years of his life. In New York he showed at the small but influential Feature Gallery. Last year, Nancy Campbell of the MacDonald Stewart Gallery in his native Guelph curated a solo survey exhibition that travelled across Canada. He also participated in several important group exhibitions in Canada and the U.S. with thematic issues around the body or Queer representations.

In the last six months of his life, after he inherited a small sum, Rob's generosity towards the art community was reflected in his manic drive to create an important collection of artists that he felt were undervalued. Out of this project came his last cultural contribution, the curation of "Smash Mega-Hit Explosion" at the Garnet Press Gallery in the summer of 1993. The dynamic combination of artists in this exhibition reflected all the qualities of his own work: intelligent, energetic, erotic, witty, innovative and...sassy.

—A. Fabo

In Memoriam

Alexander Wilson

May 29, 1953 – October 26, 1993

Alex Wilson, a former FUSE editor in the early eighties, died of AIDS-related causes in late October. A man of numerous talents and interests, he was well known as a writer, editor, political and cultural theorist, landscape designer, horticulturist, and gay activist. Most notably, he was the author of the critically acclaimed book *The Culture of Nature: North American Landscape from Disney to the Exxon Valdez*, published in 1991. This text was a thoughtful collection of interrelated essays that examined the staging and managing of natural and artificial environments in North America.

Alex was born and raised in the U.S. and came to Canada in 1977 to pursue a doctorate in comparative literature at the University of Toronto. Soon after his arrival he met artist Stephen Andrews, they became partners in life, love, travel and creative pursuits. Alex Wilson flourished in his newly adopted home.

Alex used his considerable editorial skills to give new sophistication and vitality to the cultural section of the gay liberation journal *The Body Politic* throughout the late seventies. He then moved on, becoming an editor at *FUSE Magazine* in the early eighties. By mid-decade he co-founded and co-edited *Border/Lines*, working with an editorial collective that hoped to address broader North American issues. Around this time he also began a landscaping business in partnership with Stephen Andrews, which they named Garrison Creek Landscaping Company after the long buried creek that flowed underground close by their home near Trinity Bellwoods Park.

Alex Wilson was a generous and dynamic thinker who was inclined to put his thoughts into actions. During the memorial service that his friends and family organized, many people from a wide spectrum of disciplines came forward with testimonials of how they benefited from his gentle but acute criticality. With Alex's death, Toronto is a more culturally impoverished city; no longer do we have in our midst such a uniquely brilliant and handsome, walking and talking embodiment of insightful theory put to committed practice.

—A. Fabo



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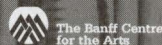
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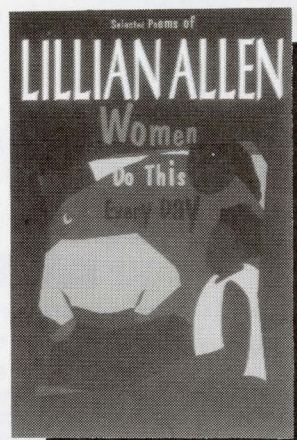
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Film & Video News

by Karen Tisch



As the Euclid Turns The Saga Continues

In response to the recent financial crisis and subsequent closure of Toronto's Euclid Theatre, a number of media organizations around the city—all former user groups of the facility—have formed a consortium entitled TMEC (Toronto Media Exhibitors Consortium). The group's mandate is to explore the reestablishment of a community-based, affordable venue for the exhibition of independent film and video. The Euclid has meanwhile been leased to Libra Films, a commercial film distributor, who has renamed the theatre The Metropolitan.

Urinal and Other Stories

Since the 1980s, Toronto-based artist and activist John Greyson has received much critical and popular attention for his highly successful films and videos exploring Queer culture and history. His most recent production, *Zero Patience*, a wildly inventive feature-length musical about "aids, science, sex and homophobia," premiered at this year's Festival of Festivals and received an honourable mention in the Toronto City Award competition. Art Metropole and the Power Plant are now co-publishing the script of Greyson's 1988 feature-length film *Urinal* along with seven image-text pieces. The new publication, ap-

propriately titled *Urinal and Other Stories*, brings together stories written by the artist between 1985 and 1990 which, in Greyson's own words, "were products of an explosive ground swell of gay and lesbian cultural production."

Kanehsatake: 270 Years of Resistance

Congratulations are due to Alanis Obomsawin, long-time First Nations filmmaker and activist, whose 1993 documentary *Kanehsatake: 270 Years of Resistance* recently earned her the Toronto City Award for Excellence in Canadian Production at Toronto's Festival of Festivals. The film, a "behind the barricades" look at the incidents that occurred at Oka and Kanehsatake in the fall of 1990, traces the 78-day stand-off between Mohawk Warriors who rose to defend their land and the Quebec police force and Canadian Armed Forces. Unlike the dominant media coverage of Oka, *Kanehsatake* places the struggle for "The Pines" in its proper historical context—outlining the Mohawks' 270 year history of struggle over their ancestral lands. A powerful tribute to the courage and dignity of First Nations peoples, this film should be compulsory viewing for all Canadians.

Redressing Racism

The history of Chinese Canadian immigration and, more specifically, the trials endured by early Chinese communities under the Head Tax Law and the Chinese Exclusion Act, are themes eloquently tackled in a new feature-length documentary co-directed by Montreal-based filmmakers William Ging Wee Dere and Malcolm Guy. *Moving the Mountain* takes its starting point from Dere's own struggle to resurrect his family history, yet quickly goes beyond its original mandate, combining interviews with early Chinese immigrants and rare archival footage. A valuable contribution to the history of Chinese Canadian communities, this film (quickly gaining recognition on the international film festival circuit) also goes a long way in exposing a buried history of systemic racism in this country.

Reading Material

Fuse readers will undoubtedly want to pick up the current issues of *Cineaction* and *Border/Lines* which are both devoted to enhancing existing dialogues and discourses surrounding "race and representation." While both magazines present the work of local and international writers on a wide spectrum of topics, an impressive offering of arti-

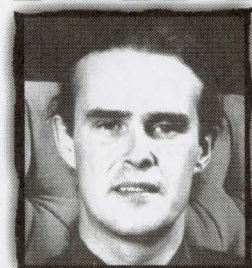
cles written by leading proponents of the Black British filmmaking avant-garde will be of particular interest to indie film followers. Highlights include Isaac Julien's *Confessions of A Snow Queen* and Kobena Mercer's *Dark and Lovely*, published in *Cineaction*, and an interview with filmmaker John Akomfrah in *Border/Lines*.

Calls For Submissions Celebrating South Asian Cultures

Desh Pardesh is a non profit organization dedicated to "celebrating and exploring new and emerging patterns of living, loving and left culture created by South Asians in the Diaspora." Their annual festival offers audiences an eclectic mix of film and video screenings, readings, panel discussions, writers' cabarets, live music and performance art (not to mention one of the hottest dance parties in Toronto). Desh Pardesh is currently inviting participants to submit works and works-in-progress for inclusion in their 1994 festival, loosely scheduled for the end of March or early April. Submissions should be forwarded to:

Desh Pardesh
141 Bathurst Street
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Tel: (416) 601-9932
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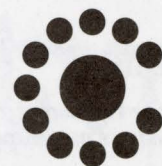
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Send In Your Out Tapes

The Inside Out Collective is currently seeking film and video submissions for its fourth annual Lesbian and Gay Film and Video Festival held in Toronto. The Festival seeks to "redress the historically inadequate distribution and exhibition opportunities for works that best reflect the gay and lesbian community." Films and videos are selected on the basis of their artistic as well as cultural and/or political value, and cover diverse issues surrounding race, sexuality, AIDS, representation and strategies of political resistance. The deadline for submissions is January 15, 1993. While all formats of film and video are exhibited at the Festival, please send 1/2" or 3/4" videos for preview purposes along with general information on the work (i.e. title, length, etc.), and a return address. Submissions should be sent to:

The Inside Out Collective
P.O. Box 121, Station P
Toronto, Canada
M5S 2S7
Tel: (416) 944-0743
Fax: (416) 360-0781

Queer Entrée

The Voyeur Foyer, a weekly cable TV series in San Francisco, screens exclusively Queer film and video. The show will air 10:30-11pm every Sunday from January to June, 1994, on channel 53. Submissions of Queer related film or video, thirty seconds to twenty-eight minutes in length, are welcome. Half inch preview tapes can be sent to:

Eric Haerberli
Submit Films and Productions
35A Hoff Street, San Francisco,
CA 94110
Phone/Fax: (415) 252-0428

Short Fuse!

by Susan Kealey

Anyone for Black Jack?

Although the procurement of cultural monies has always been risky, the Art Gallery of Windsor will literally indulge in gambling when it leases its present site to the Province of Ontario for an interim casino site. By leasing its building for a short term, the Gallery will achieve considerable retrofit and upgrading of the current facilities, including a new roof, a mechanical air handling system and 15,000 additional square feet. The revenue realized from the lease with the Province will be dedicated to assisting with the long term financial needs of the gallery. And lest you think you will be admiring Shadbolts above the one-armed bandit, in the meantime the permanent collection of more than 2,000 art works will be located on two floors of a downtown mall. The second floor will also house a new interactive "Children's Gallery."

In this novel location, the AGW intends to develop exhibitions and programmes that will increase its audience and widen its educational profile in the city. As a recent press release states, the AGW will continue to provide access to the visual art of this region and the country while responding to "The Mall" as a centre of contemporary culture. As Barbara Kruger surmised, *I shop therefore I am*.

Born to be a Fag?

While Toronto artist Robert Windrum may be happy to be gay, the Koffler Gallery would prefer he kept it to himself.

Windrum, whose work addresses issues of gay sexuality, gender and identity was to exhibit some of his embroidered works along with Michele Gay, who also works with embroidery and drawing to explore gender issues from a feminist perspective.

Twenty-eight days before the exhibition's scheduled opening, Windrum's participation was cancelled and Gay withdrew hers in support. As the Koffler Gallery is located within a community centre, there was some concern on the part of Associate Curator John Messier regarding one work which included the phrase "born to be a fag." Messier informed Windrum that he would have to seek the approval of Gallery Director Joan Tooke. However, according to a press release issued by the artists, they have received no response (at press time) from the Koffler regarding this particular work and the Gallery Director has neither seen the original nor a reproduction of the artwork. Although Joan Tooke sent a letter to Windrum stating her support of Messier's decision to cancel his participation, to date Koffler staff have not clarified who actually made the decision to cancel the exhibition. Windrum believes the cancellation represents discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation. The Ontario Human Rights Commission has taken on the case and will be pursuing an early settlement initiative.

Canadian Customs Famous the World Over

At its sixtieth International Congress held in September in Santiago de Compostela, Spain,

PEN passed a resolution noting with concern the current situation of book seizures by Canada Customs. In a letter dated October 4, 1993, to then Prime Minister Campbell, the 2,600 members of PEN American Center expressed their opposition to the random book and magazine seizures, remarking that these have been used to target small booksellers and distributors and particularly gay and lesbian presses and book retailers.

ANNPAC Aftermath

Following the infamous 1993 AGM in Calgary, several member centres have withdrawn from ANNPAC/RACA as well as one regional group in support of the Minquon Panchayat, the caucus formed to examine issues of race and representation within the seventeen-year-old association. Vancouver's Pitt Gallery and Calgary's Em Media and The New Gallery have withdrawn as well as PAARC, the association regrouping B.C. artist-run centres. The withdrawal of PAARC seems largely symbolic, as most of the artist-run centres remain affiliated. Another centre, Gallery 306 of Toronto, withdrew for rather opposite reasons, stating that they had become tired of the trendy climate of political correctness that had infiltrated the organization.



Call in the Tropes!

Miss Saigon undergoes Analysis



Lover and *Joy Luck Club* put forward quite different constructions of Asian (particularly male) sexuality and may herald a shift in the way Asian subjects and Asian audiences are viewed in relation to the film market. So while the defenders of the show charge their critics with "political correctness" and censorship of the imagination, I can see little imagination in *Miss Saigon*, just a tired fantasy dressed up with a few flashy new gizmos.

Except for the shift from nineteenth century Japan to the recent history of Vietnam, the plot sticks closely to the original story of Pinkerton and Cho-Cho-San. In the last days of the war in Vietnam, a young orphaned village teenager named Kim, is forced to become a prostitute. On her first night of work she meets and falls in love with a white American soldier (Chris), is made pregnant by him, but as a result of circumstance, is left behind when the last helicopter whisks him away from Saigon. Years later, Chris and his new American wife come searching for Kim in Bangkok, where she is a refugee bar girl. Kim has lived in hope of finding Chris, but when she discovers that he has married, she kills herself so that her son might go with his father to America.

Why does this story sound so familiar even if we've never heard Puccini's opera? Because we've seen it all before in film. The cinematic relationship between Asian women and white men have followed certain patterns: first, given that the compliant sexuality of Asian women is only as renowned as the fierce protectiveness of the Asian community and family, the woman in question must somehow be freed from her social and familial context and be made available to the white protagonist. The most convenient method, and the one employed in *Miss Saigon*, is to make her an orphan. During the course of the musical, Kim defends her son by shooting

I HAVE TO ADMIT I DON'T ATTEND a lot of musical theatre. Although as a child I knew all the words to all the songs from *Mary Poppins* and *The Sound of Music* — all the dance numbers too — today, except as camp, or with the exception of pomo reworkings such as John Greyson's new AIDS film *Zero Patience*, the form holds little interest for me.

Miss Saigon does nothing to change my opinion, I'm afraid. Housed in its own specially built theatre, costing and making millions (a mere five months after its premiere, the Toronto production has already broken even), the Mirvish-MacIntosh production of Alain Boublil's and Claude-Michel Schonberg's "opera," is the epitome of what used to be disparagingly referred to as bourgeois taste. At almost fifty dollars for the cheapest seat at a weekday matinee, *Miss Saigon* could hardly be called popular culture — the median age of audience when I attended was about fifty-five, and as far as I could tell I was the only non-white person on the entire third balcony. Nor is it, on the other hand, high culture either. This comfortable, middle-of-the-road entertainment with opulent but unimaginative sets and a seamless technical production, delivers a sentimental, cliché-ridden libretto and a mediocre score. Ma-Anne Dionisio, Kevin Gray and many of the other actors have impressive voices, but about a minute af-

ter the curtain fell I could not remember a ditty from the show. *Miss Saigon* is also bourgeois in the Marxist sense of the word, offering a cold-war account of the Vietnam war, distorted in its superficiality.

So why bother discussing this musical in the pages of FUSE, most of whose readers are unlikely to fork out that much money to view something with such little artistic pay-off? To be honest, I'm ambivalent about giving the musical even this much attention; there are other more immediate issues of racism and injustice, and even in terms of representation, *Miss Saigon* may not be as insidious as a film like *Rising Sun*, which is viewed by many more people. *Miss Saigon*, however, is a contradictory and therefore interesting phenomenon. It has also become a flashpoint in the long-standing debate about the politics and culture whose keywords are racism, sexism, political correctness, censorship and artistic freedom.

The Canadian production of *Miss Saigon* is an English translation of a contemporary French opera, itself a restaging of Puccini's 1904 opera *Madama Butterfly*, based on the 1900 stage version of an 1889 short story. The result of this genealogy is that *Miss Saigon* inherits an anachronistic racist image of Asian peoples rarely depicted so explicitly today. Recent films such as *Dragon*, *The Ballad of Little Jo*, *M. Butterfly*, *The Wedding Banquet*, *The*

Chris' Vietnamese competitor Thuy, her one remaining connection to the village. This repeats another common motif, the struggle of the men over ownership of the woman, which justifies the disposal of the Asian competitor. And true to the form, the only two Vietnamese male characters in *Miss Saigon* are Tran, a greedy and unscrupulous pimp (also known as The Engineer) and Thuy, who is made to embody both the "traditional" despotism of patriarchy and the modern menace of communism.

While many productions are pleased to titillate with a bit of multi-coloured sex, the prospect of a happy mixed race couple, however, is deemed too threatening, and most films—like *Miss Saigon*—kill off or otherwise dispose of their Asian female love interest before the end. In *Marginal Sights: Staging the Chinese in America*, James Moy notes that Cho Cho San's suicide in the original *Madama Butterfly* is meant to signify Japaneseness—the hara-kiri stereotype. He goes on to cite "the rather amusing tendency for Asian (both male and female) to find death on the American field of representation," and quotes Anna May Wong, Asian America's first Hollywood star, as commenting: "When I die, my epitaph should be 'she died a thousand deaths.' That was the story of my career. Most of the times I played in mystery and intrigue stories. They didn't know what to do with me at the end, so they killed me off." David Henry Hwang sums it up cleverly in his own reworking of the story entitled *M. Butterfly*:

It's one of your favorite fantasies, isn't it? The submissive Oriental woman and the cruel white man.... Consider it in this way: what would you say if a blond homecoming queen fell in love with a short Japanese businessman? He treats her cruelly, then goes home for three years, during which time she prays to his picture and turns down marriage from a young Kennedy. Then, when she learns he has remarried, she kills herself. Now I believe you should consider this girl to be a deranged idiot, correct? But because it's an Oriental who kills herself for a Westerner—ah!—you find it beautiful.

Aspects of *Miss Saigon* are also familiar from many Hollywood films about the Vietnam war. From the dogmatically patriotic to the remorsefully liberal, these films invariably focus on (white) Americans. Whether as brave martyrs in the battle against world communism, innocent youth thrown into a war they didn't understand, or overgrown school-yard bullies let loose on a foreign people, it is the Americans who matter—their victories, their tragedies, their crimes. In these films Vietnam and the Vietnamese are reduced to a menacing backdrop at worst; at best, they form a supporting cast whose function is to motivate the valour, anger, pity or madness of the American. This focus on the American protagonist may be the immediate result of audience response surveys and the Hollywood

star system; however, the celluloid version of the war both mirrors and justifies the treatment of Asians and other third world peoples as non-humans to be bombed or

aided according to America's needs of the moment.

The problem with any given stereotypical representation, however, is not so much that it is "negative" but that it is limiting, not that it by itself is damaging, but that it repeats assertions that are continuously and pervasively reiterated (in schools, families, government, media and so on); and not so much that it is necessarily false, but that it becomes the dominant public information about a group, and hence the common sense knowledge about them.

To see the power of the stereotype in its continuous and pervasive re-articulation is to acknowledge that the racist patterns in a production such as *Miss Saigon* reaffirm but do not on their own produce racist knowledge. If *Miss Saigon* were the only show about sexually available Asian women or money-grubbing Asian men it wouldn't be a stereotype and there would be no protest—negative portrayals *per se* are not a problem. But the criminalization of Vietnamese youth, the sexual marketing of Asian women, and the vilification of an Asian business threat are standard features of contemporary North American public discourse and institutional practice. In order to use these images—the ingenuous bar girl or the avaricious businessman—without serving racist agendas, it is first necessary to foreground and unpack these discourses. This is not something that *Miss Saigon* sets out to do.

If we understand the power of the stereotype in its incessant generation from a multitude of sites, however, we can also recognize that cultural products cannot completely pre-determine how they are to be read. Spectators bring their own histories and investments into the theatre with them, and this results in a variety of interpretations. For me, the experience of viewing *Miss Saigon* was painful. As the scantily clad bar girls bump and grind for the lecherous American soldiers, and for the almost totally white audience, I felt uncomfortably visible as an Asian. I felt profoundly embarrassed by the fawning sliminess of Kevin Gray's Tran, and

the romanticized delusions of Ma-Anne Dionisio's Kim, and the enthusiastic self-sale of the female dancers (so different from the reappropriation of the sexually explicit representations of say Annie Sprinkle or Toronto sex-trade worker and filmmaker Gwen-dolyn). The only saving grace during these moments was that Kevin Gray wasn't coded to look particularly Vietnamese, and that the actors didn't attempt "accents," providing a little relief in what was otherwise a pretty claustrophobic experience.

My reaction to *Miss Saigon* is no doubt grounded in my particular experience of being Asian in the Americas, my education in decoding texts, my political analysis, and my taste in entertainment. Individual viewers will leave *Miss Saigon* with different impressions and responses. Some will compare it to their favorite TV soap, or the last musical they have seen. The video interlude about the Bui-Doi (mixed-race of children of American soldiers) will move some spectators to tears and strike others as a shameless exploitation of the plight of these children. Some will feel pride that an "Asian" story would receive such a lavish production, while for others, the show will reaffirm their opposition to Asian immigration. I can even imagine rebellious Asian youths for whom the bar girl spectacle could be liberating in its celebration of the forbidden, having something of the allure of Madonna. And while I object to *Miss Saigon's* presentation of the Vietnam war, many Vietnamese Canadians would probably share the musical's anti-communist orientation.

In other words, it is not the case—as anti-rock evangelists or anti-porn feminists would have it—that you automatically believe and act out what you see, or that texts, even ones as problematic as *Miss Saigon*, are monolithic constructions. While the musical is obviously written for whites about the Vietnamese, there are several points in which the unitary perspective is internally unsettled. As the last Americans are airlifted from Saigon, the action "cuts" back and forth between the two sides of the massive gate dividing the American

embassy from the rest of Saigon. Under the thundering chaos of the approaching helicopter, the actors rush back and forth, from in front to behind the gate, shifting the standpoint of the audience from that of the escaping Americans to the Vietnamese who are being left behind. Yet even this disruption must be contextualized in that the only Vietnamese given any credence or sympathy in *Miss Saigon* are those for whom America represents salvation.

Because a viewer's capacity to read against the grain is greatly enhanced by the availability of alternative accounts, effectively challenging racist discourses, such as those of *Miss Saigon*, is more complicated than simply shutting down the musical. It suggests the difficult task of public education and also requires a commitment to bring forward more complex images of Asians, and therefore, to change the face and terms of cultural production in this country. This includes a host of initiatives necessary to open a space for Asian writers, directors and actors to address a range of issues, and to end the marginalization of Asian audiences. It is ironic that *Miss Saigon* has the largest cast of Asian Canadian actors I've ever seen on a single stage, many of whom are making their professional debut. The roles of the American soldiers also feature a number of Black actors, including the principal character John. Non-white actors should however be able to gain this big stage experience—and draw these salaries—without having to perform such neo-colonial fantasies.

In Toronto, public opposition to *Miss Saigon* has been coordinated by Asian ReVisions: Beyond *Miss Saigon*, a broad based coalition of community activists, students and artists. For the premiere of *Miss Saigon* the group organized a vocal picket in front of the Princess of Wales Theatre, gaining significant, if not entirely positive media attention. The protest which continues with informational pickets every month, has drawn the endorsement of a long list of organizations.

Many Asians no doubt either see *Miss Saigon* as benign, or believe that it

is self-defeating to tangle with the mainstream, and that we should concentrate on our own productions. However, the millions of dollars invested in *Miss Saigon* are not easily matched by the resources available to CelebrAsian, CanAsian Artists Group or Cahoots Theatre. I don't believe the two strategies to be mutually exclusive either: loud protest has often had the effect of opening resources to misrepresented groups.

While the Asian ReVision's principal slogan of "boycott *Miss Saigon*" may seem like wishful thinking given the record pre-sale of tickets to the show, Asian ReVisions has used the attention garnered during the controversy as an opportunity to address school boards and other institutions about stereotyping. And while the protest against *Miss Saigon* is their first endeavour, the group's agenda includes support for the artistic and intellectual work of Asian Canadians and other people of colour.

What is particularly significant about Asian ReVisions, however, is that it is the first public political action by pan-Asian Torontonians in many years. Campaigns such as that against the distortions of CTV's *W5*, the struggle for redress for Japanese Canadians, or the recent demonstrations against anti-Tamil violence have been organized largely within specific communities, with some outside support. Asian ReVisions, however, represents a generation of activists who identify beyond national roots—as Asians. It may be the most positive legacy of *Miss Saigon*.

For information about the *Miss Saigon* protest contact Asian ReVisions, P.O. Box 203, Station P, Toronto, M5S 2S7

Richard Fung is a Toronto-based writer, video producer and community activist.

NOTES

¹James Moy, *Marginal Sights: Staging The Chinese in America* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press), pp. 82, 86.



Richard Fung Interviews David Henry Hwang

Just a few months after the Toronto premiere of *Miss Saigon*, David Cronenberg's film of David Henry Hwang's Tony Award-winning *M. Butterfly* received its gala premiere as the opening film of the Festival of Festivals. Starring Jeremy Irons and John Lone, the film was inspired by the infamous case of a French diplomat who, after an eighteen year relationship with a Chinese spy, claimed not to know that "she" was in fact a man. I spoke with David Henry Hwang at the Festival of Festivals.

RF How did you come to link the story of Bernard Boursicot and Shi Pei Pu with that of *Madame Butterfly*?

DHH When I read the story in *The New York Times*, the Frenchman was trying to account for the fact he had never seen his Chinese lover naked. He said, "I thought she was very modest; I thought it was a Chinese custom." That's not a Chinese custom. I thought, maybe he's fallen in love, not with an actual person, but a fantasy stereotype of the Orient. I pondered this and after a couple of months it came to me that he probably thought he'd found his version of *Madame Butterfly*. This seemed like an interesting way to blur all those boundaries of



East-West, gay-straight, and to play with the stereotypes of gender.

RF How did you come to work with David Cronenberg, and do you think



John Lone as Song Liling and Jeremy Irons as Rene Gallimard in *M. Butterfly*, David Cronenberg (dir.), David Henry Hwang (screenplay), film 1993, USA.

is significant having a non-Asian director for this film?

DHH I've worked with non-Asian directors a fair amount. If I were going to go with an Asian American director, the only one who's really bankable at this point is Wayne [Wang] and he was doing *Joy Luck Club*. But more to the point, I personally like the mix; I like the balance. There have been periods where I've worked mainly with other Asians, and that's been exciting too. But I like the cultural debate and the tension that comes from

working with — certainly in these pieces, where there is a major Caucasian protagonist — a director who comes from a different cultural perspective. It allows us to, within the artistic process, recapitulate the kind of debate that the piece itself is trying to articulate.

It was a little more complicated than my previous experiences because

in the theatre the writer has the final word, and in film the director has the final word. I knew it was ultimately going to be a director's piece and I wanted first and foremost a director I could respect as an artist. With David, I took a leap of faith that he would be interested in screwing with all the things I'm interested in screwing with and, in this case, I think it's paid off. I also have to give David credit for his attention to researching the details.

RF How do you see your play, and now your film, situating itself in relation to something like *Miss Saigon*?

DHH *Miss Saigon* opened on Broadway two years after *M. Butterfly*. I couldn't help but feel somewhat discouraged that *M. Butterfly* which purports to turn the *Madame Butterfly* stereotype on its head, was immediately followed by a piece that took the *Madame Butterfly* legend and replayed it straight, without any irony. The idea of staging the *Madame Butterfly* story in Vietnam could be interesting, if it were done with some sort of

critical insight, instead of merely rehashing the old stereotypes. Puccini doing it in the early twentieth century was a fairly progressive thing, actually because he was trying to create an Asian woman as a heroine — O.K., a heroine by virtue of being a victim, but, at least she was sympathetic relative to Pinkerton. In 1990, I think the story of *Madama Butterfly* is rather ludicrous and racist.

RF I do find the script amazingly anachronistic.



DHH It's a nineteenth century colonialist piece, with the Asian woman who is not submissive, but wants to be rescued and dominated, believing she can only be saved by a white man. Those are the stereotypes which Gallimard in *M. Butterfly* believes in also, and which are the causes of his deception. He also wants to believe that he's a powerful white colonialist in a foreign nation of small people.

RF Critics of *Miss Saigon* and *Show Boat* are often charged with censorship. You've been vocal in your criticisms...

DHH I think the accusations made against so-called political correctness are blown way out of proportion. As an Asian American artist, I've received my fair share of criticism too, and there are a lot of people who think that *M. Butterfly* perpetrates the emasculation of the Asian male, whereas I think it's a comment on it. But the truth is, all the criticisms that I've gotten, which could be called PC, certainly have not inhibited my ability to work, the ability of the show to get

out there, or now it's being released in film form by a major studio. Criticism from Asian Americans, from Third World peoples, isn't censorship in that it doesn't stop the ability of artists to work. The corporate structure, the mainstream, for years not wanting to release any movies that just had Asians in them, however — that's censorship — in that it does limit the ability of the artists to work.

RF In rewriting the script as a screenplay, how did you handle the shift from the "cultivated" aura of theatre to the mass appeal of cinema?

DHH In the theatre, you can be

much more verbally articulate — with ideas, politics and concepts — whereas in cinema, audiences do not necessarily come to be challenged. Cinema audiences generally like a bit of content in the work, but can also be happy to sit back and let the experience wash over them. Cinema is a much more visceral, emotional experience, and my assessment of the film versus the play is that in the film the emotional relationship between the two characters is in the foreground. In the play, however, we're able to be much more explicit, for example in the lengthy trial scene, where Song gets to expound on ideas such as how the West sees itself as masculine and the East as feminine. A cinema audience isn't going to sit through that kind of thing. So it's a question of trying to create a love story which works on an emotional level, but which at a subliminal level is still subversive.

RF In the play the question of sexuality remained more of a question. In

the film, because you have to see some of it, it seems to lay the question to rest

DHH Because you have to see what they're doing in the movie, I think it blurs the line between gay and straight much more than the play. You will notice that in the movie, there's no time where John [Lone] says that he's a woman, whereas in the play he does. In the play, for instance, Song says "I know who's a man and who is not." That usually gets a laugh. But in film it's difficult to sustain abrupt tonal variations. It's a little more seamless and you can't all of a sudden create a ridiculous situation with your main character and then expect the audience to stay with you in a serious sense. So there are a whole new set of problems and challenges.

RF A problem in many anti-racist projects is that they often focus on the white subject; this version seems more balanced in terms of one's involvement with both the characters.

DHH Both this and *Golden Gate*, the other film I've written [scheduled for U.S. release in February], deal with how "they" see "us." To the extent that we've been written about and "created" by white writers, I've been interested in reversing that, creating white characters and dealing with their racism. But I've also tried to create balance, and hopefully the Asian characters are equal partners in that mix.



Above images from a stage production of Puccini's *Madama Butterfly*.

The Rising Sun in the Media

RACISM CONSTITUTES SO MUCH of the fabric of everyday life that many are able to feel quite comfortable in their ignorance. A case in point:

Ironically, the scenes in this film that could most easily be constructed as racist actually are not (unless one insists that a taste for "Orientalist" exotica is always in-cipiently white supremacist).
— Mark Harris, critic, *Georgia Straight*, Vancouver

Ironically, Harris seems rarely to have considered the complex (and perhaps the simple) ways in which racist discourses function in film. Fifteen years ago Edward Said wrote in *Orientalism* that "a taste for 'Orientalist exotica'" has been a part of a systematic, "Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient." Though Said's study does not specifically explore Japanese American relations, its influence has been so great that most activists, academics, critics, and cultural workers interested in issues of race associate "Orientalism" with racist practices affecting all Asians. Harris's comment regarding Philip Kaufman's *Rising Sun* reveals the critic's naiveté concerning issues of race. This point is driven home when he describes Michael Crichton's novel upon which the movie is based as "not really racist" though "it was unquestionably chauvinist." This is the same text that Peter Goddard and any other reader concerned with racism would call "Japan-bashing and Japan-baiting" and, I would include, misogynist as opposed to "chauvinist."

What I find particularly disturbing in a review like Harris's, is the flip-pant way in which the opinions of those protesting the movie are (not) engaged. And why did the editors of the *Georgia Straight* not provide a space

in their publication for those who are protesting the movie to express their views? They might at least have consulted the New York-based Committee Against Anti-Asian Violence or the Toronto-based Asian ReVisions — groups actively protesting, among other things, representations of Asians in the media. Has Harris of the *Georgia Straight* even read the publications of the protesters? Or why wasn't the Vancouver-based Japanese Canadian Studies Society consulted? Members of this society



expressed their interest in cinematic representations of Asian Canadians when we staged the film series, *The Asian Canadian Eye*, in the fall of 1992.

I do not have the space in this column to explore the manifold ways in which racism is functioning in Crichton's novel, Kaufman's movie, Harris's review, and the omission of a response in the *Georgia Straight* from the Japanese Canadian community or protesters of the movie. The point here is that the ignorance in a review

like Harris's can come about partly because there are so few sites in Canada from which issues of race are discussed. In fact, predominantly liberal, "non-racialized" (and for that matter, patriarchal, middle class, heterosexual etc.) imaginings are so entrenched throughout Canadian mass culture that sustained dissent is difficult to locate in our historical-political landscape. It is as if a dominant cultural logic active in this country and its institutions would forbid or limit the imaginings and material possibilities of dissent.

Recent protests by groups defined in part by racial discourses are of great importance as they begin to reveal and problematize aspects of this "logic," often on the site of oppression. I have in mind protests such as those of the First Nations, the African Canadian protest of the R.O.M.'s *Into the Heart of Africa*, the protests of *Miss Saigon*, in Toronto this year, to name only a few. Because these protests are often misrepresented in the media, it has become increasingly important to "re-cover" the politics of dissent through both the use and/or control of media sources with more sympathetic political interests.

Aside from strategies of tokenism, erasure (not reporting events or aspects of events), misrepresentation, and unequal space for debate, the media — in all its forms — often plays off one racially identified community against another. For example, Ron Takaki has recently argued that Asian Americans, so often associated with "mastery" and economic "mastery" of the automotive and electronic industry, have become the signs of ethnic success, and the unobtainable model of ethnicity for African Americans.¹ Within this racial signifying system Asian Americans are seen as

the persecutors of African Americans, taking away the latter's job opportunities through malicious economic exploitation. Furthermore, Asian American involvement in the economy is often represented as *foreign* investment. Thus Asian Americans are represented as "the foreigners" who rob African Americans of their "American rights." Therefore, both ethnic groups are ultimately represented as "un-Americans": Asians as foreign investors and African Americans as failed, or "not quite" Americans.

Takaki went on to argue that this playing off of one ethnic group against the other might partly explain why African American protest against the American judiciary in response to the beating of Rodney King resulted in violence against Korean American shops in L.A. Importantly, within Takaki's thesis, interracial violence in L.A. is located as being produced by white institutionalized violence and economic exploitation — particularly in media.

Takaki's thesis can be applied to *Rising Sun*. This postmodern movie casts the Black "Web Smith" (Wesley Snipes) in the role of a detective who was originally white in the novel. Smith's partner, the white "John Connor" (Sean Connery), is the man "in the know." As Japanese Canadian filmmaker Midi Onodera has observed:

Connery is well-cast as the wise and mysterious Armani-clad guide who leads his junior partner, Snipes, though a dark maze of high tech video and strange Japanese customs. He is fearless, smart and self-controlled — he is the image of how America would like to see itself.

But if Connor represents the American persona, then Smith represents the heart of America.

So the confusion of the "heartbeat of America" is displaced and represented by the Black Web whose love interest

is 'Jingo Asakuma' (Tia Carrere). As Onodera writes:

Jingo is of mixed parentage, Japanese and African American.... Although Jingo is cast as the thinking woman, she is far from being independent. At the end of the movie she is revealed to be just another tease in exotic packaging, a new twist on a very old cliché.

All the Japanese characters in the movie play secondary roles and stereotypical ones at that. Japanese (American) bodies, and Japanese cultural artifacts are thus used as the frontier upon which Web Smith is to learn his new American identity.

So Connery is Snipes's transcultural director. Under Connor's tutoring, Web weaves his way through the high-tech, futuristic economic world in which it is hard to recognize what is Japanese, what is American, and ultimately, what is real. At times it seems as if Japan is America or perhaps vice versa. Both viewers and characters in the movie can never know the "true" relations behind the action of the film. "Who dunnit?" is not only a question viewers can ask regarding the murder, but also the making of the film itself. Sure the film was directed by Kaufman, but who owns the studio?

The problem with Kaufman's postmodern aesthetic is that his vision, while attempting to smoke screen the historical and material relations of the film's production, is dependent on a plot driven by racist stereotypes which we all know precisely because of the historical and material exploitation of peoples of colour. For example, the floundering African American, Web, is tutored by the white Connor to learn the rules of the new day that has finally dawned on him. Arguably, like Crusoe's Man-Friday, Web has become a new version of the noble savage in a new world that smacks of neo-colonialism. The frontier of this "new world,"

where it doesn't matter if you're Japanese or American because everything is "economic relations," is nonetheless represented as the land of the *Rising Sun*. An economic, violent, ruthless, deceptive, two-faced and double-mirrored world is ultimately represented as Japanese. Thus the Japanese and Japanese North Americans are made signs of this polite yet vicious world. This representation of race, like the "half-breed" Jingo, is "just another tease in exotic packaging, a new twist on a very old cliché."

But who is doing the packaging? And who is aestheticizing global economics and politics as exotic artful dodging? We viewers, like Web, are ushered into this theatrical space under the direction of Philip Kaufman. Here, in our air conditioned darkness and individual seats we can be "thrilled" by the repeated viewing of violence against women and racial bloodshed. It's like watching TV and the news. Is this more institutionalized white violence packaged in L.A.? For a good portion of this summer *Rising Sun* was Vancouver's top grossing movie. Stereotypical, racist, misogynist, it is incredibly difficult to figure out who profits from all this. It is less difficult to see who gets hurt.

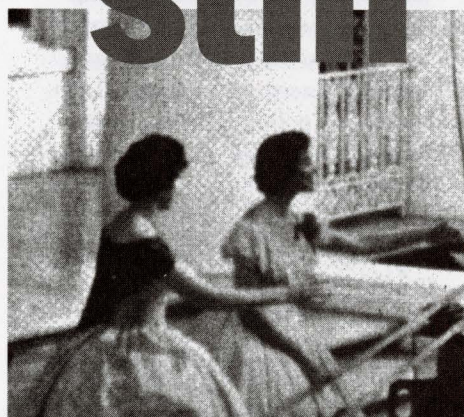
NOTES

¹ Takaki presented his argument at the National Conference of the Association of Asian American Studies this past summer at Cornell University.

Scott McFarlane is a member of the Japanese Canadian Studies Society and one of a growing number of *sansei* writers and community activists in Canada.

I would like to both thank Kyo Maclear for her help with this piece and to acknowledge the assistance of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

Sinking: \$6 million & still counting*



SIX MILLION DOLLARS! AS OF THE WEEK BEFORE THE October 17, 1993, opening of *Show Boat*, this was the amount reportedly sold in advance ticket sales. *The Globe and Mail* described these figures as "encouraging" given that *Show Boat* was a revival and not a "much-ballyhooed new work."¹ (But "much-ballyhooed" is, in fact, exactly how I would have described the media coverage of *Show Boat*.) On Friday October 16, 1993, Livent share prices closed at \$16.00 on the Toronto Stock exchange, reflecting a \$1.50 increase.²

Alongside television images of opening night festivities reflecting the theme of travelling up the Mississippi, this sort of hard factual information (or is it disinformation?) representing tangible evidence of Garth Drabinsky's and Livent's "success," could very easily have the impact of making those who opposed this production of *Show Boat* feel that they had lost the fight. Not to mention the chortling on the part of the media (including dismissive references) at the small number of demonstrators at the previews and the opening night. In these apparent zero sum games, there appear to be only winners and losers — and *The Coalition to Stop Show Boat* (*The Coalition*) along with those opposed to the production of *Show Boat*, certainly appear to have lost.

Imagine for the moment however, the following scene and its development: It has come to the attention of the Black and African Canadian communities that the well-known impresario Garth Drabinsky and his company Livent are producing the musical *Show Boat*, in which they have already invested a considerable sum of money. Various members of the Black communities meet with him and, through a series of meetings, he is convinced that the production of *Show Boat* will create great pain and injury to African Canadian communities. He is concerned that he and his company might be associated with a show that is racist, and whose production will affect African Canadians negatively. He meets with his shareholders, with the Mayor of North York, and, with the exception of a few shareholders, there is

*Epilogue from the second edition of *Showing Grit: Showboating North of the 44th Parallel* (Toronto: Pouli Publications), 1993.

general agreement that this show cannot go on. Drabinsky realizes that the opening of the North York Performing Arts Centre (NYPAC) will have to be postponed for another six months while he arranges for another musical to open the centre. North York has agreed to bear 50% of the financial cost of this postponement.

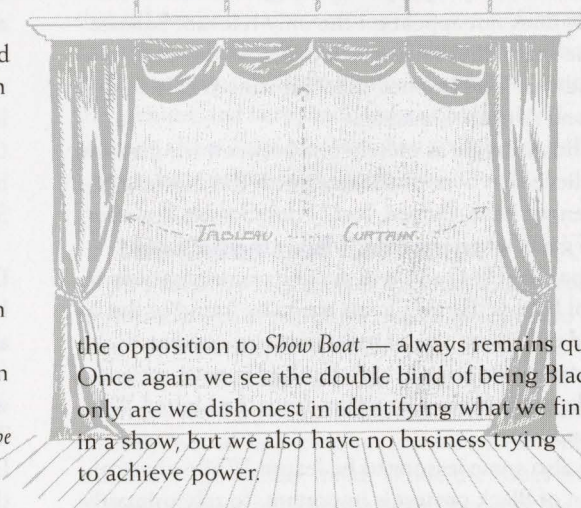
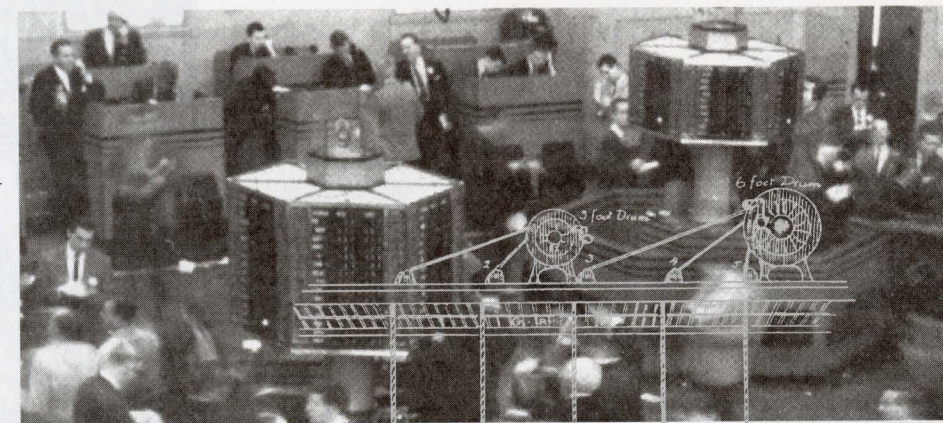
Fairy tale? Yes.
Romantic hogwash? Yes.
True or False? False.

Would that such a scenario could play itself out in the Toronto of the '90s. It would be illustrative of a very different society from the one in which we presently live; it would be representative of a society which valued all its peoples equally. A society which didn't need the lubrication of power or money to work, as this one does. A society which understood the collective pain of African peoples. But, if we lived in such a society then Black children would not be being streamed into vocational programmes; we would need no affirmative action programmes to ensure that African Canadians were hired; we would not have Black people being shot by the police in circumstances which did not warrant it; nor would we have strip searches of Black women in public.

What has played itself out over the last several months in North York and Toronto around the production of *Show Boat* is all of a piece with how African Canadians are positioned in a society which consistently dismisses them and their concerns. For instance, in the October 16, 1993 issue of *The Globe and Mail*, William Thorsell, Editor in Chief, writes that the only game in town is one of power: "The apparent issue is race — the allegation by some black people in Toronto that *Show Boat* demeans them. But the real issue is power. *Show Boat* is really just a vehicle to advance the campaign of some blacks in Toronto for more power in the life of the city, in particular the City of North York."

Mr. Thorsell not only dismisses the most consistently and publicly expressed concern of all those opposed to *Show Boat* — its demeaning treatment of Blacks — he also suggests that in expressing this concern Blacks are being less than honest and, as all good white fathers are wont to do, he tells his audience what the *real* issue is. Power.

Accepting for the moment Thorsell's argument that power is the issue, there is a further implication by him that there is something amiss in Blacks seeking to gain power. In as rapacious a society as ours where power — financial power in particular — is the only language understood, surely its pursuit would be seen as a respectable and acceptable act. Not, however, when it comes to Blacks. The acquisition, maintenance and abuse of power by individuals like Garth Drabinsky and his corporation are commendable and remain unquestioned; the acquisition of power by Blacks — whether or not we agree with Thorsell's analysis of the issues behind



the opposition to *Show Boat* — always remains questionable. Once again we see the double bind of being Black: not only are we dishonest in identifying what we find demeaning in a show, but we also have no business trying to achieve power.

All the World's a Play

There have always been two "plays" in rehearsal around the present production of *Show Boat*. One is the Garth Drabinsky/Livent-produced show; the other the "play" of events around the production. At issue in the latter play have been the following: the inappropriateness of using a racist production to open a multi-million dollar, municipal flagship which was also publicly funded; the public and private challenges to this production made by Blacks and African Canadians; and, the wholeheartedly negative responses to those challenges by the producers and the media — in short, the powerful.

The nub of the issue in this latter production is the refusal on the part of Canadian society to take seriously the issues Blacks and African Canadians define as important to themselves: their histories, their cultures and their representation in society. And, this refusal is integrally linked to their social position in Canadian society.

With the opening of *Show Boat*, Garth Drabinsky and Livent have attempted to shift the ground of the debate from this central issue to whether or not the production is racist. This being a democratic society, the argument goes, we must

see for ourselves and make up our own minds. The unstated corollary to this argument is that if you decide the play is, as we have been told repeatedly, a paean to racial tolerance and anti-racism, then the issues which have been the focus of the "play" around the play immediately become non-issues. They fade to black with the last curtain call.

It is, therefore, crucial that we look backwards and forwards simultaneously in order to remain centred on the issue — that even if the present production of *Show Boat* were the most anti-racist piece of work since *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, it in no way alleviates the up-front-out-there racism on the part of the producers, the media, and other institutions like the United Way, during its production. It in no way cures the disrespect meted out to Blacks and African Canadians, neither does it repair the grave damage done to race relations in this city. By my reckoning, the black of six million dollars does not appear on the only relevant balance sheet—the one that tallies relations between whites and African Canadians. This balance sheet remains deeply in the red to Black and African Canadians.

If we see this struggle as merely one between winners and losers and believe that winning equates with the opening of *Show Boat*, then we have, indeed, lost. Those losses, however, translate into gains when we acknowledge the strenuous work on the part of *The Coalition* in making representations to various school boards. Further gains are to be found in the individual and collective acts of resistance and courage in the face of powerful institutions, which resulted in mass resignations by Blacks and African Canadians from the United Way committees and board.

There are also some lessons to be learnt. While physical demonstration of Black protest is important, to rely primarily on public demonstrations to convey our concerns is, to some degree, to speak a language that can be easily dismissed as outmoded — particularly if numbers remain small. The weekly pickets demonstrated an overwhelming commitment and helped to keep attention focused on the issues; however, strategies like boycotts, lobbying and legal actions need to become a greater part of how Black communities function in their struggles. The Coalition's attempts to have criminal charges laid under hate-crime legislation and to involve the Human Rights Commission represent the beginnings of just such a development. A mass return of American Express credit cards, or a one-day-a-week boycott of *The Toronto Star* were among the possibilities raised in discussions I have had with others. Such actions, however, require a great deal of coordination and work to convince Black and non-Black people of their appropriateness. At the higher levels of the economy Blacks as a group may not exert much economic leverage; our purchasing power is, however, by no means insignificant. It is a weapon we should focus on increasingly; it speaks the only language this society understands.

As we tally the balance sheet, we notice that overt government support for the position of those opposing the pro-

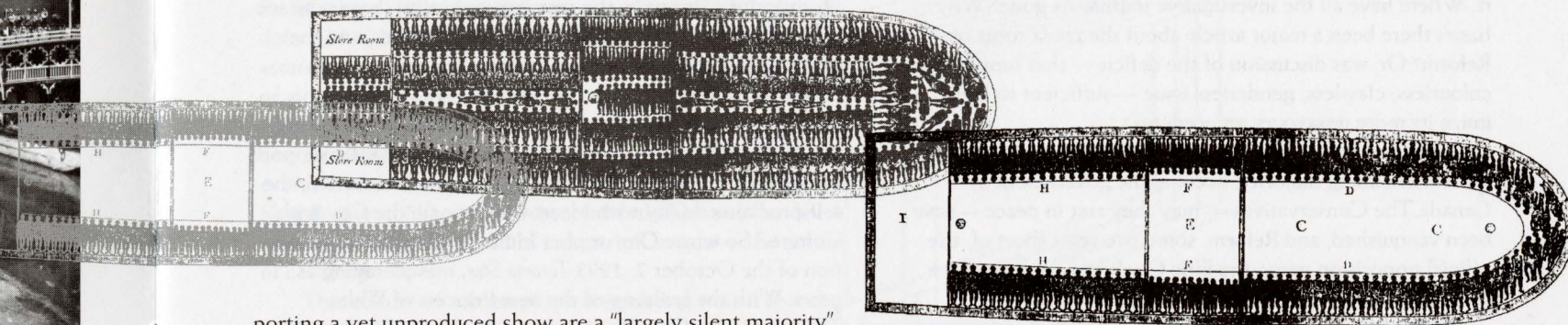


duction of *Show Boat* has been virtually non-existent, although the absence of the Ontario Premier, Bob Rae, from the opening night celebrations represents a small public relations victory. The Anti-Racism Secretariat has made no public statement on the issue, while giving money to *The Coalition*, it has remained assiduously low-key, not wishing to be seen to be taking sides. This is the Anti-Racism Secretariat after all.

At a recent lecture in Toronto sponsored by the Garth Dabrinsky-B'nai Brith Lecture Series, Harvard professor, Henry Louis Gates Jr. described this production of *Show Boat* as "a victory of tolerance and sensitivity to the feelings of an important segment of the community."³ In his May 12, 1993 written presentation to the North York Board of Education Trustees, however, we can see what Garth Drabinsky and Livent thought of the concerns of this "important segment of the community." In his submission Drabinsky describes those opposing the production as "using *Show Boat* as a platform to promote their own agenda and causes which have nothing whatsoever to do with this show."⁴ He dismisses legitimate concerns as "shouted slogans, mob rule and wild accusations which have no substance behind them." In an accompanying document in which he responds to community concerns, he writes: "We believe that the protests that have been raised about the script's purported racial stereotyping and its alleged contribution to the perpetuation of negative images of people of African-American ancestry, are vague, misconceived, and inaccurate." (My emphasis.) Drabinsky criticizes those opposing the show prior to its staging: "we have the right to be judged on our works," he argues, "only after they have been presented for public scrutiny...and not a minute before." Simultaneously, however, Drabinsky uncritically accepts the support of "the media, the general public and...even educators, (who) have expressed their full support of this production." *This without their having seen the Livent production.*

According to Drabinsky those objecting to a show which had already been performed countless times, filmed three times, and is based on a book which is undeniably racist, indulge in "mob rule" and "wild accusations," while those sup-

Illustration concept Nicole Peña



porting a yet unproduced show are a "largely silent majority" supporting the "right of the free exchange of ideas, opinions and information."

Despite his condemnation of those criticizing *Show Boat*, within the same document Drabinsky writes that "all of the concerns which have been raised about *Show Boat* have been and will be considered as our production is developed," a production which, he assures us, will carry a "message of racial harmony and understanding."

If there were no validity to the arguments of those challenging *Show Boat*, if those concerns were "vague, misconceived and inaccurate," if those challenging this production are interested in "mob rule," why did Livent state that it would consider all the concerns raised and emphasize the show's "racial harmony and understanding"? Why has Livent produced a television program on the making of *Show Boat*, narrated by Black actor James Earl Jones, which tries to show how racially sensitive and respectful it has been to issues around race?⁵ Why was it necessary to bring in personalities the stature of Oscar Peterson to validate the show and the production? If accusations were "wild" and lacked substance, why go to the trouble and expense? If nothing else, Livent and Garth Drabinsky owe an apology to those who have opposed this show for the kind of contemptuous statements they have written about them, since from all reports the production now seems all set to win a Tony for the most "socially acceptable" — if not politically correct — version of *Show Boat* ever produced.

Further to the issue of the dismissal of Black concerns and requests, Drabinsky, in his response to community concerns mentioned above, refused to release the script for public scrutiny. To do so, he argued, would be an "abrogation of the right of free speech...what the show will be, cannot be fully ascertained from the script alone," since levels of meaning could be added through "directorial embellishments, underscoring, stage action and other theatrical techniques." How then do we explain the fact that *without having seen the show*, and *only having read the script*, Henry Louis Gates Jr. was able to declare that the show was non-racist?

Livent's attempts to discredit the protesters and their point of view and take the high moral road, have been driven by the morality of the bottom line—despite all protestations to the contrary. With eight million dollars at risk, not to

mention the possibility of a Broadway run, the juggernaut that is Live Entertainment Corporation of Canada could not risk the possibility that "shouted slogans," "mob rule" and "wild accusations" might hinder its progress. And so, despite the genuine and very real concerns of African Canadians, advance ticket sales have reached six million dollars and Livent share prices have increased.

The Culture of Contempt

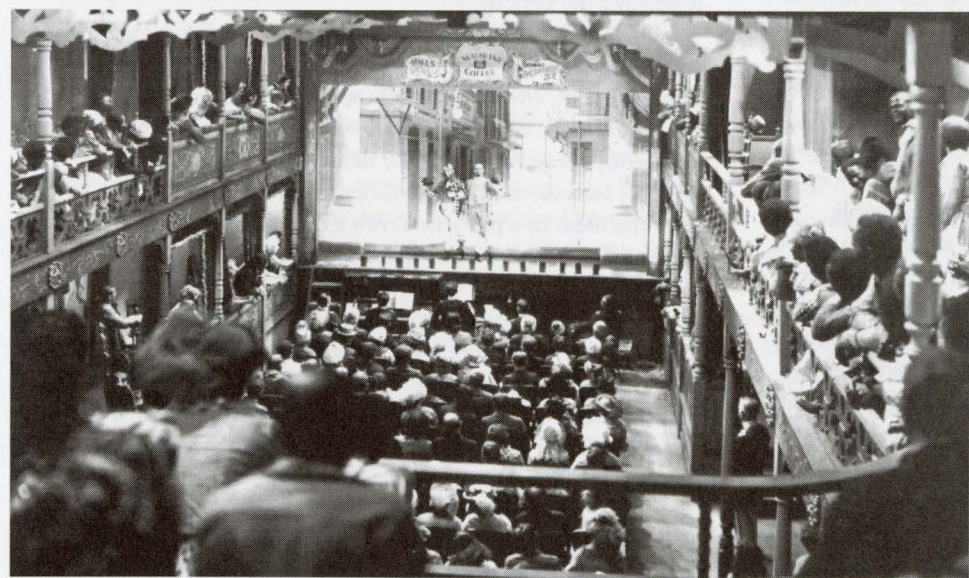
In a racist society such as Canada, it is common practice to isolate issues of racism so that they appear to have relevance only for Africans, Asians or First Nations people. Links between these groups and the larger society only surface when the need arises to manipulate the latent and, more recently, not-so-latent racism around issues of immigration and crime and welfare fraud. While the issues around *Show Boat* may appear to have relevance primarily for African Canadians, its opening during the height of the 1993 election campaign has highlighted the connections between apparently "Blacks only" issues and the seemingly larger issues like the deficit.

These links and connections have to do with how ideas are legitimized or delegitimized, and while I have more questions than I do answers, it is all the more important to ask these questions. For instance, how does one explain the apparently meteoric rise of the Reform party? Is it simply populist fervour, or are there other factors at work? How have the ideas of a party that, not too long ago, the media presented as fringe, racist, sexist and fundamentalist, become mainstream? How has a party that many in the media appeared to have had to hold their collective nose in order to write about, become the main player in the 1993 elections? Did the media malign them in their earlier coverage? Or, is it that the media has realized the error of its ways and now understands the validity of what the Reform Party truly stands for? Whatever the reasons, what is most miraculous is how a party like the Reform Party has been able to come in from the cold to a position of respectability, where reporters are by and large unable to challenge its spokespeople on

issues that as little as two years ago were grounds to dismiss it. Where have all the investigative journalists gone? Why hasn't there been a major article about the racist roots of Reform? Or, was discussion of the deficit — that supposedly colourless, classless, genderless issue — sufficient to legitimize its more unsavoury antecedents?

Since beginning this epilogue the Liberal party has, with an overwhelming majority, become the government of Canada. The Conservatives — may they rest in peace — have been vanquished, and Reform, some two seats short of the official opposition party, the Bloc Quebecois, will remain a significant force in Parliament.

What does all this have to do with *Show Boat* and opposition to its production? A great deal. Alongside the redemption, sanitizing and recuperation of socially repugnant ideas such as those espoused by the Reform Party, there has been the demonizing and discrediting of ideas such as anti-racism, feminism, and respect for one's history and culture — despite the fact that all levels of government pay lip service to these ideals, not to mention those of multiculturalism. The success of these processes run the gamut from the national to the local level, so that the Reform Party has now become a major player on the national scene, while one of the most blatant examples of how the powerful trample on the concerns of the powerless — the production of *Show Boat* — is heralded as the second coming. With the catch-all epithet and slur, "politically correct," the media — no doubt speaking for its audience — is able to effectively discredit and dismiss every progressive idea and ideal. And they do. Could it be because those so-called politically correct ideals can only be realized with real and fundamental change — the yielding of power to the powerless, the democratic control of the powerful, and a more equitable distribution of power? Is it that these ideas truly challenge the powerful (As mentioned above, Mr. Thorsell clearly had some difficulty with Blacks seeking



power), while the ideas of the Reform Party, all talk of populism and the deficit to the contrary, appeal to those who see the powerful as victims of the "politically correct" and the powerless as deserving of, and at fault for, their position in life.

All this constitutes the backdrop, setting and context of the 1993 production of *Show Boat* and its sycophantic support by the media. "When the NYPAC opens on October 17, the self-proclaimed City with Heart will become the City with Culture." So wrote Christopher Hume in an advertising section of the October 2, 1993 *Toronto Star*, masquerading as news. With the building of the new Princess of Wales Theatre for the Canadian launch of *Miss Saigon*, and now NYPAC, culture has now become synonymous with big buildings, just as it was during the heyday of imperialism. It is an impoverished definition of culture that fails to encompass those artists who, year after year and with very little funding make their art, put on their plays, perform their dance and keep the cultural heart of this city beating. Caribana, for instance, remains the most outstanding example of culture without walls or buildings. With very little support from either government or the private sector, in excess of a million people are entertained and some 200 million dollars pumped into the economy within a week to ten days.

The equation of culture with big buildings is an integral part of a long and imperial tradition that equated civilization with big stone buildings. By this definition, India and China were "civilized," while Africa was not. At least south of the Sahara. When great stone buildings stopped (beyond Egypt), so did civilization. The only explanation, therefore, according to European scholars of archaeological ruins of great stone buildings such as Great Zimbabwe found in sub-Saharan Africa, must be that non-Africans had built them. Despite evidence to the contrary—that Africans had, in fact, built these buildings, this remained the entrenched — and irrational — belief of many European scholars. The script has remained the same: Europeans are civilized and Africans not at all. Consider, for instance, the language used by Drabinsky and Livent to describe Blacks objecting to the production: "mob rule," "wild accusations," "vague, misconceived and inaccurate." All connoting qualities of the primitive, the uneducated, the unsophisticated — in general an absence of civility.

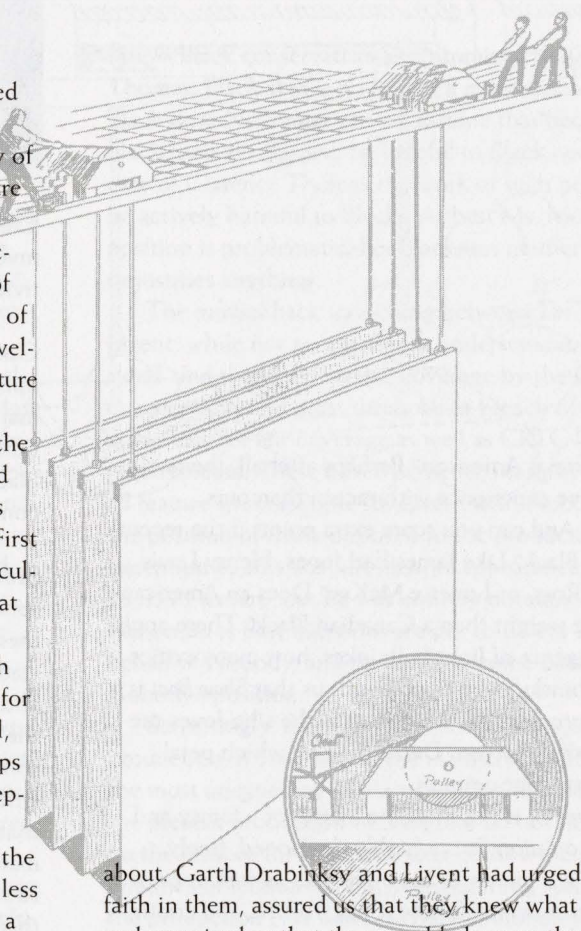
Culture is, however, far broader than the arts — big buildings included. It includes the mores, customs and behaviour of individuals in society — how we settle disputes; how close we stand to people when we talk to them; how we marry and so on. We in Canada believe

ours to be a kinder, gentler culture than exists in the United States where violence appears more endemic. The hotly defended right to bear arms, for instance, or the frequency of assassinations are but two egregious examples of this culture of violence. However, within the context of a shift to the right throughout the entire country, as reflected in the success of the Reform Party in the 1993 elections, the "play" of events around the opening of NYPAC and the production of *Show Boat* symbolize, if not represent and illustrate, the development of a different kind of culture in Canada — the culture of contempt.

This culture of contempt is a burgeoning one; it sees the weak, the helpless, the unemployed, the aged, the sick and the potentially sick as being at fault for their plight; it sees immigrants, women, lesbians, gays, Africans, Asians, and First Nations as parasitic groups feeding off the country. It is a culture of the powerful dismissing the powerless, a culture that says the less powerful can be ignored and dismissed with impunity. The very ideals that Canadians cherished, which they saw as setting them apart culturally from Americans, for instance — the culture of caring, of compassion if you will, the culture of the peace keeper (now also damaged, perhaps fatally by the killings of Somalians by Canadian peace keepers) — are now all under threat, if not permanently destroyed. Many, if not all of these beliefs, were myths in the first place, but myths are the life blood of cultures and no less powerful for it. Their value lies in their ability to generate a certain belief system that shapes a culture indelibly. These myths, however — the myth of multiculturalism included — have now all been exposed for what they are, at least in relation to Black and African Canadians; they have been effectively laid to rest with the production of *Show Boat*. May they rest in peace. Long live the culture of contempt — Canadian style!

Nobody Knows the Trouble I Know

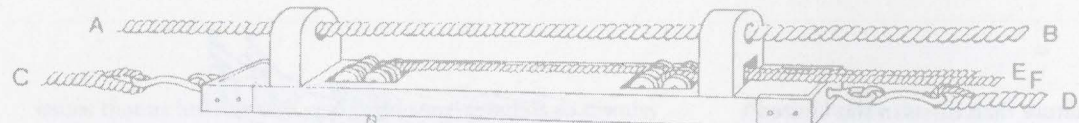
Newspaper reports to the contrary, the production of *Show Boat* is not a victory for free speech and freedom from censorship. Rather, it is an expression of how money talks, of how when one is able to control the media, one's position can be articulated, apparently endlessly, in advertisements masquerading as news specials. The press, both print and electronic, have slaved over this production of *Show Boat*. Even *Share* newspaper: "...if there are the equivalents of Oscars for theatre set designers...then Eugene Lee, who conceptualized, designed and developed these *Show Boat* sets, should get two."⁸ For eight million dollars what did we expect? But can form be so neatly separated from content? While the verdict of this newspaper was that *Show Boat* was "implicitly" racist, it failed to explain how, and suggested instead that we not take the writer's word for it but look to *The Globe and Mail's* review for verification. The overall effect of media response to the production, including articles such as this, was to make one wonder what all the fuss had been



about. Garth Drabinsky and Livent had urged us to have faith in them, assured us that they knew what was best for us, and promised us that they would clean up the production so that Blacks would find it acceptable. And so they have, from all reports to date.

As argued earlier the issues have shifted ground: instead of the focus being on the racism inherent in using this type of production to open a publicly funded arts centre, over the legitimate objections of African Canadians, or the racism manifest in the dismissive attitudes shown towards Black concerns on the part of institutions like the United Way, the issue has been transformed into a debate: is or isn't the Hal Prince-Garth Drabinsky production of *Show Boat* racist? (I too have gone through the should-or-shouldn't-I-go arguments with myself — how else could I critique it if I didn't see it?) Further, the implication is that if you can only get enough people to come forward and say that it isn't racist, then that will lay the issue to rest. Particularly if you can get enough respected and respectable Black-skinned people to explain how ill-informed and misguided those who object to the production are, and a few powerful whites to urge Blacks to spend their time doing something else.

The spectacle and farce of newspapers quoting other newspapers to prove the racist or non-racist nature of the show would be risible if it didn't underscore the essential colonial status of Canada. How many drama critics does it take to convince us that this performance is truly non-racist? Sid Adilman of *The Toronto Star* quotes five — *The New York Post*, *The New York Times*, *The New York Daily News*, the *New Yorker*, and *Variety*.⁸ Does the recommendation carry more



weight if its source is American? Perhaps after all, theirs is a far more extensive experience with racism than ours. (Another myth) And can you score extra points if the recommender/critic is Black? Like James Earl Jones, Henry Louis Gates Jr., Sandi Ross, or Lonette McKee? Does an American Black carry more weight than a Canadian Black? There could be a whole new genre of light bulb jokes: how many critics does Garth Drabinsky need to convince us that *Show Boat* is not racist? The process is as whimsical as the s/he-loves-me-s/he-loves-me-not daisy test. Depending on which petal remains, you have your opinion.

Racism, however, is not merely a matter of whimsy and unsubstantiated opinion. It is a highly developed, finely tuned system; it is a matter of historical fact as well as present day reality. If we understand how it has worked, and continues to work right up to the very present reality of Black concerns around *Show Boat* being dismissed, then we understand how this production is all of a piece with the tradition and practice of racism. In its very underpinning the work remains what it has always been — a work by white people who have used Black creativity to enrich themselves; a work about white people whose very lives as characters depend on their Black characters whose function is to sing and dance and disappear so that whites can prosper.

"Censorship is to art as lynching is to justice." Henry Louis Gates Jr. is reported as saying. "We ought to fight the former as ardently as the latter." Many see this production of *Show Boat* as a successful fight against censorship. For others it is a victory of right thinking (no pun intended) over the forces of political correctness and "mob rule." The media's insistence on the unblemished quality of this production, their role in attempting to convince the public that Blacks and Africans are ill-informed about protesting this production, and their insistence that *Show Boat* is a miracle of tolerance, underscore the adage that he who pays the piper calls the tune.

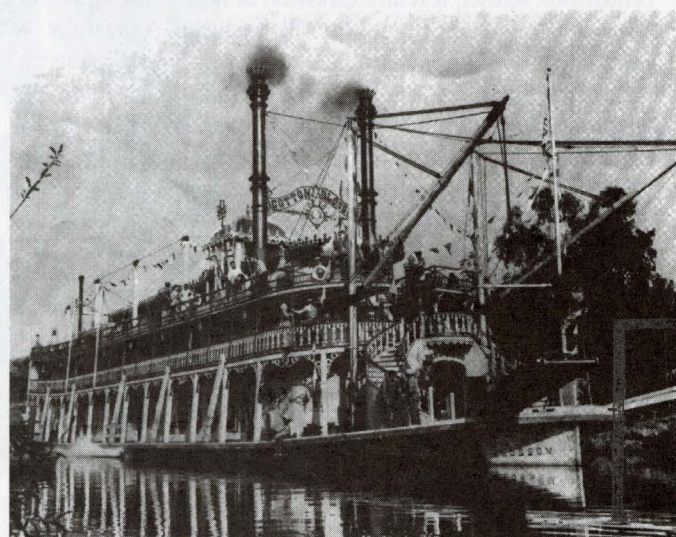
Promotion of *Show Boat* has relied heavily on the use of "specials" which cloak advertisements in a news format. As mentioned above, *The Toronto Star* special section in its October 2, 1993 issue was entirely devoted to NYPAC, *Show Boat*, and Garth Drabinsky. What was essentially advertising for Garth Drabinsky and Livent, was presented by *The Star* to the public as news, with articles by art critics like

Christopher Hume. Given that *The Toronto Star* is one of the investors in this production, it calls into question the objectivity of the reporting.

On October 18, 1993, during its *Prime Time* news, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) aired clips of the opening night festivities along with interviews of some of the main "players" in the play around the "play". With the exception of Jeff Henry, Chair of *The Coalition*, all the "players" Black and white expressed support for the production and contempt for the position of those opposing it.

On October 26, 1993, CBC television featured a special, produced by Garth Drabinsky and narrated by James Earl Jones: *Show Boat: Journey of an Epic Musical*. The unrelenting message presented to the audience by individuals of the stature of Oscar Peterson was that *Show Boat* was non-racist, and that this production had gone to great lengths to redeem the negative stereotypes. In an attempt, no doubt intended to show how generous the production team was in giving credit where credit was due, choreographer Susan Stroman tells us that African Americans created the Charleston along with many other American dance styles. "Whites," she adds straight faced, "stiffened it up and took it to another dimension." Is this theft masquerading as appropriation masquerading as imitation being highest form of praise? Or, just theft. Or is it, as Ntozake Shange writes in *For Colored Girls* that "...somebody almost walked off wid alla my stuff...you cant have them or do nothin with them/stealin my shit from me/dont make it yrs/makes it stolen/ somebody almost run off wit all my stuff/...."⁹

When his father wrote "Ol Man River" a sombre-faced William Hammerstein (Oscar Hammerstein's son) tells the audience during the October 26, 1993 CBC special, he "expressed things that nobody had expressed before." He was gracious enough to add, "certainly no white man." Naturally,



creativity only begins when the white man or woman creates or composes. Not a minute before. But who composed the spirituals and gospels? Nobody, of course. Who sang them? Nobody. From whom did Magnolia learn her "coon" songs? From Nobody, naturally. And Kern himself when he used Black syncopation and gapped sevenths to convey the Black melodies and rhythms in *Show Boat* and in particular "Ol Man River," from whom did he learn them? Why, Nobody! Since Blacks were all Nobody. And Nobody knows the trouble I know. The words of the spiritual by the same name take on a new and deeper meaning if we understand Nobody to mean not "no one" but Blacks themselves, since in the hearts and minds of most whites they were all, individually and collectively Nobody. And isn't this still the case today where we remain Nobody in trying to get our voices and concerns heard? And Nobody knows the trouble I know — words bearing the possibility for generating solidarity work in two senses: (a) only other Nobodys will — through similar suffering — understand the trouble Blacks experience, and (b) to understand the trouble Blacks experience, one has to be prepared to risk becoming a Nobody.

It is probably unlikely that Hammerstein junior consciously intended any deliberate disrespect for Blacks. It is also irrelevant. What is relevant is how statements like his and Ms. Stroman's reveal the commonsensical and organic nature of racism, resulting in racist statements even when individuals are trying to show how kind and good they are or were towards Blacks.

On October 29, 1993, once again in its *Prime Time* magazine slot, CBC television aired yet another programme on *Show Boat*, which they billed as a feature on Hal Prince. The latter suggested that there were better things that African and Black Canadians could be doing than protesting *Show Boat*. Lonette McKee, the mixed race African American actress who plays Julie, assured listeners that because she was Black and performing in *Show Boat* this meant that there was nothing wrong with it! Ms. McKee may be Black and American but her comments reveal an astonishing lack of knowledge about a significant development in Black poli-

tics — Black conservatism as epitomized by Clarence Thomas. Black skin is no longer a marker of anything except Black skin. No longer can we assume that because someone is Black their actions will be helpful to Black people. As in the case of Clarence Thomas the work of such people will often be actively harmful to Blacks. At best Ms. McKee's position is problematic; her Blackness neither explains or justifies anything.

The mutual back scratching between *The Toronto Star* and Livent, while not acceptable, is understandable. The one-sided, and therefore biased, coverage by the CBC is entirely unacceptable and must surely be in breach of both CBC guidelines for fair coverage as well as CRTC licensing requirements. These advertisements, masquerading as news, all feature spokespeople for Livent with Nobody representing the position of those opposed to the production. The one exception to this was Jeff Henry's appearance on the October 18, 1993 feature, but he was entirely outnumbered. The format requires that questions are put to Livent supporters on behalf of Nobody, and the answers come back rejecting Nobody's position.

Surprisingly, there has been some criticism of the present production of *Show Boat* in the mainstream press, surfacing in the most unexpected of places — *The Globe and Mail*. Critics of the present production of *Show Boat* do not necessarily agree on the reasons for objecting to it; it, however, Bronwyn Drainie's objections to the overwhelming American nature of the production (*The Globe and Mail*, October 30, 1993) bears noting. So too do Michael Valpy (*The Globe and Mail*, October 19, 1993) strongly worded criticism of the production for its insensitivity and Liam Lacey's (*The Globe and Mail*, November 2, 1993) targeting of the blurring of the lines between news and advertising that the CBC has indulged in.

The Globe and Mail has, in fact, gone on record as identifying the show as racist: "Is the Hal Prince-directed *Show Boat* racist?" theatre critic Jack Kirchoff asks. "Sure, and probably sexist and ageist, too," he answers. Could this statement be used, I wondered, to launch a complaint with the Ontario

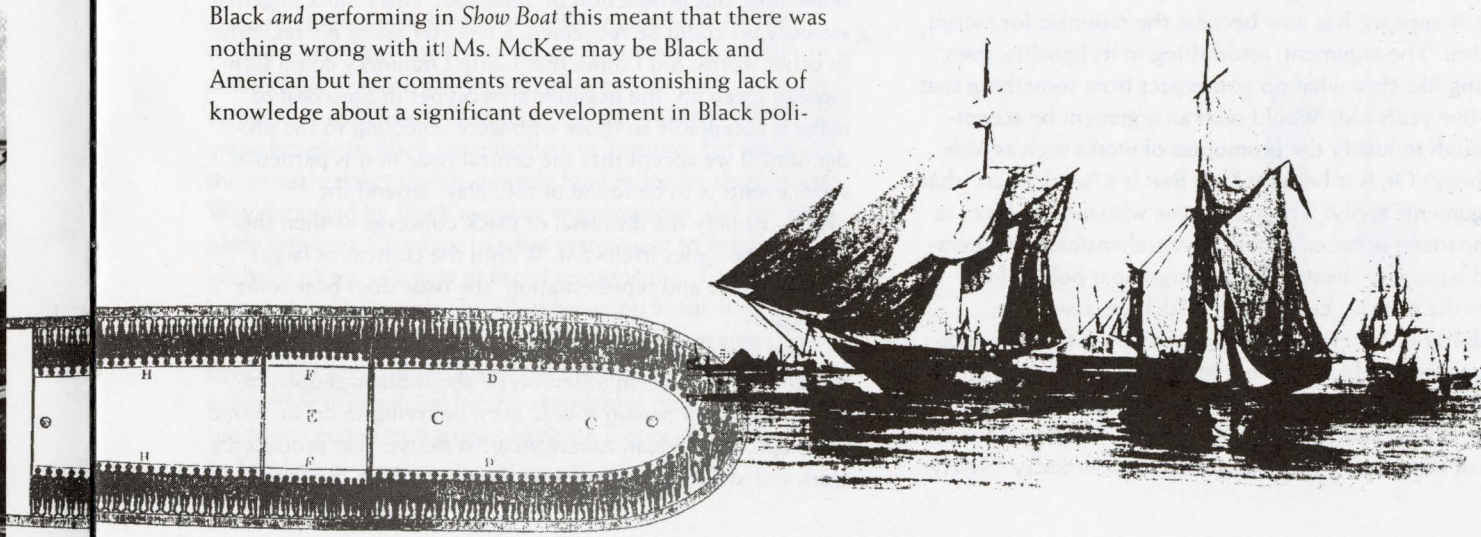


Illustration concept Nicole Peña



Bettye Saar, *The Liberation of Aunt Jemima*, mixed media, 1972. Courtesy of the University Art Museum, University of California at Berkeley.

Human Rights Commission? My mind buzzed with possibilities. I read on in surprise, recognizing many of the arguments, albeit unacknowledged, made in this work, *Showing Grit*. But. And there is always a but. "Is *Show Boat* appropriate for the 1990s?" Jack Kirchoff asks again: "I think so," is the answer, "at least as much as any other sixty-five-year-old piece of theatre." I was to hear others — on CBC radio, for instance — repeat this argument.

Age, it appears, has now become the rationale for racism and sexism. The argument, astonishing in its banality, goes something like this: what do you expect from something that is sixty-five years old? Would such an argument be acceptable enough to justify the promotion of works such as *Mein Kampf* today? Or, is it because *Show Boat* is a "work of art" that such arguments apply? There are some who might object to the comparison between a work of reprehensible hate literature and a piece of theatre, but the argument holds. If age becomes the primary criterion by which we assess the acceptability of material around us, then even the very society around us should escape our judgments. In seven years, the year 2000, racism, sexism and classism and their manifold practices will be at least two millennia old. Ought we to use the age of these belief systems to excuse them today? Surely,

the relevance of the age of these systems lies in helping us to understand how embedded they are in the cultures of the world and, therefore, how difficult it is to eradicate them. To use age to excuse the inexcusable — the present production of *Show Boat*, for instance — is, at best, lazy thinking; at worst, it is to be an apologist for Livent and Garth Drabinsky.

Before leaving the subject of media, it is worth noting the double standards that are blatantly applied when issues of concern to Blacks arise. *The New York Times* dismissed the protesters against *Show Boat* as "ill-informed" individuals who "accused the show of racism without bothering to see it." This same newspaper carried but one small informational column on the closing of the multi-media show *Jesus Was His Name* (referred to in *Showing Grit*) and scheduled to open in New York at Radio City Music Hall last June. *The New York Times*, at that time, expressed no opinion on the events surrounding the closing of that show; it described none of the objectors to the show — Jews and Christians alike — as "ill-informed"; it blamed no one for accusing the show of racism "without bothering to see it."¹⁰ Unlike *Jesus Was His Name*, however, *Show Boat* has had a sixty-five year track record of indisputably racist productions, of which at least three versions are preserved on film. Despite this we remain, according to *The New York Times*, "polite, ill-informed local protesters."

Be it American or Canadian, white society, by and large, ignores the concerns and issues of its African citizens. This remains the central issue around this production of *Show Boat* — that the concerns raised by many African Canadians were dismissed as "mob rule" and... "wild accusation." The concerns of other groups, however, are always seen as more important, more valid, more worthy than those of Blacks and African Canadians and Americans. The approach of *The New York Times* underscores this fact.

To Redeem or Not to Redeem

There has been much talk about the possibility of redeeming this production of *Show Boat*. Did I think negative stereotypes could be redeemed, a reporter asked me recently. In other words, did I think that Garth Drabinsky could sufficiently "clean up" the negative stereotypes in *Show Boat* to make it acceptable to those who were objecting to the production? If we accept that the central issue in this particular set of events is to be found in the "play" around the play — namely the dismissal of Black concerns — then this question becomes irrelevant. Within the context of larger issues of "race and representation" the issue does bear some looking at.

The first issue that comes to mind is whether a white person could ever redeem a stereotype about Black people, or whether a white person should even be trying to do so. Some years ago, the African American artist Bettye Saar produced a work called *The Liberation of Aunt Jemima* in which the latter

carries a broom and a machine gun. The image, at once powerful and immediate, completely subverts and, therefore, redeems the stereotype of the mammy, the fat Black woman, whose role is one of universal nurturer. In its subversion, the image is overwhelmingly empowering.

Any redemption of stereotypes that may have taken place in *Show Boat* has only occurred because of the outcry around this production. Livent's aim has always been to make money for Livent and Garth Drabinsky, not to redeem negative stereotypes of Black people, as in the case of Bettye Saar's work. And most certainly not to empower Black people. Being concerned only about box office profits, Garth Drabinsky and Livent had no recourse but to minimize the financial effect of those criticisms. Hence the company's attempts to discredit critics of the show and "prove" how non-racist *Show Boat* is.

What has always been at stake here is the bottom line: the Livent corporation has never been concerned about the feelings, opinions, concerns, or pain of Black people, except as these might prove to be inconvenient for them and lose them money. Black pain, provided it doesn't become Black anger, is tolerable, particularly if it reinforces the liberalism of whites. This explains the existence and persistence of the language of hand-outs and charity, rather than reparations, in matters relating to Africa and Blacks. Black pain is acceptable if it can be turned to a profit for whites, as all productions of *Show Boat* have done. Black pain is unacceptable if it turns to anger and demands not pity but respect as *The Coalition* and other African Canadians have done. The only opinions of Blacks that Livent and those supporting this production, such as Mayor Mel Lastman, have been willing to listen to were those that supported their position.

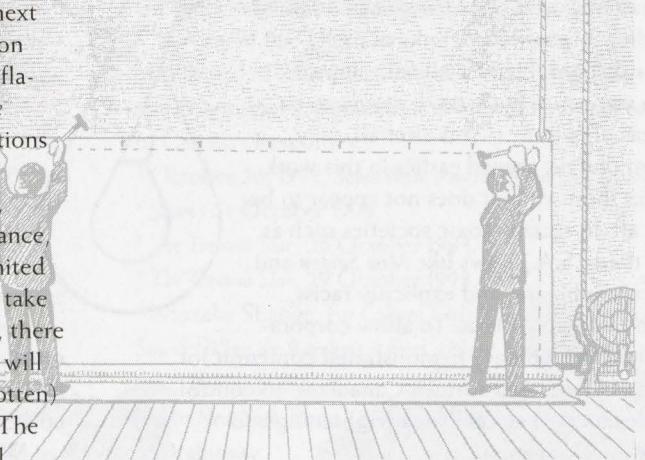
There is, however, another sort of bottom line — another type of tallying that needs must happen. On the one side of the balance sheet are the powerful with their advance ticket sales of six million dollars, the increase in Livent share issue prices, and news that *Show Boat* will open in New York next spring or fall. On the other side is the heightened tension and anger on the part of many Blacks in this city at the flagrant disrespect and disregard for their concerns. No one should equate the paucity of numbers at the demonstrations and pickets — more a reflection of over-extended activists — with a lack of support for the issue by many, many people in Black communities in Toronto. For instance the annual cricket match, a major fund raiser for the United Way, arranged by Black member organizations, did not take place this year. Contrary to what many want to believe, there has been a cost — a cost in social tensions that Toronto will have to bear long after *Show Boat* has gone to the Big (rotten) Apple. (Which was always the goal of this enterprise.) The deficit that presently exists in the provincial and federal economies is paralleled by the even larger social deficit that has been created in relations between Blacks and whites in Toronto.

Not With My Child

While tallying balance sheets we must keep in mind the attempts being made by Livent to expose students to this production. If the issue around this production of *Show Boat* continues to focus on whether or not the production is racist, or whether Livent has adequately cleaned up the stereotypes, the larger and more important issue of how Blacks and Black concerns are treated will be lost. Once that happens, and it is in danger of happening, then it all becomes a matter of whose opinion carries more weight. Further, an entire struggle will be obliterated and the impulse to social amnesia so pervasive in modern society will carry the day. In the vacuum? So created, it will be extraordinarily easy to justify taking students to this show.

Garth Drabinsky's and Livent's response to community concerns presented to the North York Board of Education states that it "offers comprehensive educational programmes to students from across Canada and the U.S. border states." According to Livent, "(m)ore than 400,000 students" have participated in these programs. "LIVENT considers it important that young audiences be given an opportunity to experience the world of live theatre."¹¹ Given the exorbitant price of tickets to these shows (an average of \$50); given that it is only the well-to-do who can afford them, is this, in fact, an accurate experience of "the world of live theatre"? Isn't this a brazen attempt to influence the thinking of students so that they come to equate live theatre with these "blockbuster" types of shows — often American and trans-Atlantic imports. This type of experience fails to provide students with the knowledge that much good, and often great, theatre takes place around them, month after month, year after year, put on by small and often struggling theatres like Tarragon, Theatre Passe Muraille or the now defunct Black Theatre Canada and Theatre Fountainhead.

For teachers, many of whom are already juggling several tasks, the ready-made packages provided by Livent are



undoubtedly attractive. The preparatory work is already done for them, and school boards will already have approved the shows, so the possibility of offending parents is lessened.

In the case of *Show Boat*, the "world of live theatre" to which Garth Drabinsky and Livent wish to expose Canadian students comprises an imported show, thoroughly American in its racist script, its cast and its production team. And to explain it all to Canadian students, no less a figure than the eminent Harvard professor, Henry Louis Gates Jr. with his educational "anti-racist" material.

Corporate involvement in schools has gained increasing acceptance over the last few years, particularly in the U.S. This involvement includes food concessions and direct linking of curricula to business needs. In their crassest instances these incursions take the form of companies contracting with schools to have students watch televised material, complete with advertisements, prepared by them.

The process is not so far along in Canada, but with schoolboards facing shrinking budgets there is increasing pressure for them to seek this solution. There is at least one recorded attempt to introduce advertisements into the school system in Alberta. At present, the linking of business and education in Canada manifests itself primarily as the tailoring of curricula at the secondary and university levels to fit the needs of business.

Livent represents the cultural manifestation of this now burgeoning movement of corporate involvement in schools. In their own words: "As government arts programmes have been drastically cut back due to budgetary constraints, Livent considers it important that young audiences be given an opportunity to experience the world of live theatre."¹² "Budgetary constraints" and cuts are the very arguments used by businesses and schools as rationales for forging closer links in the U.S.A. While the dangers of this new alliance appear sharper with respect to business, it appears to be less so in areas of culture — it is after all, only entertainment. But, as argued earlier in this work, culture "works" best when it does not appear to be "working" at all. In racially toxic societies such as Canada and the U.S.A., shows like *Miss Saigon* and *Show Boat*, both implicitly and explicitly racist, become even more pernicious. To allow corporations like Livent, which have demonstrated contempt for the concerns of Blacks and African Canadians, to control anti-racist education of students is a frightening and unacceptable development.

The Emperor Has No Clothes

A great deal more than negative factors exists on the

Black side of the balance sheet, however. Despite all that has been written about the evils of political correctness — including the media attempts to dismiss the protests — the latter have had an impact. The sheer amount of media time spent justifying the production is proof of this. For this *The Coalition* must be given credit for keeping up the pressure through weekly demonstrations. If opposition to the show had had no effect on public opinion, Garth Drabinsky and Livent would not have spent money producing a show to prove how entirely non-racist *Show Boat* is. Neither would Drabinsky have brought Henry Louis Gates Jr. to Toronto to tell us country, Canuck, Caribbean Blacks just how ill-informed we really are. Nor would that backsliding anti-Semite, William F. Buckley have come, courtesy of Bnai B'rith, to tell us why Jews deserve special treatment and Blacks don't. Neither of these individuals comes exactly cheaply.

Those of us — African, Asian, First Nations and white — who have opposed the productions of *Show Boat* and *Miss Saigon* have succeeded in pushing the boundaries of the debate concerning issues such as racism and culture and that postmodernist mantra "race and representation." In short, we have, collectively, put the issue of culture, one of the linchpins of racist structures, on the table. The mandarins of high culture and the media can try—and how they have—to dismiss us as typifying "mob rule" and rabid purveyors of political correctness. They can no longer ignore the arguments, rooted as they are in fact. The best *The Globe and Mail* could do after admitting that the show was racist was to drag out the age of the work to justify it.

One argument, however, made earlier in *Showing Grit*, bears repeating. It is the argument, made equally often by Blacks and whites, that *Show Boat* is acceptable because it is historically accurate. The history that *Show Boat* reflects is a one-sided history, written, as often history is, by the victors. It is a history that omits—deliberately—the anguish, the pain and the trauma of a people. It is a history that, in an attempt to cover its bloody tracks, portrays Blacks as happy, singing "darkies". It is a twisting and warping of history that in 1993 results in the son of Oscar Hammerstein, describing his father as having a strong sense of "unpleasant experiences such as being Black in the South 100 years ago." Somehow the words "unpleasant experience" do not begin to capture the experience of the holocaust that was slavery in the South, or its aftermath. It is but a short step from "unpleasant experience" to portraying Blacks as essentially happy-go-lucky workers, content with their lot.

While we continue to engage in the debate about whether or not *Show Boat* is racist, we continue to play by the rules of the game laid down by Garth Drabinsky and Livent. It is crucial that we not lose sight of the larger issue located

in that "play" around the play — the adamant refusal of white Canadian society to take seriously, or treat with respect, the needs of its Black citizens and residents. This is manifest in all aspects of Canadian life — beginning with the education of Black children, through issues of policing and the justice system, to larger issues like immigration. This ought not to surprise us, however, when we reflect on how Canada, a white supremacist society, has treated, and continues to treat, its First Nations people. The benchmark for the treatment of all other peoples of colour coming to this land is the attempted genocide of Native peoples by Europeans. That is what links this struggle by Blacks and African Canadians against the production of *Show Boat* to the opposition to *Miss Saigon*, and to the many struggles of Asians, First Nations and other peoples of colour — the struggles of all Nobodys — against those systems that are poised to claw back the tiny and very recent gains made by them.

These systems are powerful, they appear to have unlimited financial resources and, allied as they are to the mainstream media, they seem invincible. They are, however, morally repugnant, politically bankrupt and spiritually dead. Despite the many many tailors — the Emperor has no clothes.

No walls will come toppling down with the death of capitalism; there will be no media gathered to witness its demise. But we are living it, if not witnessing it, as economies shrink, unemployment rolls grow, violence multiplies and we continue to poison our environment. Hence the need for antidotes like *Show Boat* and *Miss Saigon*.

The fairy tale described above of Garth Drabinsky cancelling the production of *Show Boat* would have had astoundingly long-term benefits for race relations in this city; it would have gone a long way towards convincing Blacks that lacking financial clout does not mean that they are at the mercy of the powerful. What we have had instead is an exercise of raw, naked power — *Show Boat* must open, and hang the costs of increased resentment and anger on the part of African Canadians — masquerading as a "victory of tolerance and sensitivity." In their gospel's power, the powerful always win, the powerless remain losers. However, the powerful are not the only ones who tally balance sheets: resentment, anger, perceived contempt, and limited educational, social and employment horizons, eventually and inevitably lead to explosions. Unfortunately, rioting is still one of the most frequent ways in which Blacks attempt to exercise power and exorcise the disrespect and abuse meted out to them in white

societies. Yonge Street was just such an attempt to balance these inequities. And while that OI Man River of racism continues to run, other Yonge Streets become inevitable.

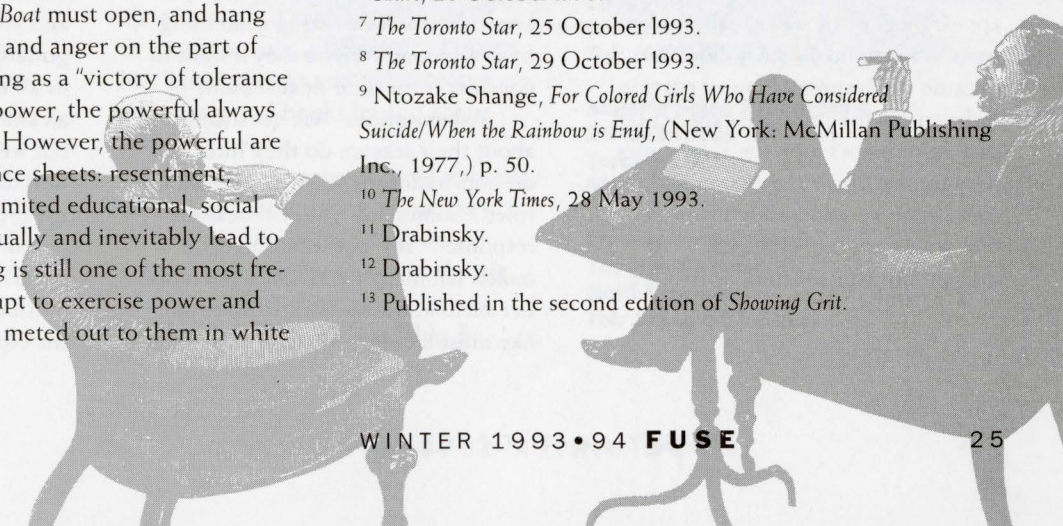
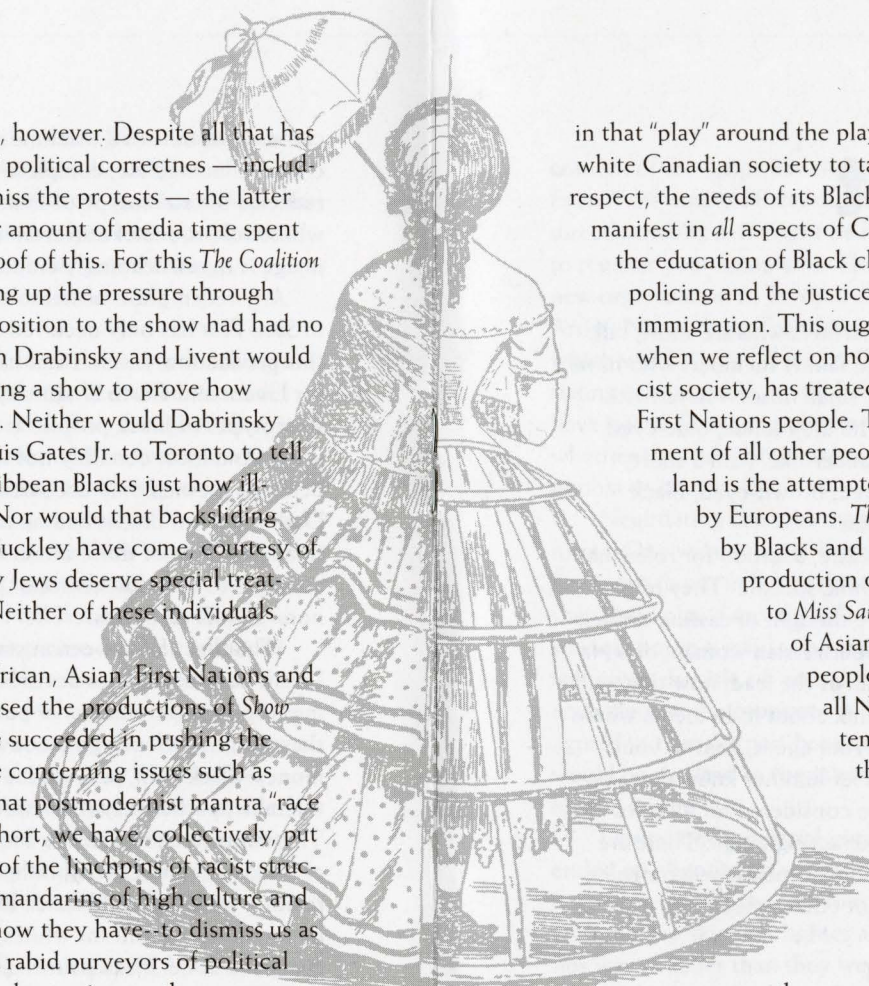
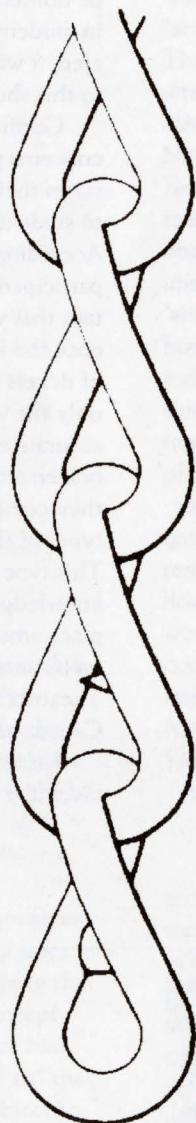
To ensure a balance sheet that results in Black, however, it is essential that those opposed to *Show Boat*, continue their opposition during the run of this show. Since there has been so much talk of redeeming the stereotypes of *Show Boat*, I determined to explore the possibilities of truly subverting the play. *The Redemption of Al Bumen*¹³ is the result of just such an attempt. The following are other suggestions for continued resistance:

1. Parents should refuse to allow their children to attend *Miss Saigon* or *Show Boat* if their school organizes such a trip. They should also make their protests known at the school and board level.
2. Individuals or groups should write to the Anti-racism Secretariat and the Minister of Citizenship to express their concerns and opinions over *Miss Saigon* and *Show Boat*, including the treatment of Blacks and Africans in the events leading up to the production of the latter.
3. Individuals or groups should complain to the CBC's Ombudsman and the CRTC regarding the lack of representation of the views and opinions of The Coalition and those opposed to the production.
4. Contact The Coalition or The Black Secretariat to see how you could be of assistance.
5. Continue to educate yourself and others about the issues.

M. Nourbese Philip is a poet and writer living in Toronto.

NOTES

- ¹ *The Globe and Mail*, 16 October 1993
- ² *The Globe and Mail*, 16 October 1993
- ³ *The Toronto Star*, 29 October 1993. The Bnai B'rith Garth H. Drabinsky lecture series invited Dr. Henry Louis Gates Jr. to speak in Toronto on October 28, 1993.
- ⁴ "Statement by G. H. Drabinsky to a Meeting of the North York Board of Education Trustees, Wednesday May 12, 1993" and "Community Concerns and Live Entertainment Corporation of Canada's Responses."
- ⁵ October 26, 1993, *Show Boat: Journey of an Epic Musical*.
- ⁶ *Share*, 21 October 1993.
- ⁷ *The Toronto Star*, 25 October 1993.
- ⁸ *The Toronto Star*, 29 October 1993.
- ⁹ Ntozake Shange, *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide/When the Rainbow is Unuf*, (New York: McMillan Publishing Inc., 1977,) p. 50.
- ¹⁰ *The New York Times*, 28 May 1993.
- ¹¹ Drabinsky.
- ¹² Drabinsky.
- ¹³ Published in the second edition of *Showing Grit*.



Rocking the Show Boat

BEING AN ACTOR IN A COUNTRY where art comes first in the budget cuts and last on most people's list of necessities is hard. Being an actor of colour within an industry that still casts us primarily in small, stereotypical roles such as maids, hookers, dancers, snake charmers, kung-fu fighters, spiritual healers, cooks and showboat singers is really hard. Actors have very little institutionalized power, actors of colour have even less and women of colour actors, well...what's a girl to do?

All artists have it tough, but actors have their own unique realities to contend with. Above all, we are not in control of our own work — unlike visual artists, we cannot work independently. Well some of us do, but it's a challenge to really feel like you're acting when you are doing it home alone, for your lover, friend or pet. Actors need an audience, and preferably a paying one.

Both in theatre and media the competition is fierce. It is estimated that for every ten times a white actor auditions for a part, an actor of colour auditions once. The stark inequities in the theatre scene are further unmasked when we realize that very few mid-size to large theatre companies carry a whole season of plays that employ people of colour actors. And those that do rarely offer roles to people of colour that go beyond token appearances or (if we're really lucky), parts in a secondary story-line. Yet, because we desperately need parts in order to get the requisite experience casting directors look for, it becomes hard to turn down these "offers." So, sometimes we reluctantly take roles that we do not feel challenged by, that are not well written, or that are

irresponsible in the way that they portray people of colour or women.

As the most visible participants in a production, actors face different responsibilities than the producers, writers or directors of colour that take on these projects. Sometimes we don't know we are visibly portraying a stereotypical character. Other times we do know but don't feel we are in a position to say "no" to the work. The controversies surrounding *Show Boat* and *Miss Saigon* highlight the limited options we have as actors of colour when we face racism, sexism and homophobia in our workplace. Outside of refusing the gig, ignoring what's happening, or only working on projects that are anti-racist, anti-sexist and anti-homophobic (not a realistic option right now for most of us struggling in the business), what can we do?

The Audition

Once we get an audition there are things we can do to let our presence be known. Choosing an audition piece that reflects our own reality is one way of letting producers and directors know that we are writing and are active here in Canada. Chances are, if it's a piece by a person of colour or by a woman of colour, they might not know it. That's OK. It allows us the chance to talk about the piece. If they haven't seen it before, then you know they will be seeing something fresh and new. Maybe they'll want to consider it for their next season?

Ask questions. Ask questions about their season: do they intend to do non-traditional casting for major roles? Sometimes you will hear the response: "Yes, but we do have to match families." Question some more. Let them know that our families are like most families — we have parents,

siblings, partners who are short, tall, light, dark; family members who have big noses, small noses. I have first cousins who are blonde, blue-eyed, tall and dancer-like. I am a short, black-haired, brown-eyed, Black South Asian.

In theatre, audition for roles that are not ethnic specific. They might never have thought of casting a Black woman, South Asian woman, or a Native woman as the lead, now they will at least think about it. In media where you need your agent, chat to your agent and let him/her know that you want to be considered for all roles within your acting range. There are agents who will submit you for roles that are not ethnic specific.

The Gig

Theatre gigs are obviously different than media roles, but they have similar challenges for actors of colour. A big problem in both mediums is **The Script**. What do you do when your character is underwritten, caricatured, stereotypical or just out-and-out racist or sexist?

Quit. (It's an option, though not a great one.)

Negotiate. If you are lucky enough to be working with other people of colour, talk to them, try and get some support. When I did this on a theatre gig we were able to present our concerns to the writer, director and producer in written form and negotiate an agreement that would allow us all to do our work comfortably. We all still had concerns about the project but we were able to negotiate a situation that would allow us to commit to the project. If there is no one in the cast or production team that understands your concerns you can take it outside. If it's an equity production the equity officer can help you, if the

content of the script has changed. Even if the equity officer cannot get directly involved, it might be helpful to register your complaint. There is a new organization in Toronto called Artists Networking Together (ANT), which will help you if it can. If negotiating is impossible, it still helps to have pointed out your concerns whether they are about racism, homophobia or sexism.

Negotiating can take many forms. One woman actor instructed her agent to put in her contract that she would play a servant as long as she was not in a maid's uniform and was given the title of "assistant" or the equivalent in the programme. She also agreed to take the part because she would be the lead in the other play for the season.

During one industrial gig I did, I ended up negotiating with the makeup person. When she was finished with me, my skin was lighter and my lips were smaller than they were when we had first met. I went to her and asked her to do my lips again and I powdered my face with my own powder. The director didn't care or didn't notice, but I did.

Talk. If it's a company that is trying to grapple with the issue of non-traditional casting, let them know about other actors of colour, directors, female producers, writers and stage managers. There are books like *Into the Mainstream*, from the Toronto ACTRA office, for use by producers, which list actors of colour.

The Powers That Be

We need to sit on the arts councils, the places where they decide which organizations and individual artistic non-profit projects get money. Call them or write a letter letting them know about yourself or someone you think is knowledgeable about the theatre or film community, and would be willing to sit on a jury.

Support your local theatre (I know it sounds like an ad), but there

are theatres employing people of colour — actors, producers, stage managers, directors! I am currently producing, directing and writing a full-length play with Maxine Bailey and a group of actors that will feature six Black women, under the name Sugar'n'Spice Productions. This project involves Black female artists in all aspects of the production, costume design, writing, acting, fundraising and producing.

We need to be **The Powers That Be**, which means we need to be producers, directors, administrators. There are a whole lot of us who are. In fact, there are so many of us, I could never list us all here, but if you are looking for people of colour for crew, actors, administrators try BASO, Desh, LIFT, Full Screen for a start.*

I know you hear this all the time, but write letters. I wrote a whole series of letters to CBC, Channel 47 and CFTO complaining about the lack of people of colour in programming, and the lack of quality programmes in which they do appear. The more they hear from us the more they will know we are here. Write them and tell them about a character on TV or film that you want to see more of. Write the artistic directors of theatre companies and recommend plays that you would like to see produced. It's our tax money that funds "community" theatre productions like *Show Boat*.

Get the local business community involved. For example, go to the Black community for a sponsorship of a play that is by and about the Black community. Our culture is wrapped up in the arts, it can't be maintained or progress without artists. Call places like Theatrebooks and ask for plays and theoretical books by and about people of colour.

I know that none of these options are completely satisfactory but they do give us some room when we are going for the gig, working on the gig, or waiting, and waiting and waiting for **The Gig**. **The Powers That Be**

and our community need to know that even if we are doing **The Gig** we have concerns about it. The show must go on, but it doesn't have to be built on our silence. Rock the boat, don't tip the boat over, rock the boat, till we don't need the boat, *rock the boat...*

Sharon M. Lewis is an actor, writer, director, and producer struggling in the big city to find fortune, fame, and innovative art (not necessarily in that order.)

***Brief Resource List**
compiled by Sharon M. Lewis

Into the Mainstream
a catalogue of visible and audible minority actors
ACTRA
989-1311
Canadian Actors Equity Association
Tel: (416) 867-9165

ANT: Artists Networking Together
lobby, advocacy, workshops for and by actors of colour
Louis Taylor or Calvin Greene
Tel: (416) 595-6190

Black Film and Video Network
Tel: 588-6633

Black Artists Service Organization
Tel: (416) 203-2159

Desh Pardesh
South Asian Cultural Festival
Tel: (416) 203-2159

Metropolitan Cultural Affairs
Theatre Division
Irene Bauer
Tel: (416) 392-4218

Ontario Arts Council
Theatre Division
Jan McIntyre
Tel: (416) 969-7432

Sugar'n'Spice Productions
26 Bellwoods Ave. Apt. 2
Toronto, Ont.
M6J 2P4

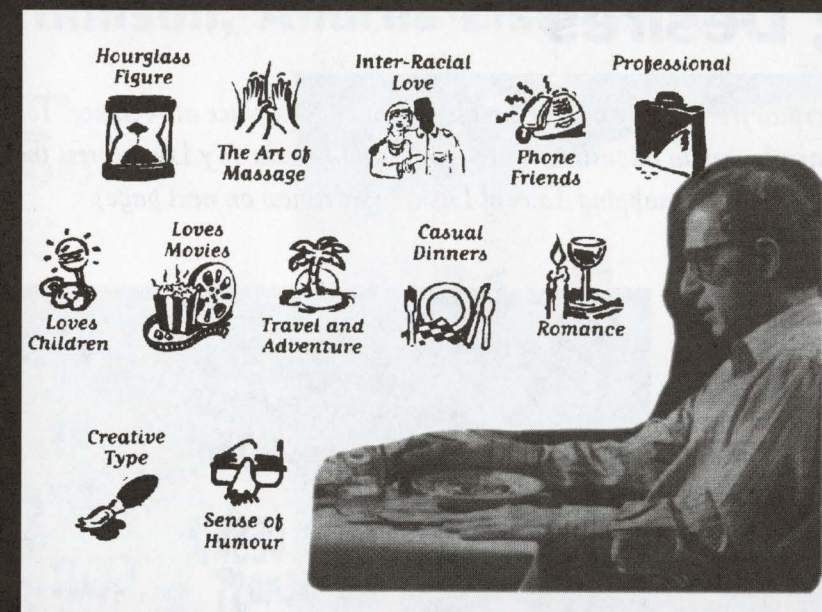
Toronto Arts Council
Theatre Division
Beth Reynolds
Tel: (416) 392-6800



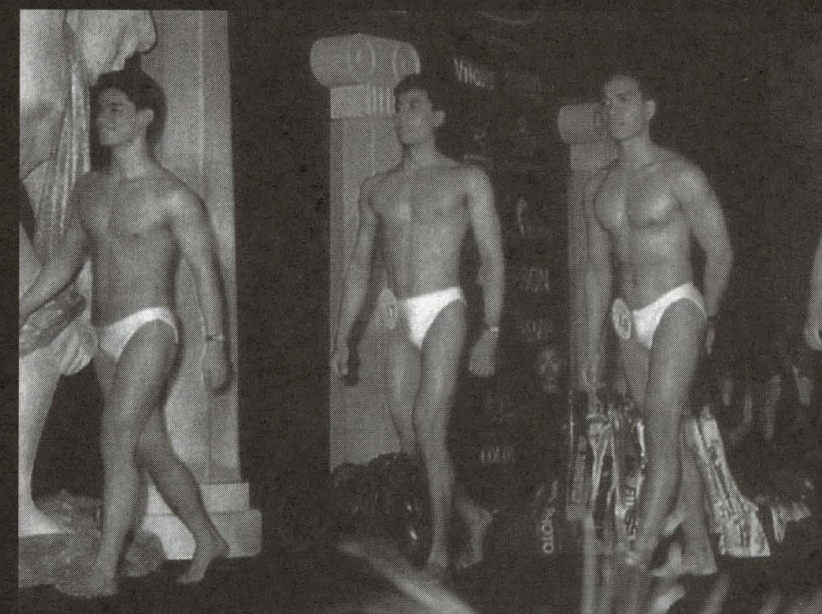
Yellow Peril



Dog Meat



Butterfly Syndrome



Som Yung Gai

Multiplying Desires

The following quotes were excerpted from a round-table discussion which took place at A Space, Toronto on September 28, 1993. Artists karen/miranda augustine, Carol Laing and Brenda Joy Lem express their viewpoints on their participation in the exhibition "Remapping Tales of Desire" (see review on next page).

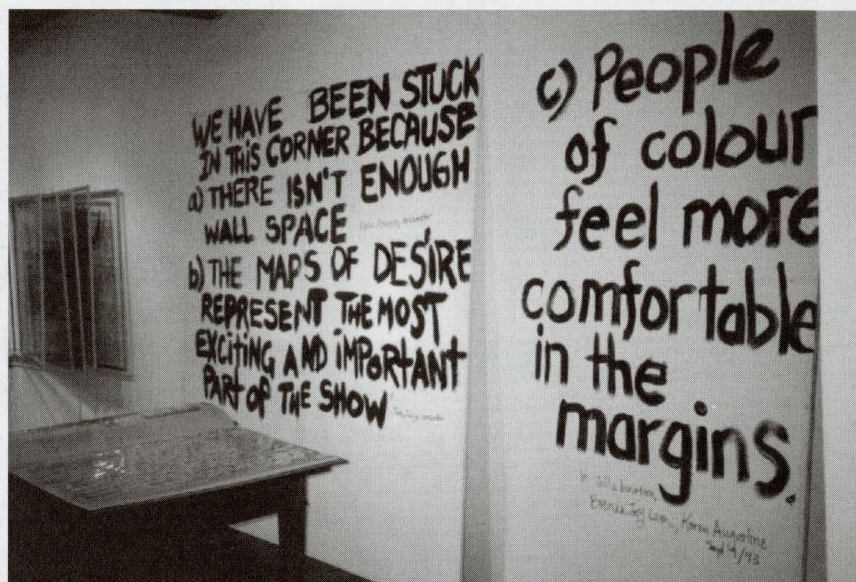
BJL The one thing that was disturbing for me in that panel discussion was that Andrea Liss basically said one thing about each of the collaborating artists' pieces. I felt that she was trying to explain them into her own theories around feminist issues, and my piece was not just about feminist things, but she tried to justify her own theories. I felt like she was using my work to footnote her theories rather than being open to what my work was really about.

KMA At first, I was telling Brenda, I'm not sure if I want to do this. On the one hand it's an opportunity to show your work but on the other hand, I wasn't crazy about the show. I just felt like there was this weird catch-22.

BJL I didn't feel there was any collaboration except between karen augustine and myself when we did the protest on the wall. Normally in collaborations, there's a certain amount of equality among the people that are collaborating.

KMA Like when you, me and Kyo [Maclear] worked with Haruko...that was way more positive. We actually had meetings where we talked about ourselves and our work and what we wanted to bring to the show. It was really good. And then we got to know the other artists who were taking part. We also got input into what we wanted to do. She already had in mind the materials and then it was just up to us to talk about ideas and stuff like that.

CL I think in a collaborative exhibition there's always something wrong with looking at desire that is singular. If we've learned anything...if we don't understand that we want to work collectively because we have certain things in common...we should have learned by now that we don't make any assumptions about what we have in common. That's part of the process.



Above photo of participating artists' intervention in the exhibition *Remapping Tales of Desire*.
Below & left images from the bookwork *Remapping Tales of Desire: writing across the abyss* by Karen Atkinson and Andrea Liss.

KMA But that happens so often. Here I find you're the one Black writer...so when these opportunities come, they seem like opportunities and we take them. And then usually we end up feeling compromised. We feel that if we do our work will be shown, and if we don't do it then we won't.

BJL There's something about who has the power. People say why did you stay in the show if it was such a problem, and I felt that I wanted to voice what I could, and at the same time I feel that double bind.

BJL A lot of people here can afford to go to these countries like Asia...it's not just men that are colonizing.

CL It seems the entry level for a real process of collaboration is a process open to negotiation and change so it means that you don't really know what you're going to end up with. That's the process that invites others to participate on their own terms.

Karen Atkinson, Andrea Liss

Remapping Tales of Desire
A Space Gallery, Toronto
September 4 - October 16, 1993

A Tale of Conflicting Desires

Remapping Tales of Desire, an attempted collaboration between a number of local artists and two L.A.-based artists, Karen Atkinson and Andrea Liss, is remarkable for both its success and its failure. Its evocative opening-day presentation was followed the next day by a heated conflict: at a public panel discussion, local artists accused initiating artist Karen Atkinson of misleading, mistreating and ultimately marginalizing them. Disturbing as it was, the conflict, as much as the original work, illuminated the issues with which the artists had set out to grapple.

Karen Atkinson's original intent was twofold: to use the conquering attitude of both explorers and modern day tourists as a metaphor for men's continued attitude of conquest toward women; and to exhibit women's own mappings of desire as a counterpoint to this attitude. Unfortunately she was much more successful with the former. The "remapping," to which the local artists were asked to contribute, was given too little attention and space, both in the planning of the show and in its final presentation.

The resulting fiasco demonstrates as well as the actual work the difficulty of achieving mutual understanding between people of differing origins and, particularly, a differing power. It is always tempting for those who have the power to see only those parts of the "other" which are of direct benefit or enjoyment to them and which do not threaten them. It appears that Karen Atkinson fell into her own paradigm in her willingness to map the problem of intrusive desire, but not to let her de-



Installation view, "Remapping Tales of Desire," A Space, 1993.

construction go once it reached the limits of her conception and control.

Karen's most successful work in the show is the montage of contemporary travel photos, sixteenth century wood block prints, and texts demonstrating the conquering attitude which prevails to this day amongst Europeans setting foot on foreign continents. Images and text are grouped in little clusters which immediately evoke the excitement of discovery. The black-and-white wood block prints create a captivating portal to the lurid travel poster photos on which they are overlaid. The combination is interesting because, while the media are so different, each flattens and objectifies what it represents.

There are, for example, floating woodcuts—a king on a throne and warships—set against a classic sunset beach. Statistics on the rapid destruction of the indigenous people are typed on the back of a postcard, like a smug little message sent home from the conquerors.

On other picture-postcards, Atkinson plays with the striking resemblance between the language of original conquest and that of contemporary touristic conquest. "I also discovered that the sea smelled like the despair of a

waiting woman," writes Alberti several centuries ago; "the New World gracefully yielded her virginity to the conquering castillians," writes a historian in 1942; "an intimate hideaway on an island for your every need and desire. Discover virgin beaches and breathtaking tropical scenery," writes a brochure writer in 1991. Along with these men, Atkinson has cleverly chosen to quote a female travel brochure writer rhapsodizing on the feminine charm of the tropics.

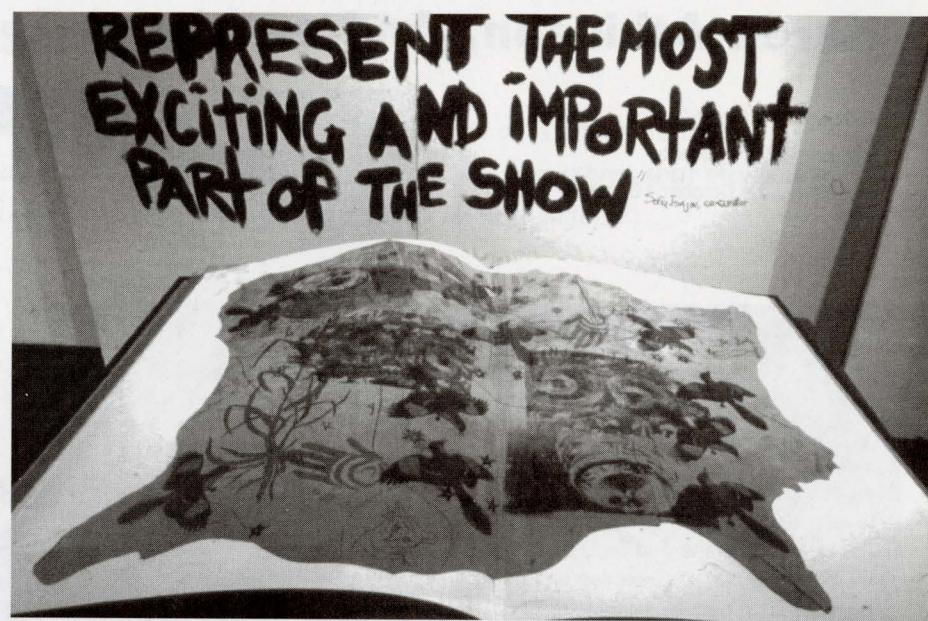
Because women are themselves implied in the objectification of foreign lands, the show puts them in an ambiguous position. It points out their capacity to act as conquerors themselves and their complicity with the male conqueror. Women may well find that they have come to identify with the sun-washed beaches, with the projection and fulfillment of another's desire which earns them a place at the side of the conqueror. They are in a position to appreciate the bittersweet lesson of the text Atkinson has set on the walls: "to love without domination might then be a coming to understand that one cannot overwhelm, cannot completely inhabit, cannot "have" the other. To love without overtaking might then be an admission of distance, a recognition of sorrow."

It is interesting that the text asks us to accept a certain sorrow, a mourning, while the rest of the piece, the attempted "remapping," reflects a desperate attempt to hang on, to categorize and to control. It is a frenzy of images, words and objects which lash out at meaning, never hitting their mark. And in the corner, on a desk in a closed book, are the evocative remappings of desire executed by the — not surprisingly — disgruntled local artists.

This is not to say, though, that the attempted remapping has absolutely no weight or validity. It takes as its point of departure a quite intriguing fantasy map, drawn by a seventeenth century woman, sentimentally depicting the road from Amity to Tender. It passes by such districts as Respect, A Great Heart, Sincerity and A Gallant Letter. And it is traced on a territory that very much resembles a woman's body, with a strange overlay of her exterior anatomy of belly and breasts and her interior anatomy of labia, vaginal passage and ovaries.

With this map Karen Atkinson suggests an introspective solution to the problem of compulsive conquest. But in elaborating the map she loses the brilliance of presentation that she brought to the problem. Her other wall pieces, and the explanatory booklet she created in collaboration with Andrea Liss, leave the antiquated document without clear connection to Atkinson's own issues and sensibility. It remains a sketchy old map on the wall with odd little captions scratched on.

The booklet at first appears a promising medium for the intimacies of remapping a course onto one's body. It includes enlargements of various parts of the map and writings by the map's originator. But the accompanying text is highly theoretical and turns insistently back to criticism of conquest rather than elaboration of the process of remapping. Although Atkinson (or perhaps Liss) writes in the booklet that "this imaginary Map of Tenderness is as fictive, or as real, as any of the maps to which we are accustomed," the booklet fails to bring convincing personal experience to bear on these abstractions.



Map book in "Remapping Tales of Desire," as at A space, 1993.

Beside the map Atkinson has created a number of moveable acetate sheets which stick out from the wall like a large book. Because they are transparent and attached in such a way as to overlap, they are very difficult to read. At the show's opening, Karen said that their illegibility demonstrates the absence of a final and truthful projection — there being a number of overlapping ones. This is an interesting message, but one which would have been better conveyed by the collaborating artists whose maps, being much more personal and expressive, would have had far more power on the wall than in a closed book. The acetates themselves contain jumbles of images and words overlaid in playful fashion but doing little to flesh out this notion of mapping a path into one's own body.

There are a number of other components to the installation which are somewhat haphazard. The significance of a circle of handkerchiefs — which Karen explained, in conversation, as referring to the traditional body language of women (as in dropping a hanky to get a man's attention) — is not self-evident. Within the circle, desks are grouped to allow you to sit down and have a look at the booklet. However, she has covered the desks with diagrams and assorted words which, like

the acetates, are more baffling than revealing.

It is interesting to note that this accomplished artist, a teacher at the California Institute of the Arts, while able to cleverly deconstruct a destructive cultural phenomenon, and even to begin envisioning an alternative, cannot go so far as to either flesh out that alternative or give others the opportunity to do so. Would this be a threat to her professional credibility? From the way she resorts to a flurry of sliced and diced words and images, which seem to express a desperate assertion of the power of intellect rather than a search for union between the body's experience and formal language, this appears to be the case. And so the remapping of desire remains suspended.

Janet Creery is an underemployed freelance writer and editor.

A Cup for a Cup

Forest City Gallery, London
September 11 – October 9, 1993

Forest City Gallery's "A Cup for a Cup" was a neighbourhood exchange project which included artists and non-artists, the gallery and non-art spaces. Through an open call, artists were invited to seek out a business or organization with which to exchange, guided by the principle that the artists would intervene in the street; the business, organization or individual would occupy a space in the gallery.

There was an attempt not to impose the terms of art on either the participants or the spaces used by them. The kinds of interventions that resulted were varied and individual, having been worked out by the exchanging participants. Each exchange was thereby characterized by its own typology, the character of the neighbourhood being essential to the nature of the resulting intervention. The relative economy of the means employed meant that the significance of the works relied primarily on their relevance and contextualization, not on the degree to which the materials or presentations were sophisticated or seductive. By locating the exchange value of art at a specific level — that of communication between individuals and groups in a specific community — the monetary and careerist values of art were side-stepped.

Questions of "quality" in relation to operating art categories — progressive, modernist, folk, amateur, traditional, design, craft — were rendered irrelevant. Instead the viewer was encouraged to engage with the pieces based on their relative sensitivity to context. Varying degrees of attention were, in fact, paid to the sites and in-gallery displays, often as a reflection of the way in which the pairs of participants had chosen to work together. Interestingly enough, the displays of the non-artist participants in the Forest City Gallery — many of which were set up by their artist partners — often looked more like "art" than the interventions by the artists in the public spaces. While this emphasized the legitimizing effect of the pro-

CYRIL READE



Salvador Aragon, Ebenezer Tailors Custom-made Clothing, Forest City Gallery Display. Photo: David Merritt.

fessional gallery space, it also reflected the perceptions of the non-artists as to what they believed constituted the artist's domain of work.

The Forest City Gallery, an artist-run centre now marking its twentieth anniversary, is located in East London on a site it has occupied for the last five years. The gallery is situated on Dundas Street, one of London's historically important east-west arteries, which runs through the downtown area. The Forest City Gallery is east of the downtown core, which is decaying because of over-speculation and the flight to the suburbs; this more easterly part of Dundas is both working class and underclass.

The gallery's project involved that part of Dundas Street that runs from Adelaide Street, traditionally the marker between affluent and working class neighbourhoods, to the Rectory Street corner where the gallery is located. These blocks house grocery stores, including one specializing in West Indian and one in East Asian foodstuffs, a number of Country and Western bars, hospices and other street-level services run by religious organizations, variety stores, small family-run businesses, community health, social and immigration services, used furniture, clothing, book and record shops and a theatre.

While many members of the Forest City Gallery live or work in the neighbourhood, there has been, until now, little or no concerted effort on the part of the gallery to locate its activities in relation to the neighbourhood, or to speak to a constituency other than the construct known as the art community.

Under the impetus of "A Cup for a Cup" organizer David Merritt, who developed the project through extensive discussions with potential participants, the Forest City Gallery sought to open up a dialogue and an exchange with its neighbours. In doing so, predetermined and generally accepted notions of art were laid aside. An opportunity was created for both artists and non-artists to experiment and to formulate proposals. Implicit in this initiative was an attempt to side track the imperatives of institutionalized models of art production and exhibition with which artist-run centres have become increasingly burdened. As corporatist agendas of marketability and profitability have penetrated the country's funding bodies and public galleries, artist-run centres are responding to this pressure by reshaping their identities and raising their visibility in hopes of stemming the financial bleeding. This has raised the ante with regard to the limited programming slots, fanning ca-

Dan Graham Rock My Religion Writings and Art Projects 1965-90

Edited with an introduction by Brian Wallis

Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 1993

Homes For America (1966) was Dan Graham's first art project. "Exhibited" as an art magazine publication, it signaled at the outset of Graham's career his perpendicular but always relevant relationship to contemporary art. It documented the monotonously serial composition of a New Jersey tract housing development, and accompanied this visual documentation with an equally monotonous descriptive text. *Arts Magazine* published *Homes for America* in its December-January 1966-67 issue. By deleting all but one photograph, however, the magazine treated the project as a straightforward article — missing the point of the project and anticipating, as well, the ambivalence with which Graham's art and writing has always been received.

What was the point of a series of photographs depicting row upon row of houses with an accompanying text describing such structures in reference to formulas like "AABBCCDD," "ABCD-ABCD," "ADCBADCB"; and what was the point of situating it within the context of an art magazine? (Although his original choice was, in fact, *Esquire*.) In editor Brian Wallis' introduction to this collection of Graham's work he characterizes *Homes for America* as "an attempt to disclose...the larger systemic logic that governed the field of mass consumption..." An easy reading. For Graham's real interests, as this book bears out and as Wallis himself later testifies, have always been history, memory and historical positioning as manifested in the myriad instances of opposition to dominant culture occurring everywhere from punk rock to architecture.

Wallis' choice of words are telling; "systemic logic" and "field" also refer to the language of minimalism, the

dominant critical aesthetic discourse at the time Graham began his career as an artist. *Homes For America*, rather than simply an analysis of mass consumption, appears to me to be a critical response to minimalism's seeming lack of history, specifically the contemporary social history of urban space. Graham's piece in fact suggests that the languages of minimalism and urban space are quite similar. His images of housing developments in working class sub-districts are strikingly similar to the formal structures of Donald Judd's modular units and Robert Morris's boxes — similar even to Sol Lewitt's and Frank Stella's paintings of criss-crossed, parallel and repetitive lines traversing the surface of a canvas. While minimalist art suggested that its ultimate reference was the institutional confinement of art, Graham suggested that the historical indices of social relations are always somehow inscribed within works of art.

Over the next twenty-five years, Dan Graham would continue this inquiry into the historical past and the unearthing of moments of history and memory in artworks and writings that ranged widely across the field of contemporary social life and art: punk rock, body art, television, video, cinema, public sculpture, corporate architecture, institutional critique, suburban housing, historical gardens and urban space. Although Graham's work could variously — and meaninglessly — be described as conceptualism, body art, sculpture, installation, video art, critical architecture, whatever — his writing, happily, transgresses such rigid distinctions. Graham's key concerns derive from his interest in Walter Benjamin's anti-official theory of history. Breaking with the bourgeois-objective concept of a mythically teleological continuum of history,

Benjamin proposed instead a materialist engagement with history linked to changing definitions of subjectivity as defined by domination and enslavement rather than by natural development and scientific progress.

Graham was, however, a minimalist at heart, if we understand that the true stakes of minimalism were indeed history. Minimalist art — through boxes and modular units, light fixtures and paintings which redirected the traditional figure-ground relationship so as to be inclusive of site as the grounds for legibility — reconfigured the practice of art in order to address context and subjectivity. Although initiated by a canonized and select group of white men in New York, the seeds were sown for less socially privileged artists to re-make contemporary culture with a critical eye to the past and a critical awareness of what myopic thought comes with privilege.

With his recent "Corporate Arcadias" — works that truly resemble early minimalist art in spatial logic and in the situating of viewer and viewed — it may be true, as some recent press trumpeted, that Graham continues the discourse of minimalism. With the opportunity afforded by *Rock My Religion: Writings and Art Projects 1965-90*, however, it can be shown that he does so keenly aware of its pitfalls. Situated within his own historical context, Graham has only made those contradictions apparent.

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reerist competition among artists for positions in this part of the Canadian art system that can lead to exposure in commercial or public galleries. "A Cup for a Cup" sought to propose an alternative.

Two artists, Mickey Meads and Alice Mansell, organized their exchange with the City Art Centre, a meeting place for artists who, for the most part, have no professional aspirations, but who practice art for varying and serious reasons. Portraits of and statements by these artists were collated by Meads and Mansell in order to address the issue of the identity of the artist. This question is raised by relating institutionalized definitions of art practice to a social practice which contributes to identity and community, as it does for this group, which meets regularly in a donated volunteer-run space to share experiences.

Jenny White, a painter of intimist images, arranged an exchange with Furniture Reconditioning and Antiques. On a reconditioned table in the shop window, she placed a portrait painted by her grandmother on a doily crocheted by her mother-in-law. The blending of the painting and the doily with the artfully arranged reconditioned furniture in this storefront resulted in a seemingly invisible work. Only the small identification tag reframed this intervention, adding a personalized sense of memory and history to the commerce of antiques.

Mary Donlan negotiated an exchange with QAP (Quick As Possible) Towing, a notorious London towing company. Donlan occupied an empty lot owned by the company, gluing pairs of used shoes to the asphalt surface in an implied trajectory around the lot. This evoked the clientele of the numerous second-hand stores in the neighbourhood. Inside Forest City, QAP's sign surveyed the west gallery from high on the back wall, transmitting the anxiety that the tow trucks have come to convey.

David Merritt's human figure, made from small branches densely and deliberately pinned to a yellow cloth-covered board, floated in and out of sight amidst the other objects negligently placed by the local tailor Salvador Aragon, who uses his storefront as a work area. The display of the Nicaraguan tailor's pants

and skirts — examples of his trade — surpassed its function as a commercial display, and exuded the effect of the clothing in Christian Boltanski's *Canada* (1988), mounted at the Ydessa Art Foundation in Toronto. In contrast to *Canada's* effect of provoking the spectator's desire to project an history onto anonymous subjects, in this display, the cultural context and the personal history of the tailor were revealed.

Kelly Green collaborated with the Wendell Holmes Bookstore. Her storefront installation critiqued the commercialization of images of Native North Americans by showcasing a product that used a stereotyped image as part of its packaging. The bookstore presented art books and monographs of artists, precisely laid out in a glass bookcase, in the gallery. Unwittingly, this book display reminded viewers that other commercial interests are involved in marketing artists by perpetuating notions of quality, uniqueness and individualism.

Ron Benner's advertisement-like panels, installed in the Valdi discount grocery store over cans of tomatoes, potatoes, mushrooms and beans — vegetables native to the Americas — addressed the relationship of agri-business to indigenous cultures. This installation raised questions about the visibility or legibility of its intervention: do Valdi customers get the cryptic critique of this aspect of consumerism in relation to the appropriation and commercialization of native food stocks? (A question which could be generalized and asked of the residents of the neighbourhood in relation to the project as a whole.) Benner also organized the mounting of the Valdi display at the Forest City Gallery. Cans of the same vegetables were stacked in a pyramidal shape reminiscent of a Mexican sun temple, using the art language idiom of repetition, form and association.

In contrast, some displays in the gallery were presented using other idioms. The Ethiopian artist Aregawi Gebriwhet, who has been in Canada for only seven months, hung his traditional oil on leather paintings and small artisanal metalwork figures in an overlapping decorative arrangement. John's Lunch and Mary's Snack Bar both exhibited appealing home-style ciphers of

their business identities — among them a T-shirt and a cartoon-like drawing which retained the freshness of personalized service so often lost by the marketing logos of franchise and upscale eateries.

Maurice Carroll installed a second-hand television in front of the curtain of the street-level window of area resident Dan Casnig. His tape of two right eyes, opening and closing out of sync, parodied the police video surveillance of this strip. Dan Casnig, in turn, exhibited his wood sculpture of a male torso in a way that made it seem much like a figure destined for the prow of a ship.

Jack Niven's two oil on plexiglas paintings, one in each of the windows of Pay Less Furniture, played with the ornamental motifs of the furniture and upholstery placed in the storefronts. The rug and chair that Pay Less Furniture placed in one of the Forest City Gallery windows, reanimated the original commercial vocation of the gallery space. This was true as well of Dee 'n Ted's arrangement of kid's toys, games, dolls and lingerie in a second gallery window.

The displays in the gallery interrogated the transformative power of the art space: they both displaced and emphasized its bracketing quality, binding it to the display of merchandise and services of the neighbourhood, while not eschewing its function for generating or projecting meaning. What resonates in this exhibition is the fact that meaning is not tied to the mercantile or careerist concerns of the art world. Here, it is rooted in a neighbourhood and intended for its residents, while addressing issues that are not parochial. The effect of focusing on a specific locale was reiterated by the interventions of the artists who adapted their practices to the nature of the businesses or organizations with which they collaborated. In doing so, they acknowledged the meaning of these forms of commerce and services; in a broader sense, they created a meaningful place for the Forest City Gallery in its neighbourhood.

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Sounding Differences Conversations with Seventeen Canadian Women Writers

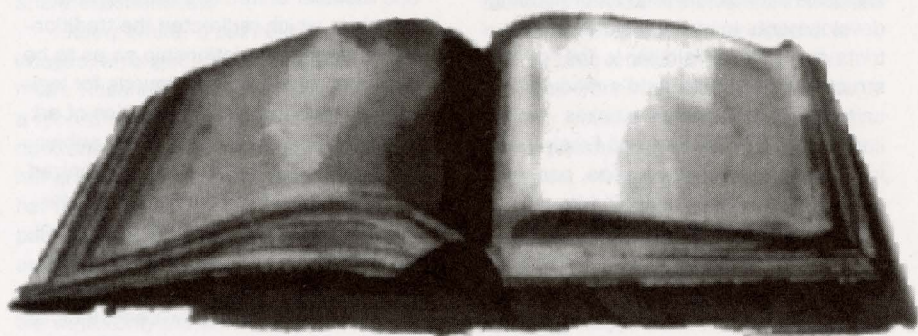
by Janice Williamson

Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993

Writers & Company In Conversation with CBC Radio's Eleanor Wachtel

by Eleanor Wachtel

Toronto: Alfred A. Knopf Canada, 1993



When I read literary interviews, it's with the hope that other writers will offer up their secrets — a hope which is often thwarted by the skills they have learned, from necessity, to conceal and protect themselves. *Writers and Co.* and *Sounding Differences* are two very different compilations of interviews, in which Eleanor Wachtel and Janice Williamson, respectively, use their considerable skills to reveal as much as possible about the work and concerns of various writers.

Writers and Co. is an easier read, and its interviews — from the CBC radio show of the same name — are tightly edited and streamlined. The selection of twenty-one authors, which includes several Canadians, is diverse but mainstream by comparison to the seventeen women featured in *Sounding Differences*.

Eleanor Wachtel is a witty and beguiling interviewer whose knowledge of her subjects is extensive. Her unabashed nosiness about what motivates them as writers provokes some lively responses. She digs hard for what she wants, which is information for her readers, and while she may accept cheerfully a writer's refusal to respond to a particular question, she won't hold back from prodding the same writer on other topics. She succeeds not least when she elicits a challenge or a rebuttal, as when Margaret Atwood responds to the question whether a photograph can save or steal your soul, "Let's leave souls out of this." Later in the same interview, Atwood has just finished speaking about her responsibility to other writers who are suffering repression or imprisonment elsewhere, when Wachtel says "I want to change the subject completely and talk about love." Atwood flashes back at her: "That was about love." Soon after this, Wachtel says "That's all I wanted to wring out of you," acknowledging the element of coercion in her role as interviewer.

She wrings a wonderful variety and depth of information out of the writers with whom she talks, and their respons-

es to her questions make it increasingly apparent that, as Irish writer Bernard MacLaverty says, there's no such thing as an apolitical writer. Whether they have sought out the themes that inform their work, or whether, like Russell Banks, they have had these themes forced upon them through personal experience, no one here could be described as apolitical. From "the troubles" in Northern Ireland to everyday male violence, Wachtel's interviews expose the breadth of what concerns these many different writers.

Whereas in *Writers and Co.* the political nature of writing is revealed incrementally, in *Sounding Differences* Janice Williamson articulates it from the start — beginning with the interviewing process itself. In her introduction, subtitled *Interviews as an Intervention*, she announces her intent to produce a fluid dialogue that, as she says, will replicate "the fluid boundaries of women's conversational gossip...[and] disrupt more authorized forms of knowledge production." She plans to critique the role of the interviewer, while allowing the writer as much voice as possible. To this end, she is very present in these interviews, very personal, in a way that Eleanor Wachtel, while being more obviously directive, is not. At times I found Williamson's presence disconcerting and even frustrating, but while it sometimes interrupts the flow, it produces some interesting results.

Williamson is aware that most of the women in *Sounding Differences* are not regularly seen or heard by a mainstream audience, and she states that when she began her project, "there was little critical writing on many of [them]." These are women whose work, and even whose presence challenges certain critical or social conventions; like Williamson, each is very conscious of where she stands in relation to them.

Though Williamson speaks of the importance of "unsettling the critic," I'm not sure she needs to focus on this as self-consciously as she has. Beginning with Jeannette Armstrong, the

women interviewed seem more than equal to the task of unsettling the interviewer themselves. They resist being led or pushed, with a determination and subtlety that would be as effective when faced with Eleanor Wachtel's more aggressive interviewing style as it is with Williamson's expository, sometimes self-deprecating questions.

When Jeannette Armstrong responds to questions she often reframes them before answering. She speaks of coming from an oral tradition, as an Okanagan Indian, and of being very conscious of the way oral language has eventually become contained and confined by written language; herself, she resists being contained or confined by the limitations of an interview.

Poet Di Brandt refers to another oral tradition, a religious one, when she talks about her past and her influences as a writer. In the previous interview, Armstrong expresses her consciousness of being part of a community of women, particularly Native women writers. Brandt also talks of feeling responsible to other women; of having found "a community voice in resisting a communal identity." The community she comes from and resists is Mennonite, and the one she has come to is female, though she is sometimes overwhelmed by the impossibility of speaking for all the women who identify with her.

Brandt experiences the act of writing as a transgression, and says that when she began she chose the middle of the page — a small cramped space in which to write. Another writer, M. Nourbese Philip, fills the page's margins as well as the middle with poetry, an act that she calls "subverting the poem itself."

Like the other women in this collection, Philip and Brandt feel the necessity of creating their own space and structures for writing, and of rejecting accepted norms. Nicole Brossard speaks about the transgression that is inherent in the act of writing itself, but also in what she writes about: desire between women. For this subject she finds tradi-

tional structures of writing profoundly inadequate. Most writers in *Sounding Differences* talk about challenging such structures, rewriting (or, for Jeannette Armstrong, rescuing) them. Brossard wants to discard the novel for what she condemns as the "fictionalization of women's lives." Elly Danica, when presenting the terrible abuse she suffered as a child, wants to erase the gap between the reader and the writer's words, to "present on paper the pain of [her] experience with no space between the text and the reader."

Poet Claire Harris says, "To write, we have to challenge even the forms we write in. The language we use, every thought has to be tested for its truth." She also says that, "...inherent in Eurocentric criticism is the idea that there is a norm, and that everybody else is reaching for it. This always puts the critic up there looking down on the peasants. There is no acceptance of variation, of difference." In very different ways, Janice Williamson and Eleanor Wachtel have turned this convention on its head, Williamson by explicitly attempting to reverse the balance of power between writer and critic, and Wachtel by probing persistently for what is unique to each writer. In the end, both of these books succeed in doing what interviews should — they let the writer speak for herself. And as Eleanor Wachtel says, "A good writer can turn your head around."

Diana Bryden is a poet living in Toronto.

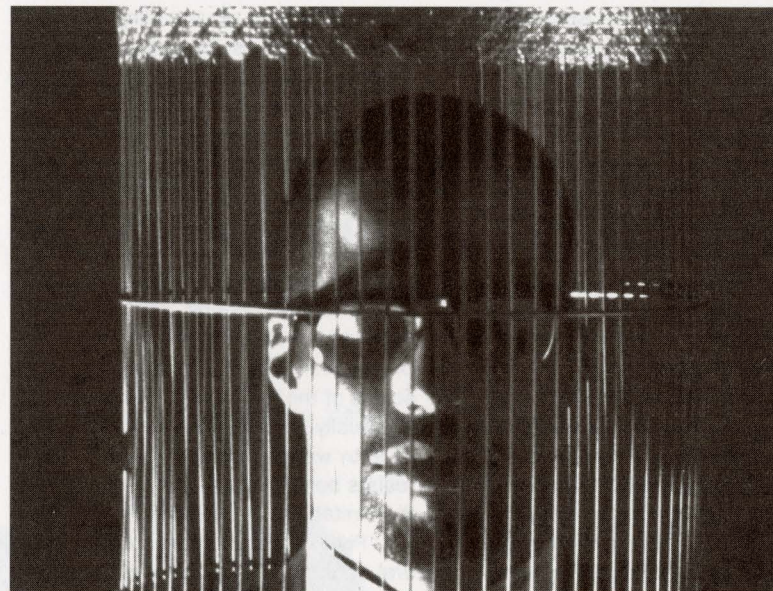
Notes from the Indie Circuit

Sampling Independent Films at the 1993 Toronto Festival of Festivals
Toronto, September 9 – 18, 1993

The Festival of Festivals. Every September when the city goes mad for movies and out-of-town festival hoppers alight, I prepare to freeze in summer-weight clothing waiting in endless lines with thousands of others for transformative experiences in air-conditioned theatres. In 1993, a new ticket system spared the wait and if you, like me, prefer your movie going up-close and personal, there was always a berth in the first three rows. From here, I squashed in the respectable quota for a pass-holder (forty films in ten days), and made like an image junkie. What thrill surpasses witnessing the unspooling of Jane Campion's latest, or the anticipation of Tracey Moffatt's first feature?

In the menu-creation which is the choosing game at the festival, my tastes can be shockingly mainstream and I'll spare you details. At the same time, the sheer numbers—299 films from forty-six countries—ensure a palate so varied that makes transparent the monovision that masquerades as "viewer selection" at multiplex malls or on cable television. Just on the basis of the program book and all those juicy descriptions: the promise of a cinematic nirvana. About eight different film programmers feed the masses, and I truly mean masses since it is here that one senses a *really large* "public" gathering for movies day and night.

But it's also at the festival that the truly dreadful (or worse, bland and passable) lie so comfortably in stealth along with the unforgettable. My initial short list included well over a hundred films



Still from *Seven Songs For Malcolm X*, John Akomfrah (dir.), Black Audio Film Collective, film, 1993, UK.

and it's a little painful to think back on what I missed after enduring long, difficult and not necessarily rewarding hours of Cannes prize winner *The Puppetmaster*, by Taiwanese director Hou Hsiao-hsien (whose films are usually among the best in "world cinema"), and another Godard puzzle, *Hélas Pour Moi*. In contrast there were two that I absolutely adored, Roman Polanski's over-the-top plot twister *Bitter Moon* (like *Last Tango in Paris* but with the good sense to laugh at itself), and Richard Linklater's *Dazed and Confused* (for the '70s peasant blouse, mood ring set).

This festival can't pass without questioning the deplorable absence of lesbian-produced films. Last year, what with Canadian entries such as *Forbidden Love* and *Thank God I'm a Lesbian*, Barbara Hammer's opus, and charmers like *Rosebud* and others, it was a veritable bumper crop. The much-heralded New Queer Cinema never included lesbian work in the first place, and this year's notable dearth at the festival may be partially attributed to the fact that only one international programmer, Kay Armatage, is committed to promot-

ing lesbian directors and their work. Instead, *Boxing Helena* ruled the roost, or at least grabbed headlines. Perhaps, if the festival inaugurated a video component as the New York Film Festival did last year, someone like Pixelvision teen star Sadie Benning, who is producing some of the more exciting, startling imagery and insights in moving pictures today, could have a crack at these larger audiences.

The high-profile of Asian or Asian American-themed films, especially showing outside of the Asian Horizons section, was disarming. Too weirdly eclectic to be considered trendy successors to the New Black Cinema explosion of Sundance Festivals past, this crop of films defies easy description, except to say that if Western interest in the Orient was defined by the prurience and coquettish fetishism of David Cronenberg's *M. Butterfly*, better and more satisfying to spend the price of a ticket on a tasty meal in Chinatown. Tony Chan's first feature, *Combination Platter*, sucks all the remaining heat from Cronenberg's wet noodle in a flash. Impressive for its detailed sense

of nuance and easy humour, the film locates itself right in the pocket of a Chinese waiter searching for his green card escape. Ten years after Wayne Wang's landmark *Chan is Missing*, comes another remarkable Asian hyphen American dramatic feature film.

Considering some of the other international independent films at the festival, the smashiest program I saw was the pairing of John Akomfrah's *Seven Songs for Malcolm X* with Raoul Peck's *Lumumba: Death of a Prophet*. Ostensibly biopics about two great fallen Black leaders, each film found its own inimitable entry into the mythology and meanings of their lives. Shown together, they reverberated. In *Seven Songs*, Akomfrah takes a collage approach to his monumental subject by juxtaposing interviews with Malcolm's wife Betty Shabazz and other Black intellectuals such as Thulani Davis, Toni Cade Bambara, Greg Tate and Coco Fusco (the latter reading from FBI files), with written text, strikingly staged tableaux and present-day footage of Manhattan, including opening night of the other *Malcolm X*, the Spike Lee opus.

Both fragmented and monolithic, *Malcolm X* is the impossible subject, all but disappearing under the weight of media interpolation, political revisionism and baseball cap hype. With a formal rigour even Greenaway would have envied, normally arch and arty touches like the "X" taped to the little Malcolm's coat, and books hanging over his head, seem wonderfully appropriate and refreshing. Cinematographer Arthur Jafa's diffused focus shots and other anti-realist strategies undermine the translucent linearity of conventional biography. Using another Greenaway-like device as the film's structuring principle—rephrasing the narrative of the number seven according to the myriad correspondences in Malcolm X's life—the film succeeds as a cinema of ideas, cerebral but not dry. Taking a discursive approach, an unmistakable trademark of Akomfrah's film practice (Black Audio Film Collective fashioned a masterpiece with *Handsworth Songs*). The film also brought to mind Isaac Julien's *Looking for Langston*. With an imaginative approach to an already overburdened, forever elusive subject, and situating the

search as a form of mourning, both films are remarkable for being insistently historicizing and politically relevant in the face of dodgy press and naysayers.

In *Lumumba*, Patrice Lumumba enjoys a kinetic, almost psychic attachment to the filmmaker in Peck's literary but highly cinematic treatment of the '60s Zairean revolutionary. Leaving the theatre, I wasn't the only one mouthing "Chris Marker," like a talisman, in a comparison with the extraordinary expressivity of Peck's talents as a writer, buoyed by his pointed political analysis that worked hand-in-hand with an interrogative pleasure in images. In the spirit of postcolonial critique, Peck (who is Haitian-born, raised in the Belgian Congo before Lumumba's rise to power, educated in Germany and currently residing in Paris), has a story worth telling and a great way to tell it. Incorporating the diasporic elements of his own past, Peck dovetails his personal history with the capricious political personality of Lumumba and the history of Zaire's national liberation in a way that is reminiscent of Marker's approach to the rebel Cabral brothers in Guinea Bissau and Cape Verde in *Sans Soleil*. However, Peck's direct access to the players from 1960, thirty years later is unprecedented in an independent political documentary (or poetic documentary—the film is both) and the results of these interviews are fascinating as he exposes, of-

ten through juxtaposition, the corruption and hypocrisy of the regimes of power, old and new.

"I wanted to search for signs of a prophet," Peck announces. "Why not in Brussels?" Flashing signs of diasporic aesthetics, he travels with jet-like speed the imaginary space between memory, a revolutionary time, and the complacent streets and deadly cool diplomacies of modern Europe. His sense of outrage is palpable, his humour intact, and his curiosity unstoppable. Displaying a love for film's materiality and the musty odour of old archives revisited with new purpose, Peck reanimates dead photos like a puppetmaster at play. I also caught Peck's Haitian-set feature, *L'homme sur les Quais*, but even that fine drama about the small-town tyranny of Duvalier's macoutes didn't approach the emotional subtleties of Peck's avenging, graceful hand in *Lumumba*.

"It's a bit arty," Tracy Moffatt said, in describing her film, *Bedevil*, almost as a form of apology. Watching it, I was mostly puzzled. With a background in photography, she defiantly makes "art" films, no doubt partly spurred by an image system that wants to represent Australian Aborigines in social problem docs or ethnographic films aplenty. *Bedevil* consists of three segments, almost like short films unto themselves, entitled, "Mr. Chuck"; "Choo Choo

Still from *Kanehsatake: 270 Years of Resistance*, Alanis Obomsawin (dir.), film, 1993, Canada.



givin' props 2 da boyz a black review of the Festival of Festivals

Toronto, September 9 – 18, 1993

This year's Festival of Festivals brought forth a variety of strong work from some of the most promising and established filmmakers throughout the African diaspora. I had originally planned to focus on women's cinema — that is, women of colour — with an emphasis on the B-girls. But, call it a need to respond to the "cult-nats" of the male gender, I decided to discuss the following six films, having been greatly affected by the issues they raised and their creativity in form.

Being true to my African Canadian roots, I christened the Festival at the Cumberland with two Canadian shorts, by Stephen Williams and Clement Virgo.

With an opening scene featuring Clifton Joseph, "dubz poet at large," Williams' *A Variation on the Key 2 Life* is about the relationship between jazz saxophonist Skill Blackstock and his girlfriend Cherry O'Baby. The conflict arises when Skill just can't seem to focus on his music; Cherry, tired of his self-absorbed, idle behaviour, steps off, leaving him to deal with his irresponsible and sorry self. Eventually, Skill gets it together — long enough to reveal the lesson of the story: women can distract you from what's really important.

A Variation has the unfortunate flaw of an ever present patriarchal-nationalist sentiment. By way of representation and name, the "patri-nats" have once again deemed the woman (Cherry) a walking hole, and the man (Skill) a character of much greater substance. Thereby, this film's strength lies within Williams' distinctive filmmaking style rather than the story itself. Rich in colour and eye-catching cinematogra-

phy, this work presents very powerful and sensual images of the Black body on screen — a rare accomplishment not to be taken lightly.

Coming from a stronger screenwriter, Clement Virgo's *Save My Lost Nigga' Soul* was a pleasant surprise after his previous release, *A Small Dick Fleshy Ass Thang*, which dealt unsuccessfully with racial stereotypes. What's really nice about *Nigga' Soul* is not just the reworking of the Biblical Cain and Abel tale, but its exploration of the relationship among three Black men — two brothers and a roommate. The issues of addiction, recovery, family, and particularly spirituality, are woven together in a well-scripted dramatic short which demonstrates Virgo's range of voice and continued growth as a filmmaker.

John Akomfrah's *Seven Songs for Malcolm X* and Raoul Peck's *Lumumba: La mort du prophète* honour the lives and legacies of two Black revolutionaries using similar narrative style — a retelling by their families, friends and contemporaries. Coincidentally, missing from each film is an in-depth look at the politics of each leader that would expose his revolutionary essence.

Produced by Britain's Black Audio Film Collective, Akomfrah's *Seven Songs* features a vivid cast of cultural producers (Thulani Davis and Toni Cade Bambara, to name just a few). Visually and experimentally stronger than *Lumumba*, *Seven Songs* successfully uses documentary footage, stills, interviews and theatrical re-enactments to enrich this homage to the great African American leader. Too focused on Malcolm's involvement with the Nation of Islam,

Obomsawin and *Zero Patience* by John Greyson, deserve more than this cursory mention and I hope these important, astonishing films can be discussed later in these pages. Finally, I have to register my delight in *Half Japanese: The Band that Would be King* by Jeff Feuerzeig, and my utter absorption in *The Wonderful, Horrible Life of Leni Riefenstahl* by Ray Muller, two other films that seem independently-minded (although I haven't actually tracked their funding sources) and succeed on their own terms. Championed by music critics, *Half Japanese* may be the indie industry's best-kept secret. Apart from the Ramones, *Half Japanese* could be one of the only original punk bands left, and certainly the last to resist (though not consciously), major label commodification. The film embraces the tuneful noise of Jad Fair's three chord charisma with the kind of foolish abandon and irrational longing known only to music fanatics piecing together pop dream scraps in bedrooms, garages and basement dens throughout North America's suburban sprawl. In another world and time and place, Leni Riefenstahl might have been king, too.

NOTES

¹Michael Taussig, "An Australian Hero," unpublished paper, p. 8.

Helen Lee is a Toronto-based writer and filmmaker.

Choo"; and "Lovin' the Spin I'm In." Moffatt called them ghost stories, I think to avoid their labelling as "folk" tales or primitive lore, as much as to describe the western infusions into Aboriginal life. As in her previous shorts, *Nice Coloured Girls* and *Night Cries*, but not quite so trenchantly here, she examines the brutal psychic effects of colonization in provocative, highly stylized scenarios which dramatize the unspoken violence of the bond between whites and Aborigines. Here, the ghost is most definitely white.

In "Mr. Chuck," the corpse of a drowned GI stinks up the moat of a development area where white men work and Aboriginal kids fill their bellies with candy. Told in a Chinese-Australian-accented English by an elderly Asian man, the story is chock-full of discontinuities and unexpected image fragments (mock documentaries, tourist footage). Colour fills the screen, bleeding into the next sequence. In the past tense of "Choo Choo Choo," Moffatt herself plays a woman whose family's outback home lies next to the railway tracks that deliver them packaged goods, liquor and miles of neglect. In the house lives the ghost of the little girl killed on the tracks. "Lovin' the Spin I'm In," arguably the most accessible segment, is haunted by the inexplicable death of two young Aboriginal lovers, a mother who still mourns their death and the business-minded white couple who are trying to evict her to make way for yet more developers.

In all three sections, the film employs complicated memory structures, overlapping diegetic spaces and culturally relevant symbolic systems — all of which demand more than a single viewing, and certainly more research. I'd venture to guess that the aerial shot of the spinning car that closes the film is that of a Holden car, the semiotically loaded symbol signifying "Australia's Own," a peculiarly nostalgic and fetishized form of Australian nationalism which represented "independence, freedom, equality," and the transition from the bush to the modernity.¹ Not a touch too ironic for the complexity of Moffatt's moral and aesthetic project.

My Canadian faves, *Kanehsatake: 270 Years of Resistance* by Alanis



Above still from *Bedevil*, Tracey Moffatt (dir.), film, 1993, New Zealand.
Below still from *Combination Platter*, film, 1993, USA



Still from *A Variation on a Key 2 Life*, Stephen Williams (dir.), film, 1993, Canada

the film fails to encompass his multiple transitions within the realm of progressive Black politics.

Haitian-born filmmaker Raoul Peck offers a personalized documentary of Patrice Lumumba, the first post-independence leader of the Belgian Congo. Peck's memories of childhood are interspersed with archival footage in a powerful narrative marked by the recurring phrase, "My mother told me..." *Lumumba* lends the viewer an insightful glimpse into the social ramifications of colonialism within this African country, and the short and tragic life of one of its most insurgent leaders.

On the American scene, the onslaught of films dealing with drugs, violence and inner city youth is on the rise. Well-known for his role in *The Crying Game*, Forest Whitaker makes his directorial debut with *Strapped*, a New York-based story focused on the endemic use and availability of guns to Black youth. The opening scene, in which a ten year old shoots his friend, marks a downward spiral of events (including gun-trafficking) for Diqan, the young teenager at the centre of the film.

Controversial in subject matter and execution, *Strapped* carries a certain amount of nihilistic baggage from its contemporary, *Straight Out of Brooklyn*. Seemingly geared towards middle-America, the film plays on the viewer's emotions rather than developing a grounded exploration of this horrific problem. Unlike the range of perspective, storytelling and intelligence found in Allen and Albert Hughes' *Menace II Society*,

Strapped provides a restrictive image of inner city youth — irresponsible, drug dealing, unambitious and unemployed.

Having expected a replica of *Boyz in the Hood*, I was doubly impressed with the Hughes brothers' first feature film, *Menace II Society*. In an uncompromising look at street life in Los Angeles, they conjure up a wide cross-section of three-dimensional characters, providing the audience with a better understanding of urban life. Without pretence, *Menace* broaches a myriad of controversial issues with maturity: Black-Korean racial tensions, poverty, addiction, brotherhood, male/female relations, racial pride, single mothers and responsibility.

Perhaps what is reflected most in these films is a move away from limited nationalist perspectives. With the exception of *Strapped* and *A Variation on the Key 2 Life*, these films enriched this year's Festival of Festivals by reconceptualizing on-screen Black representation and by affirming diasporic African heritage.

karen/miranda augustine is a writer, visual artist and the managing editor of *At the Crossroads*, a journal for women artists of African descent.

ROBERT F. REID-PHARR

Film/Video

Mix: The 7th New York Lesbian and Gay Experimental Film and Video Festival

The Kitchen and GO!GO!SPOT, New York
September 9 – 19, 1993

Directors of "Mix: The 7th New York Lesbian and Gay Experimental Film and Video Festival," consistently — and insistently — emphasized the politics of hybridity, especially as these are represented in the various diasporas that continuously change the landscape of New York City, the Americas and the rest of the planet. The festival — the oldest gay and lesbian festival in the world, included nearly two weeks of programmes organized by Karim Aïnouz and Shari Frilot. The focus moved from imaging polysexual desire and practice (the "Sex Busters" programme) to witnessing the interchange of art, culture, language and sexuality in the South East Asian Diaspora ("Raat Ki Rani").

Fortunately, the vision of the festival did not stop at the point of simply emphasizing the idea that one can be both Black and Gay, Asian and American, or even lesbian and punk. Instead, the best pieces continued to push the envelope, refusing to get caught in a stale conception of hybridity, one that does not take into account the dynamic nature of identity and meaning.

Sandi DuBowksi's hilarious video *Tomboychik* (1993), a witty and compelling exploration of the filmmaker's relationship with his eighty-eight year old grandmother, Malverna, not only references the vibrant and distinctively Jewish American culture that pervades the City of New York, but also the incredible changes that this culture undergoes from generation to generation to generation, person to person.

Myra Paci achieves a similar effect in her nineteen minute film, *Transeltown* (1992), a work that details the search of a boyish-looking woman — or a womanish-looking boy — played by Paci herself, for "femininity." During "her" jour-



Still from *Transeltown*, Myra Paci (dir.), film, 1993, USA.

ney she finds the dead body of a young woman, upon whom s/he immediately focuses her desires, taking it home, cleaning it, feeding it, laying on top of it, until it unexpectedly disappears, leaving behind only a trail of viscous, pungent "goo."

The ambiguous and contradictory nature of desire is rearticulated in Isaac Julien's *The Attendant* (1993), screened during "Who's Saying What About Whom." This programme, curated by Karl Knapper and Alfonzo Moret, featured eleven videos that worked to challenge tired notions of what can properly be said about race, gender, class and sexuality. In *The Attendant*, Julien juxtaposes static conceptions of Black history, particularly slavery, with both white and Black sadomasochistic fantasy. What does it mean, Julien asks, when the descendants of masters and slaves find themselves turned on by playing at being masters and slaves? In the

process, he suffuses the standard, museum-confined narrative of white supremacy and Black degradation with erotic content such that the idea of the Black as powerless and the white as completely masterful is exploded.

Strikingly, the audience at this programme seemed to miss how radically challenging Julien's *Attendant* was, opting instead to rehearse again, in the question and answer session, an already familiar debate around the uses to which white gay artists, particularly Robert Mapplethorpe, put Black gay male bodies. Christopher Cutrone's *Ghost Body* (1993) came in for particular criticism during the session. The problem was not that we initiated yet another discussion of racism and representation, but that at no point did any of us question how the terms of our debates are themselves constructed by the racist, misogynist, homophobic cultures in which we live.



Still from *24 Hours a Day*, Jocelyn Taylor (dir.), video, 1993, USA

The awareness that our various languages are not always equal to the task of conveying what it is that we need to say or need to know came crashing in on me while watching Goulart de Andrade's *Silicone Monster* (1993). This seventeen minute video was shown during the "Brazilian Sexualities" programme, which will travel to Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo and Belo Horizonte. De Andrade interviews transvestites who have come together to give and receive silicone injections in their breasts and their cheekbones. The crowd literally squirmed and guffawed as a none-too-attractive transvestite with badly cut and scarred forearms injected her sister. She caught the heavy drop of dark red blood that oozed out, as she removed the syringe, in a single painted fingernail and quickly whisked it away. The video, produced in Brazil, was entirely in Portuguese, adding to the sense of distance and confusion for at least half the audience. Throughout, I had the sense of feeling assaulted. It wasn't an issue of simply not understanding, but of feeling vaguely that to truly understand would be to change myself fundamentally.

Similarly, Wendy Jo Carlton's *Bumps* (1993) forces the audience to focus their attention completely on both the body and the desire of the filmmaker. Her *Bumps* are both markers of the "weakness" of her flesh and the monuments to her passion. She flips through photographs of old girlfriends as she

tries to pinpoint the moment of transmission, aware throughout that there is no one to blame. Her hesitancy in revealing her secrets and the intimate, precious way in which she uses the camera reminds the audience that we are seeing her at her most naked, forcing us to respond on our most human, most visceral level.

"Mix" was absolutely successful at those places where people were actively encouraged to interact. The addition of a festival cafe, The

GO!GO!SPOT, allowed the artists and their audiences to meet, drink, take in the installations that had been produced for the festival, argue, flirt and exchange phone numbers. As a consequence, the process of cross-fertilization begun during the screenings was given an incredible and rare opportunity to take root.

At the same time, the two showings of the "pornography" programme, "The 1000 Dreams of Desire," at the euphemistically named Ann Street Adult Entertainment Center, took many participants, particularly women, for the first time into the underground world of sex theatres. It was interesting, however, that there was no actual-sex taking place during the programmes. I wondered, as the crowds jammed themselves against the cum-stained walls of the private viewing booths, if pornography did not become incomprehensible when it was reconceptualized as art. How are we to read a work that was created as a vehicle for the masturbatory fantasies of gay men when the most shocking and least acceptable thing that one could do when watching it would be to masturbate?

I would have to say, in fact, that there were a number of moments in the "regular" programmes that were much hotter. Jocelyn Taylor's *24 Hours a Day* screened during the "Moto and the Human Touch" programme, curated by Vujan Lee Smith and Thomas Allen Harris, oozed Black Lesbian desire. Strangely

enough, the two sexy Black women in the piece never do anything more than talk on the telephone, watch videos, eat mangos and cook soup. OK, one does chase the other around with a strapped-on dildo, but nothing more graphic than that. Taylor and her actors are simply geniuses of innuendo and suspense.

Like "Moto and the Human Touch," Ming-Yuen S. Ma's programme, "Eat Your Gender Roles," attempts to show a more or less representative cross section of the Chinese diaspora. Throughout the programme, I kept thinking to myself that there was something about the use of time in these pieces that I was missing. When we were finally done with the very sleepy thirty-nine minutes of Anson Mak's Hong Kong-produced *Two or Three Things I Know About Them* (1991), I was glad to find myself comfortably back in the familiar terrain of American-based identity politics with Quentin Lee's *Sleeping Subjects* (1993), an examination of a Hong Kong-born Yale student's conflicting desires for both his white female and Black male lovers.

The organizers of this year's festival ought to be encouraged to continue along the path they have undertaken. Shari Frilot and Karim Ainouz, the first people of colour in the U.S. to curate a major gay and lesbian festival, have produced a sexy blend of erotica, performance, documentary, coming of age stories, explorations of national identity, meditations on sex and death, and porn. For the first time I had the sense that the festival itself (not just the films and videos) was experimental, a workshop where emerging ideas about how to curate, screen and promote film and video might be tried and played with. More than anything, the festival rekindled my yearning for the moment at which our cultural politics would become truly Queer, the moment at which we would loosen our grips on received notions of who we are, and begin the exciting and frightening process of learning to constantly recreate ourselves.

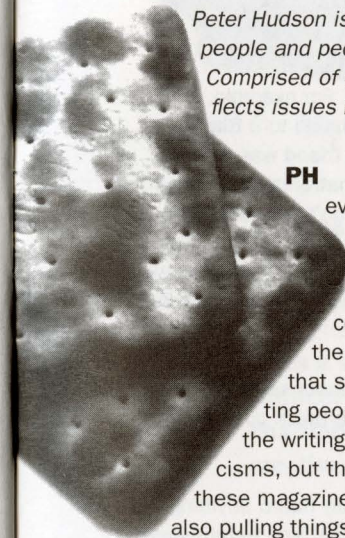
Robert Reid-Pharr is a cultural critic who teaches at the Department of English at the City College of New York.

Breaking Crackers

karen/miranda augustine

Profile

Peter Hudson is the editor of diaspora, a Vancouver-based magazine for Black people and people of colour. We began corresponding in the summer of 1993. Comprised of excerpts from phone calls and faxes, the following discussion reflects issues relating to grass-roots arts publishing in Canada.



PH It seems that every white magazine out there is having a feature on artists of colour...the race and the body politic and that stuff. They're getting people of colour to do the writings and the criticisms, but then again, who are these magazines writing for? It's also pulling things out of a context. The problem that I have with a lot of these art magazines — the basic kind of tokenism that they're doing — is that they're not critical of the system they're within. How long are we going to be neat little facets of the white art world?

Even though some of us are getting published in these places, we're not really controlling the production of these magazines. Originally I had wanted to rant about the existence of white magazines and the absence of magazines by black and brown people, but I think that would be a little naive. I sometimes forget that they have a specific mandate to exclude and/or contain us and I react as if it was a simple oversight that they ignored us since the beginning of time. Is there a contradiction for us to be doing this in here?

kma I can relate because I've been and am involved in magazines with which I am the only Black woman (Black person even) who is involved with them. It makes them look very good. There are a lot of nice "politically-correct" journals that appear to be very progressive, but technically, the white people are usually in charge—they have the power and they are getting paid.

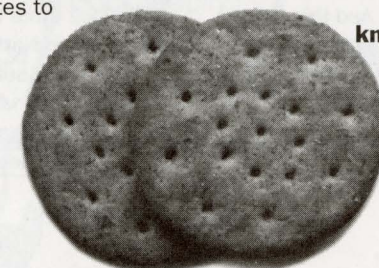
I want to talk to you about Canadian culture and how it relates to your magazine, *diaspora*. Don't you find that Black Canadians do not take up

space? During the summer, when a lot of tourists come over here, my friends and I always say that you can pick Black Americans out from everybody. They walk down the street like they own it; they take up space. It's a positive thing.

PH Something seems to be gelling, but I think we're still confused about the Canadian part. Maybe we have a problem trying to locate ourselves in any one space, so we end up nowhere, which perhaps isn't such a bad thing. Although I've been socialized in a certain Canadian experience—identifying with a certain national psychology—I'm trying to figure out how to distance myself from that without denying its influence on me.

I'm not sure how *diaspora* fits into that. I think other people will make their own decisions about it. It's definitely involved in a discourse about race, white supremacy and the construction of blackness, but at the same time some people might not call it a black magazine. What the magazine probably represents more than anything is the experience of the confused children of immigrants who grew up isolated and alienated in Western Canada. I put the magazine out for that reason mainly. I think there is also a subtext of class aspirations and/or class denial. When I think about it, I tried to get the Simon Fraser University library to subscribe. The guy looked through it, frowned, and said, "There's nothing in here about Canada." I thought, Jesus Christ, all the writers are Canadian, *everything* here is about Canada, it has *everything* to do with Canada.

How is Afro-Canadianness manifested in *ATC*? Is it an Afro-Canadian magazine?



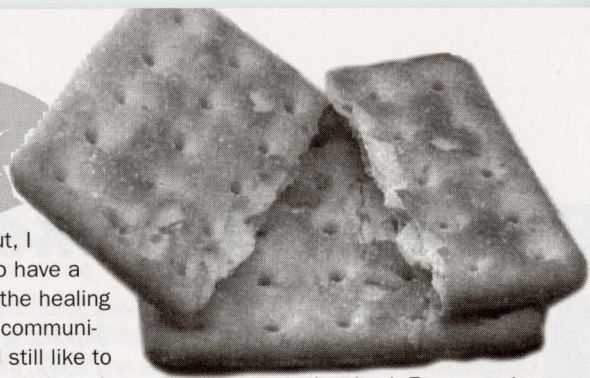
kma Definitely. Have you ever heard of a Black women's studies reader, edited by

Gloria T. Hull, called *All the Blacks are Men, All the Women are White, But Some of Us are Brave*? Well, my friend and I felt it should be re-titled *All the Blacks are Men, All the Women are White, and All the Black Women are American, But Some of us are Brave*. This sums it all up. In Canada everything is so American-centred. It was only a few years ago that the first cross-Canada Black women's art show took place. With that in mind, I'm very committed to keeping the magazine seventy-five to eighty percent Canadian content. The documentation of Black Canadian women's artwork is virtually non-existent. We know a lot more about the history, activists, artists from Black America than we do in this country. America dominates our media in every way. They're positioned as the centre of the world.

As Black Canadians the issue of documentation — *and accessibility to that information* — is vital. And that's where *At the Crossroads* is coming from. Canadian history is well documented from the perspective of the colonizing powers. We, on the other hand, have to research and dig for that information about ourselves because we weren't bombarded with the information in the school system.

PH This discussion around Canadian culture relates to issues I have on the topic of identity politics. I find the discourses to be slightly constraining...a little self-absorbed also. While we sit wondering what this or that shade of black means, we can easily forget the greater context we are working and living within. We can easily forget about the impact of our consumer practices, that whether we like it or not, we live like Canadians.

kma I'm really glad you said that because I had an argument with someone who had criticized a piece Richard Hill



wrote for *Fuse* several issues ago. She had a problem with him not writing Western with the word "white" in front of it. But, what she wouldn't accept was if you're Black and live in North America, you're helping to oppress billions of people because of where you live and what you buy and what you wear and what you eat. Some people don't want to speak that specifically. They don't want to accept the fact that....

PH You have a certain amount of privilege.

kma Yes. You have a certain amount of power when you look at the world from a global context.

PH And again it's not to negate the fact that there are struggles that we have in Canada, but to put it into context and take responsibility for the fact that you and I can put together a magazine, and we can go to university...

kma Or drop out of university...

PH I guess there's a contradictory place of needing to remain oppressed and unempowered to actually claim empowerment in one form or another. But going back to the identity thing, on the one hand, it's necessary to be continually naming yourself since your name is always being taken away, but it seems like it is often done at the expense of innovations in form or narrative.

kma Yes. Everyone starts to sound like they're saying the same thing. Sometimes I wonder if people have a different angle on it. The issues regarding mixed race and the whole concept of "race" are interesting because you can get into a whole heap of discussions. The myth that people can be put into "boxes" or "categories" so easily...nothing in this world is so cut and dry.

How's your magazine coming? Talk about when you actually started it. What was going on for you when you decided to start it?

PH Well, it had been in my head for a while, but after one pathetic summer in which all the internalized racism and

sexism of all the people of colour that I know came out, I thought it would be good to have a publication that dealt with the healing that needs to go on in our communities. At some point I would still like to get to that, but at the present time, for various reasons, a New Age Black Power magazine isn't feasible.

Anyway, I was frustrated that most of the black magazines out there had this fairly narrow notion of how and what black people talk about. I'd like to see the discussions expanded to talk about non-black black subjects, and I'd also like to get away from talking about only black/white. I think things are a bit more complicated than that. Unfortunately, it seems that white people are quick to appropriate something like that; it's easier to be embraced by a white liberal avant-garde than to even get the magazine to black people and other people of colour.

I told a lot of black people I was putting together a black magazine, and they responded with, "Great, a black community newspaper, it's about time." And I had these frightening visions of a four page newsletter, a third of it on weaves, a third on jerk chicken, and a third on Maestro Fresh Wes. Don't get me wrong, I love jerk. It's just that there's this conservative assimilationist portion of black people in this country who are happy with the modest successes which this great land has offered them. I'm not interested in the staples of parochial black capitalism, which seems to perpetuate our marginalization.

kma Actually, it's funny that you said that you wanted the magazine to start off as being for people of colour because when I first started my magazine, a lot of people wanted me to do women of colour. And you know, it really annoyed me because I felt that whenever Black women decide to do something on our own we have to include everyone else. It was as if we weren't allowed to and that really bothered me.

There are certain specificities to Black women's issues. And this isn't to deny the importance of cross-cultural organizing, but I do feel a lot of work has to be done on behalf of all parties

involved. For example, a South Asian woman said to a Black friend of mine—my friend was worried that she had been patronizing to someone—that she couldn't be patronizing because she was a Black woman. And that's a weird 'something' that happens constantly, which you can never exactly place your finger on.

PH What kind of response is the magazine getting from the Black community in Toronto?

kma I haven't really heard anything because the magazine isn't established yet. I've been paying attention more to the women who don't feel confident in their work—who are usually unestablished or new writers and artists—I want them to give it to me. So many Black women have major self-esteem problems. I see their work, and it's really strong, and it's like pulling teeth to get them to submit it to the magazine because they don't think it's good enough. What I want is for the women who aren't confident in their work, to be published along with those who are well known or established writers. I think it's encouraging for them to see their work printed next to them.

PH What you've said about confidence is really important. No matter what level of revolutionary consciousness we get to, we seem to be constantly battling a self-hate which can become totally debilitating. And it's compounded by jealousies within our communities, fear of failure, and the feeling of being overwhelmed by white forms and discourses. As Roy Miki told me, we deny a part of ourselves that naturally speaks outside white forms; we sometimes censor those ideas that have no credibility in the white world. It's important to challenge our ideas of a magazine especially since there are very few critical publications in North America in which black people can submit work that will really be under scrutiny by other black people.

By the way, when are you going to do Michie Mee's prison interview....

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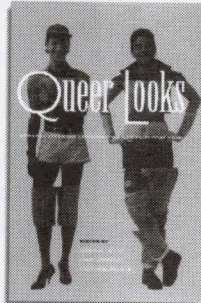
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