

The background of the cover is an abstract composition of warm colors: yellow, orange, and red. A prominent feature is a red, draped fabric, possibly a garment, which occupies the right side and bottom of the frame. The lighting is soft, creating a sense of depth and texture in the fabric.

# 13 conversations about art and cultural race politics

Monika Kin Gagnon  
AND Richard Fung

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WITH CONTRIBUTIONS BY

Cameron Bailey, Dana Claxton, Karma Clarke-Davis,  
Andrea Fatona, Sharon Fernandez,  
Gaylene Gould, Richard William Hill,  
Ken Lum, Scott Toguri McFarlane,  
Alanis Obomsawin, Kerri Sakamoto

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PRENDRE PAROLE

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## FOREWORD

*Cameron Bailey*

As a boy, James Baldwin found himself transfixed by Joan Crawford's back—an image of her, walking the length of a train corridor, away from him, deeper into the screen. Even as a boy, he knew what it meant, or felt it: that mute expanse of chalk flesh, glowing silver at the edges just where it met the frame of her dress, the train, that screen, his world. It was an image made for desire, indiscriminate in the desire it provoked (who could resist?), but so specific in the order it maintained. Even as a boy, he knew it meant trouble.

I grew up gazing at Joan Crawford's back, too, even when it was Cheryl Tiegs's teeth, or that aerial shot of Southfork at the start of every Dallas. And on some subcutaneous level, like James Baldwin, I knew it meant trouble. Trouble and pleasure.

Years later, when I sat in committee meetings hashing out the numbing details of this lobbying effort or that anti-racist strategy, when I stood under the grow lamps of a cultural institution I'd been sent by the ancestors to infiltrate, when I raised my head and looked outward, I still could see Joan Crawford's back. In time, I came to find a little truth I carry with me now: at the cell structure of political action lies desire.

There's a half-transparent image of Joan Crawford's back that floats before the eyes of legions. It's an image that's sealed and beckoning at the same time. It's the itch, the unfulfilled desire, the forced spectatorship that feeds spectatorship, that drives the sense of so much work to be done. And though the work we do is collective, though at its best it's for the greater good, the

image each one of us knows, the seed of our work, is intimate and ultimately unshareable.

I miss the old days. Even armed with a critique of nostalgia, I miss the old days. I miss the fresh wind of new battles, the charge of bylaws newly born. Some evenings, with the fluorescent light glinting off those noble beige filing cabinets, committee meetings could exhilarate.

My old days run roughly from 1989 and the birth of many floating, short-lived coalitions of Toronto artists of colour, through 1995, when Mike Harris came to power in Ontario and began the great clawback. Great changes were accomplished in those days, though the changes were by no means new. When we imagine today's art activists reinventing the wheel, we should recall whose wheel we remade, and that the only lasting wheel is the wheel of reinvention.

I miss the old days. If the seed of our work is personal, so sometimes is the fruit. I miss the old days because it was then that I fell in love. And because my partner at the time was an artist also engaged on the race and representation front, our union took on a prophetic light in the eyes of an earlier generation. We drew glances, even smiles when we walked down the street, mainly from older white women. The sight of a black man and an Asian woman together meant something, something distinct from any other configuration, something that took the knotted form in some minds, I imagine, of Joan Crawford's back.

In circles of power and circles of dissent, the old days are up for grabs. This volume provides a much-needed attempt to investigate recent histories and put them in dialogue with other places and other times. One thing is certain—the introjection of race into cultural politics, which reached its height in the early 1990s, was not like pointillism or theosophy: a curious byway pursued by artists at a passing moment in history. But if that one thing is certain, one thing remains unclear: what now?



I say look to the DJs. Look to who's spinning what (and how), in hot little late-night rooms from Vancouver to Halifax. Look to the range and curiosity that far exceeds what most of us could accomplish in galleries and committee rooms all through the old days. DJs are nimble, though often not self-theorized.

What does it mean for a Chinese Canadian kid from the prairies to cut together Brazilian beats and Cree vocals for a polyglot audience in Montréal? Dunno. But it may be a sign that difference is back. Scavengery's back. Joan Crawford's back. And they're freestyling.

## OTHER SOLITUDES

Monika Kin Gagnon

On the heels of completing *Other Conundrums: Race, Culture and Canadian Art* in 2000, I found myself suffering from a solitude of thought related to the very issues of race and culture my book had engaged. Most of the essays in *Other Conundrums* emerged from the 1980s and 1990s, a period characterized by a proliferation of events and works by artists of colour and First Nations artists in the visual arts, film and video. During the book's writing, I had reflected on this time with a strangely doubled perspective. On the one hand, I recorded the point of view, engagement and strategies of the cultural race politics in their historical moment; this was a major goal of *Other Conundrums*. On the other hand, my vantage point from the present (in 2000) insisted that perspectives and positions on these cultural politics had indeed, dramatically shifted. My curiosity lingered over how one might link the cultural vibrancy of a decade earlier, and the present moment (now 2002) which is vexed by a strange brew of nostalgia, burn-out and a sense that we have somehow "moved on." How have cultural race politics arrived at the present moment, itself characterized by uneasy solitudes of thought? What might enable a more complex mapping of relations between this recent past and the dispersed present? And what might an analysis of this period enable for the future?

I approached Richard Fung to engage in an extended conversation as a way of generating provocations, pathways and perspectives I felt incapable of conjuring myself. I have watched Richard's videos with captive interest for 15 years and eagerly read his essays for their insightful analyses and their ability

to effectively embody the complexity of debates and strategies, whether the topic was cultural appropriation, or a recipe for anti-racist image-making. My feeling was that Richard and I had enough similarities and differences between us to make a conversational encounter fruitful. As a form, the conversation has enabled questions to be posed, and simply left to gestate; it has offered the possibility of divergence in opinion (although this was unfortunately not to occur as readily as we had hoped, despite the productive rhetorical tensions this might have created for our text). And so we began with one lengthy recorded conversation in Richard's lush garden in the summer of 2000. Like most interviews, it undertook an editorial transformation that gradually shifted our focus. Our commonalities soon became apparent, but so did our limitations. There were areas of recent history and events we knew would be interesting to discuss, but our particular experiences and knowledge restricted our abilities to fully engage the strands and ideas we knew were implicated with those we were laying out. The conversational form, in other words, produced stylistic and conceptual limits that were different than, for instance, the essay form, where research and correct citations would enable us to draw from other knowledges and perspectives. With this sense of contour and lacunae defining themselves as we proceeded, we expanded our terrain by engaging more individuals in conversation.

*13 Conversations About Art and Cultural Race Politics* brings together a variety of recent reflections by artists, critics and curators on issues of ethnicity and racialized difference, and further explores some intersections with the visual and media arts from the vantage points of Vancouver, Toronto, Peterborough and Montréal. A principal touchstone for this book is the celebratory explosion and proliferation of work by artists of colour and First Nations artists in Canada during the 1980s and 1990s in the visual arts, film and video. The characteristics of this period were occasionally connected, sometimes separate, formations of independent cultural communities across Canada. Artists



of colour and Native artists' communities self-organized as coalitions, collectives and caucuses, to stage numerous events (including conferences, festivals, screenings, readings, workshops and art exhibitions), as well as the publication of exhibition catalogues, chapbooks and special issues of magazines and journals. In this book, the term "cultural race politics" specifically refers to the processes of self-identification and self-organization by Native artists and artists of colour into communities and collectives during this period. At issue in these processes are questions of visibility and legitimation, and what can be referred to as "a politics of knowledge." At their very foundation, these cultural movements and activities bring into question (and problematize) who defines, determines and controls cultural value.

From a contemporary cultural perspective, the (re)inhabitation of concepts of race in the 1980s and 1990s by artists, writers and activists signalled attempts to overtly reinscribe "race"—a biological and so-called scientific concept that emerged as a nineteenth century instrument of social control—as a term that was operational, alive and well in the present moment. The term would be re-deployed as potentially useful in bringing attention to, and undoing, the effects of racism. Outside of the artistic realm, American Black liberation movements in the 1960s, preceded by anti-colonial and decolonization movements following WW II, as well as Fourth World movements of indigenous peoples and the American Indian Movement (AIM) in the 1960s, had already emblazoned racialized self-identifications in the public sphere. The ways that these overtly political questions of race and cultural identity began to intersect with economies of artistic value is complex and by no means uniform. The many layers to the cultural process in the visual and media arts include: art education in post-secondary schools, as well as other forms of mentoring and teaching; the creation of artistic works; their circulation and exhibition; and the contexts of their critical engagement, evaluation and sale. To a large extent, as in the early women's movements of the 1960s

and 1970s, self-organized events created forums for artists of colour and First Nations artists to give their own meanings and value to their cultures. By the 1980s, there were already signs that the assumed identity categories that organized the politics of the 1960s and 1970s were being internally scrutinized by various groups. Within women's movements, the homogenizing rallying cry of "women as women" had given way to more complex engagements with discourses, institutions and processes that contributed to the formations and maintenance of patriarchy. Critiques and acknowledgements of difference "within" emerged, notably by lesbians and women of colour demanding a recognition of how power was reconstituting along familiar axes of privilege: heterosexuality, whiteness and class.

This history of questioning has carried over into the movement this book engages. These *13 Conversations* attempt to illuminate the complexity of the evolution of cultural race politics over the last two decades, engaging the history and formative concepts, and by speculating on its future. This book is in part interested in how we might better understand the present moment in Canadian culture as having evolved from the influences of these earlier cultural race politics. Questions that emerged at the onset of developing this book were numerous: What does it mean to continue thinking critically about race in relation to artistic practice and other cultural processes? What has created the situation wherein a recent history of cultural race politics seems to have *withered*? What is the impact of accelerated globalization and so-called "global culture" on our considerations of culture, race and difference? And what do concepts of "cultural appropriation" and authenticity of cultural forms—concepts that were so critically debated a decade ago—continue to mean within "global" cultural contexts, where notions of cultural hybridity, syncretism and fusion are now the order of the day?

This project is also inspired by a sense of the numerous memory losses and erasures that seem to be occurring around the events that characterized



this period—what Sharon Fernandez has referred to as “cultural amnesia,” and what Andrea Fatona attributes to the partial successes of anti-racist consciousness-raising that have given an illusion of transformation. 13 also responds to the sense of stasis detected by some of us who participated in events in the 1980s and 1990s, especially as cultural institutions and practices began addressing and incorporating the implications of these cultural politics. The Canada Council for the Arts has, for instance, pro-actively engaged a process of cultural equity for over a decade with the formation in 1989 of the Advisory Committee to the Canada Council for Racial Equality in the Arts. As Ken Lum points out, such incorporations suggest that artists be particularly vigilant as to what critical aspects mutate or disappear within such institutional frames. As well, 13 considers instances of overt backlash to pro-active equity measures. Institutions were often content to quickly move on after hiring one person of colour, with a misguided sense that the uncomfortable challenges of identity and difference, and of cultural equity, had been adequately addressed. Because of the often scattered geographies of communities and their activities, there has also been an emergent sense that the “reinvention of the wheel” is occurring where battles, strategies, debates and rhetorics seem familiar and recognizable, and tactics of opposition merely repeat themselves. In this sense, this book responds to the paucity of historical memory and critical voice that are at the base of both an apparent amnesia and backlash.

The form of our book, with its different voices, puts into play the dissonant cultural difference at work during the period, as opposed to a cultural plurality. Various perspectives and interpretations are needed to open up the complicated, often localized and varied trajectories these cultural politics took, the way we remember them, and perhaps most importantly, how this cultural memory might impact on the future. The space of the conversation and interview was particularly inviting and generative in this regard. 11 artists, critics and curators partook in the interviews and conversations in this book



between 2000 and 2002. Contributors responded to questions in recorded interviews or in written form through email. As will become evident, different voices and tones come through these face-to-face and written exchanges, hopefully pointing to the different ways such histories can be compiled and facilitated by different media. Our conversationalists were selected for the richness of alternate perspectives they offered to our own, with the hope that a cacophony of reminiscences, opinions, interrogations and viewpoints might contribute to the text's spilling plenitude.

One consideration in the compilation of this book, for us and our *Arttexte* editors, was the question of "audience." These compiled texts attempt to gather different historical strands by naming events, individuals and artworks in a recuperative and revisionary process. As we know, such an archival endeavour is not always chronological or comprehensive; the multiple voices in our text hopefully demonstrate how different perspectives may erupt simultaneously, or within the same decisive instant. Part of the recuperative aspect of this project would suggest an educative dimension, that is, one engaging art students or individuals interested in familiarizing themselves with historical cultural race politics and its discourses in Canada over the last 15 or so years. Such a pedagogical function has a particularly vexed nature for cultural race politics, where the demand to perform functionally for white culture is often seen as more important than the need for cultural practices to perform within their own intentions, aesthetic trajectories and theoretical discourses. Different strategies were entertained to fulfill these multiple roles, including a timeline, the use of a glossary, and a "hypertextual" approach to footnoting. In the end, we have attempted to fulfill both capacities and compensate for any assumptions within these conversations by including a detailed bibliography of written works cited and recommendations for further reading, as well as a videography/filmography/discography. These sections, to the best of our ability, offer strands for those wishing to undertake further in-depth investigation, without impeding the conversational flow.

Richard and I have organized our discussions around six broad themes which are enhanced by our conversationalists. We begin by qualifying our use of certain terms in "Framings," broadly defining the cultural frameworks we are functioning within, and locating ourselves subjectively. We then proceed to interweave the first of our conversationalists. Dana Claxton's elaboration of the vexed relationship of Aboriginal artists to contemporary art discourse introduces the issue of cultural value and processes of legitimation within artistic contexts, and how this informs her own artistic practice. Like Claxton, Andrea Fatona's reflection on her own curatorial and artistic practice leads her to a questioning of structures of value within alternative cultural communities themselves. She suggests, as does Richard Fung, that experiences of the Caribbean have contributed to a complex and layered perspective on difference that is not always established in relation to the dominant whiteness characteristic of Canadian mainstream culture. "Art +/- Politics?" goes on to explore how cultural equity impacts specifically on material access to production, and how this, in turn, relates to considerations of aesthetics and art histories (as Richard formulates the problematic, how the "politics in the art and politics *on behalf* of the art may need to be disentangled"). Karma Clarke-Davis and Ken Lum contribute artists' perspectives on identity, race and difference in relation to their own artistic production and to art institutions. They also add anecdotal insights into how their own racialization has occurred within the art world, implicitly highlighting the practical difficulties of effectively separating art from race politics. "Into the Institution" introduces the cultural institution as interface for cultural race politics. Reflections by Richard William Hill (Curatorial Resident, Art Gallery of Ontario) and Sharon Fernandez (former Equity Officer, the Canada Council for the Arts) generate perspectives from the deep recesses of two mainstream cultural institutions as they both consider the challenges and transformations that have occurred at major Canadian cultural sites. The next section, "Imaginative Geographies,"



touches on different registers of nationhood, and the permeability and political force of borders. Alanis Obomsawin offers a historical view of her own experiences as a filmmaker within the National Film Board of Canada, and through this, how Aboriginal issues have shifted in Québec over the last 30 years. Gaylene Gould discusses the cultural race politics of the 1980s in Britain, when the anti-racism potential of community-based cultural programmes was recognized and supported by local governments and cultural agencies. Alanis Obomsawin's reference to the attacks on the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001, along with Scott Toguri McFarlane's and our own, seemed to draw attention to the absence of mention in other sections. September 11 and its reverberations in the Middle East and around the world, occurred after most of the conversations in this book were already completed, as may become apparent. While we do not see this tragedy as necessarily decisive in its impact, it has undeniably brought issues of identity to the fore, and amplified the significance of racism and ethnicity, not simply in the cultural realm but in social and political arenas. We have treated September 11 as a marker of the temporal specificity of this book's making. Given Richard's and my critical contributions to Asian Canadian cultural practices and writing, "(Can) Asian Trajectories" undertakes a speculative engagement with the meanings of Asian Canadian as a category, and traces some of its historical and cultural trajectories. Kerri Sakamoto and Scott Toguri McFarlane, both of whom have participated in Asian Canadian, and specifically Japanese Canadian cultural activities for over a decade, ably expand our view onto more global and interdisciplinary views. In the final section, "Speculations," Richard and I consider several recent activities and exhibitions as reflexive of the current moment, among them, *Recollection Project* (2000), *Transplanting: Contemporary Art by Women From/In Iran* (2001) and *Documenta 11* (2002).

Reading through these texts in their final compilation, I was moved by how these pages of reflection, insight and speculation, are fleeting glimpses into



longer, ongoing conversations that were already flowing, and will undoubtedly continue. If at the onset there seemed a pressing sense of engaging in dialogue because of a solitude of thought, what has emerged from these layered, overlapping and sometimes dissonant perspectives is a sense of complexity and the impossibility of closure. *13 Conversations* paradoxically closes with the open cast of our speculations, yet in so doing, responds to the contemporary moment of a mutating cultural race politics within increasingly inter-textual, interdisciplinary and “global” frames of reference. The challenge of such complexity is that we be vigilant and rigorous in our thinking about history, histories and ‘historicity’—the astonishing force by which the historicization of our present moment is always left open to question. These texts and voices, even the present moment, provocatively ask us to imagine what we can’t, to imagine that which is, perhaps, unimaginable.

## FRAMINGS

**Monika Kin Gagnon:** You're someone who has been actively working for the last 20 years within cultural communities in Canada and been instrumental in developing various intersections between them: the video and filmmaking worlds, academia, gay, lesbian and queer communities, the AIDS activist movement, Asian Canadian, Asian diasporic groups and other communities of colour. Can we perhaps begin by "framing" our discussions and defining some of our terms, such as considerations of race within identity politics, or what we might want to call "cultural race politics"?

**Richard Fung:** I prefer the term cultural race politics because we can be more specific in referencing a kind of oppositional politics of race that had its roots in the civil rights movement and within which can be included anti-racism, various multiculturalisms, as well as racial and ethnic nationalisms. For our discussion cultural race politics also overlaps with Fourth World nationalisms of indigenous and Aboriginal peoples, which in addition involves geopolitical questions of land and political sovereignty.

Identity politics is not a term I use much. The phrase is popularly used to indicate the discourses of minoritized subjects whether "of colour," indigenous, gay, or whatever. Sometimes it's neutral, but more often it's used dismissively

to conjure a simplistic, single-issue politics of self-righteous rage and guilt-mongering. It's counterposed to criticality and rigour, and to class-based analysis. I am critical of a kind of self-defined anti-racist, feminist and/or queer politics that does not integrate an analysis of how various forms of oppression intersect and merge, or how in a capitalist system class exploitation and disparity form a bottom line. There is a kind of moralism around identity that often passes for politics. On the other hand, as sociologist Himani Bannerji and others working within a Marxist framework have shown, class is always already raced and gendered. So I'm ambivalent, and avoid the term identity politics, as I'm often not sure in which sense it's being used. It's a little like the term "political correctness," which was a self-critical term within the left and then became appropriated by the right during the period of the first Bush presidency.

I find it important to stress that cultural race politics in Canada has its roots in the process of colonization, and in every subsequent attempt to regulate—and in some instances wipe out—people according to race and ethnicity. In North America, white racism is the bedrock of identity politics of race.

**MKG:** But isn't the appropriation of terminology and language, and this turning of meaning exactly strategic? I don't really use "identity politics" either, perhaps for a different reason, though; I find it far too general as a term, particularly given its early histories coming out of 1960's civil rights movements. In *Other Conundrums*, I ended up using "cultural race politics" to specify a cultural terrain first, and then an engagement with race politics—but this wasn't without a long qualification about this term in the intro! One might say that identity politics, though, has a kind of ambivalence within it. The notions of community that are at the core of identity politics are never really stable. All those debates and discussions in the 1980s and 1990s, about how communities were constituted and who could speak on behalf of whom, were



about constructing artificial, provisional communities. I think a problem with these terms and politics occurs when that sense of ambivalence isn't acknowledged—or any ambivalence or tension is seen as a betrayal of the politics. The British cultural studies scholar Kobena Mercer and others talked about this a decade ago as a reticence to publicly expose the cracks or limits of any community or politic.

**RF:** A lot of the work in the 1980s, mine included, was centred on articulating minoritized identities and experiences. It was necessary to draw attention to and displace white hegemony. Multi-media artist Adrian Piper, for instance, focused on complicity and personal stakes in racist discourse and practices. She put the white viewer on the spot. But the issue of race and ethnicity goes beyond personal experience. Jamelie Hassan is exemplary here, because her work has taken up Arab and Muslim issues, but not necessarily framed as identity or personal heritage. Not that she erases herself, but she's usually attending to questions beyond the self, to systems of power. There is an endless field for investigation in the areas of race, culture and nation, much of which doesn't deal with identity at all. So I feel a frustration when any work dealing with power and "difference" is read as identity and then dismissed as "identity politics." Race and racism are still relevant topics for art and for politics. Just because racism is now officially repudiated doesn't mean that it has disappeared.

**MKG:** How did these conceptual considerations come to bear on cultural practices, specifically the cultural activism that came to a peak in the 1980s and early 1990s?

**RF:** I believe there were a number of intertwined factors that produced a "moment." At the core, there were related changes in perception and politics

around art and social identities taking place in at least the English-speaking North Atlantic. In Britain, Stuart Hall described the development of “new ethnicities” and the loss of an essential black subject. In the United States, Cornel West talked about a “new cultural politics of difference.” The old civil rights agenda of desegregation and access to jobs and education was merging with, and in a sense being displaced by, a politics of representation. In Canada, there was a critical mass as a generation of Aboriginal people and people of colour were coming out of schools and into the literary and artistic scenes. There was a frustration at the kind of barriers many of us saw in our way, despite our formal qualifications. There had always been individuals and organizations of non-white folks working in the arts, but what was new at this juncture was the dissatisfaction with the circumscribed place on the sidelines, and the perception that this status could finally be changed. So the participants in gallery exhibitions and publishing ventures began to be scrutinized in the light of racial inclusiveness. This first bubbled up in the alternative art and publishing scene. In Toronto it was in galleries such as A Space and magazines like *FUSE* and *Fireweed*. These were the venues most accessible to non-white artists and writers, and because they saw themselves as progressive organizations, they were also more able to be cross-examined along these lines. From this, developed a more concerted effort to deal with systemic racism in the larger cultural institutions. From my memory, the first people in Toronto who raised questions of race and racism within the predominantly white art world were not visual or media artists, but people who were writers and activists and also academics, people like Himani Bannerji, Lillian Allen, Dionne Brand, Krisantha Sri Bhaggyadatta, Makeda Silvera and Marlene Nourbese Philip. It’s not that these issues were not discussed before then, but there wasn’t as yet a coordinated public critique. I must also point out a generation of people working earlier, like Vera Cudjoe at Black Theatre Canada, painter Daphne Odjig, writer Austin Clarke, filmmakers Jennifer Hodge DeSilva and Alanis Obomsawin, and

performance artist Lily Eng. The painter Aiko Suzuki, for instance, has been a tremendous catalyst through activities like the Earth Spirit festival for Japanese Canadian, First Nations and Inuit artists, which she coordinated in 1991, the Poornam retreat for First Nations and artists of colour in 1993, which I attended, and the *Japanese Canadians in the Arts: A Directory of Professionals*, which she coordinated in 1994. Since the early 1990s she was also working to realize what came to be the Gendai Gallery.

**MKG:** Where did you focus your own energies?

**RF:** First I must say that I felt very green at the time, and it's only in retrospect that this seems coherent. It seems to me that an artistic ecosystem requires at least the following elements: education, development, production, distribution, exhibition and critical attention. To succeed as an artist one needs access to each of these. So it's no use getting an education if you can't get the resources to produce work after graduation. It's no use producing work if you can't get it shown. And if no one writes about your work it's hard to gain the legitimacy to get the resources to produce the work. It's a cycle, an ecosystem. Yet in the early 1980s, the scrutiny regarding racism and the lack of diversity seemed directed at the exhibition venues—near the end point in the process. That translated into a push to visibly integrate the rosters of art galleries and media festivals, with the result that artists like myself, those who had managed to produce a body of work, were in great demand. It wasn't necessarily that we were being tokenized—remember that there was an overall interest in images of “difference” at that time—but when the pressure was on to demonstrate “diversity,” it was easy to fall back on known quantities like us. This, however, did little to usher new people into the pool, and it was at this time that I decided to put my energy to opening up access to production. I got involved in ventures such as Shooting the System, a one-time



conference for emerging film and videomakers of Native, African, Asian and Latin American backgrounds, and I later programmed *Race to the Screen*, a conference and festival that focused on the politics of representation in film and video. At the same time, I had also joined the Canada Council's committee examining systemic racism in the arts, a process initiated by then-director of the Council, Joyce Zemans, and facilitated by Vancouver artist Chris Creighton-Kelly who later ran the Banff Centre residency *Race and the Body Politic* in 1992, which I attended.

**MKG:** Can you talk more about *Shooting the System* and *Race to the Screen*?

**RF:** They get blurred in my memory, but they took place in 1990 and 1991, respectively. For what became *Shooting the System* I contacted a number of people I knew or heard about who were involved in the media arts and interested in racial and cultural equity issues. This included Cameron Bailey, Ali Kazimi, María Teresa Larraín, Glace Lawrence, Brenda Lem, Lana Lovell and Premika Ratnam. Others joined along the way, including Viola Thomas, Jorge Lozano and Michelle Mohabeer, among others, and we called ourselves Full Screen. The committee that grew out of these meetings collectively organized all aspects of the conference from writing grants, to designing workshops and selecting participants. If I remember correctly, the title itself came from Marjorie Beaucage, who later coordinated the Banff Centre's outreach to Aboriginal artists. The idea was to pass on information about, and develop a critical understanding of, the funding system; to provide a forum for discussion with the institutions; to allow successful makers such as Alanis Obomsawin, Renee Tajima and Claire Prieto to inspire and mentor; and to provide a space for artists of colour and Aboriginal artists to meet. The conference was well attended and a support organization for emerging artists developed out of it and continued meeting and holding events for some time afterwards.

At *Shooting the System*, filmmaker Midi Onodera warned that discussions shouldn't be limited to simply gaining resources, but that we must also pay attention to the work itself. This was an inspiration for me as a programmer in thinking through *Race to the Screen*, which was organized at the Euclid Theatre with Terry Guerriero and Ian Rashid (also a founder of *Desh Pardesh*). The Euclid was an exciting but short-lived community venue initiated by the Development Education Centre (DEC). During its life it was home to many of Toronto's alternative cultural events. The emphasis at *Race to the Screen* was less on the means of production than on artistic and political strategies, and on the stakes involved. There were screenings of local and international work; lectures by scholars such as Kobena Mercer and Richard Dyer; workshops and panels with programmers like Cameron Bailey, Su Ditta and Cheryl Chisholm, and artists like Atom Egoyan, Ali Kazimi and Gloria Miguel. At the same time as attempting to do something affirmative, I also wanted to foreground the social construction of race and some of the blind spots of race discourse. Dyer discussed the representation of whiteness, for instance, published later in his book *White* (1997). It was also the time of the 1990 Gulf War, and a response to the vilification of Arabs and West Asians—communities not always included under the rubric of “race” at that time—seemed urgent and necessary. Jamelie Hassan presented a programme on geopolitics and the representation of the Middle East.

I saw *Shooting the System* and *Race to the Screen* not as stand-alone events, but as complementary to each other and to the work that we were doing within the institutions. And both were instructive. The collective effort for *Shooting the System* was successful, but that success resulted from a lot of negotiation. Group identities are formed by different histories, discourses and experiences. So whereas for Asian and African Canadians, the physical body marks the discursive bottom line of our racialization; what holds a Latin American/Latino identity together is primarily culture and language; and for First Nations people

it's a question of sovereignty and land in addition to possible issues of colour, culture and language. (I remember Fernando Hernandez pointing out that as a Mayan from Chiapas, he was not "Latin American.") There was a lot of openness and generosity in the group, but it took time for us to get over our various assumptions, as most of us were used to thinking about our issues only in relation to a dominant whiteness. There was common ground, but there were also crucial differences.

For me this wasn't so traumatic, as I grew up in Trinidad, and my own politicization occurred during the Black Power era there. I was thus forced to see myself in relation not only to the white colonial elite, but also to African and Indian Trinidadians who were discursively below the Chinese in the colonial and post-independence racial hierarchy. Yet the Chinese were a minority and I was pestered with racial taunts as a child. It was coming to terms with this double-edged experience that brought me to anti-racism as a teenager. My parents also came from very poor backgrounds but had made good by the time I was growing up. They both worked incredibly hard, but memories of poverty lingered in my family, and still do. It was in thinking of their class transition that I realized there were informal systems in place which allowed the hard work of individuals like my parents to be translated into financial reward as business people, but that these systems inhibited black individuals' success.

**MKG:** What was your artistic path?

**RF:** I graduated from the Ontario College of Art in 1977, but it wasn't until 1984, after I'd worked for a few years in community television and graduated from university with a Cinema Studies degree, that I made my first independent video and therefore legitimately entered the art world as a practitioner. By then I had been writing and working on some cultural ventures, such as



the *Asianadian* magazine, a national pan-Asian forum that lasted eight years, and I hung around the *Body Politic*, a journal that fostered what came to be queer studies. A formative moment was when I attended the first Third World Lesbian and Gay conference held in conjunction with the first gay rights march on Washington in 1979. Audre Lorde gave the keynote address. After that I helped found Gay Asians Toronto in 1980. From 1981, I also developed a relationship with what was then the Toronto Board of Education's Equal Opportunity Office (the Board was later amalgamated by the Harris Tories into the Toronto District School Board and the department has seen many transformations, budget cuts and staff reductions). That fall, Tony Souza, the Race Relations Advisor, invited my partner Tim McCaskell and me to facilitate at their second Multicultural, Multiracial Residential Camp for Secondary School Students. This was an incredibly innovative process in which students developed an analysis of the ways that racism and other forms of discrimination were impacting on their lives and schools. It also focused on giving them the tools to change these relationships. I continued to facilitate at these camps for several years and made three videos for the Board. Tim was eventually hired by the Department, and our ongoing conversations about race and pedagogy have been crucial to my practice. What's your story?

**MKG:** It's interesting to hear about the multiple arenas that you've found yourself participating in, as an activist, as a cultural coordinator/facilitator, and as an artist. I have been, in a sense, always immersed in the art world. My father, Charles Gagnon, is an artist and teacher who is well established in Québec and whose work is known across Canada. And my mother, Michiko Yajima, had a commercial gallery, Yajima Galerie, from 1975 to 1984, which along with the Isaacs Gallery and Carmen Lamanna Gallery in Toronto, was one of the few commercial galleries dealing in Canadian contemporary art in the 1970s and early 1980s. Contemporary art and artists were part of my

day-to-day environment since I was a child. I went to many art openings and vividly remember seeing experimental films as a child, including my father's. I met many interesting artists such as the Mexican photographer Manuel Alvarez Bravo at his home in Mexico City in the late 1970s, and photographer André Kertész in his New York City apartment, from which he photographed Washington Square. My mother also had affiliations to Japanese artists and I remember the composer Toru Takemitsu and conductor Seiji Ozawa at our home when I was little.

I grew up with the kinds of complexities associated with being a mixed race child in the 1960s in Montréal, in that I continually encountered mistaken identifications because of my appearance, my name and my ability to speak fluently in both English and French. While my mother tongue is French, I was educated in English, and grew up in predominantly anglophone cultural contexts; I suppose my bilingualism has made it somewhat difficult for me to fully grasp the implications of discrimination based on language, as racialization was for me a far more determining factor. In the 1970s, I was frequently mis-identified as Vietnamese because of my ability to speak French. In other words, my French did little to code me as Québécoise, but rather, my Asian-ness was always a principal signifier, and for some, then, immediately coded me as "from elsewhere." It's interesting to think of Stuart Hall's description of the proximity between race and ethnicity, 'race' as a social construct linked to so-called genetic, naturalized differences and visible signifiers; 'ethnicity' being grounded in cultural and religious features, encompassing language. Hall's sense is that the discourses of biological and social/cultural difference are never far apart from each other and that they constitute racism's two registers. You can see how the two come into play in my example.

I became involved in the arts and in the independent film communities in the early 1980s while I was doing my M.A. at York University in Social and Political Thought. My work as a film script supervisor in Toronto through the



1980s and early 1990s basically subsidized my existence as an art writer. At that time I was involved in the founding collectives of *border/lines Magazine* and Public Access (the artist and writers' collective that continues to publish *Public*). The first article I published was an interview with Barbara Kruger for *border/lines Magazine* (her work was being exhibited at my mother's gallery). Around the same time, I also interviewed artist Mary Kelly, whose first installation, *Interim*, of her magnum opus on femininity was showing at A Space in Toronto. It's interesting to recall these early interviews in relation to our own conversations, as I guess it has always been a form of textual dialogue that has interested me. In 1988 I wrote an article on Jamelie Hassan's work for *Vanguard*, and when we first met we discovered that we were reading the same writers and books: Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1979), Homi Bhabha's essay "Signs Taken for Wonders" (1986) and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's *In Other Worlds* (1987), which had just been published. So I guess I came to issues around race and cultural difference imaginatively from a post-M.A. academia and an encounter with post-colonial theory in the mid-1980s, combined with my early involvement as a young feminist in the art world. This moment with Jamelie was so salutary, as I'd been quietly encountering post-colonial writing myself. Retrospectively, it seemed like one of those first moments for me of combining theory on colonialism and race with the particularities of contemporary art production. Much of post-colonial theory at that point was about literature. Up to this point, I had been working with (white) feminist approaches and thinking about this in relation to women's artistic production—the French feminists' work on language, patriarchy and *l'écriture féminine*, and British feminists like Laura Mulvey and Mary Kelly using psychoanalytic theory to inform their film and artistic practices. I thought about this in relation to the work of Canadian artists, such as Nicole Jolicoeur and Janice Gurney, but also more generally to a history of Canadian women's artistic practices. I was then presented with questions concerning how to



think about the implications of post-colonial theory in relation to artistic practices and what this might mean in a Canadian context.

In 1988, I joined *Parallélogramme* at the invitation of filmmaker Lynne Fernie, where we co-edited the magazine until its demise in 1993. (It would later become *Mix*.) The Association of National Non-Profit Artists' Centres/Regroupement d'artistes des centres alternatives (ANNPAC) was the publisher of *Parallélogramme* and so I became involved with the artist-run centre movement, individual centres and a coast-to-coast community of artists. Working with Lynne was a remarkable experience as I was introduced to consensual ways of working and collaborating; she was a true mentor within the arts community and gave me a tangible sense of what community building meant within a feminist context, and how knowledge and skills are passed on. As editors we were in touch with regional representatives and also attended the association's annual general meetings (AGMs), where each of the 100 artist-run centres sent a representative to the three-day meeting. These were amazing social events, probably most appreciated for the extensive networking and exchanges they enabled. It was in this context that I encountered practical aspects of how cultural race politics bears on cultural processes.

I attended my first AGM in 1991 in Québec City, and that year le Regroupement des centres d'artistes autogérés du Québec (RCAAQ) (which had constituted itself as a regional association to ANNPAC in 1986) advised its artist-run centres to withdraw their membership from ANNPAC, as a response to their perception that the organization had become overly bureaucratic and inconsequential to the political needs of artists and artist-run centres. Québec's departure from ANNPAC was quite acrimonious and charged. (The sole full-member artist-run centre to remain was Optica.) The following year, the AGM was in Moncton with cultural equity on the agenda for the first time. Lillian Allen gave a keynote address that challenged the artist-run

centres to undertake self-examination, and she invited people of colour and Native people in attendance to caucus (there were seven of us out of more than 100 people). This caucus of seven constituted the Minquon Panchayat, and we authored a roadmap for cultural equity for the association that was later accepted by the membership. I've written about this in more detail elsewhere and don't want to get too repetitive (but what followed at the AGM in Calgary one year later were escalating conflicts about the equity initiatives that resulted in formidable ruptures within the association; these ruptures would be the end of ANNPAC, which had been in existence since 1976). The withdrawal of the Québec centres had of course already challenged the viability of a "national" association. I've often wondered how Québec centres might have collectively responded to the cultural equity initiatives that manifested a year after their withdrawal, and how these politics might have played out differently, if at all.

While organizations like ANNPAC were struggling to address cultural equity by "allowing" adjunct caucuses to propel change, you've described parallel currents of groups of people of colour and First Nations artists and writers self-organizing and identifying in broad and generalized groupings to generate self-value. My encounters with cultural race politics were at both interfaces: with organizations trying to deal with the issues, but also with events that were self-defined and self-organized. In 1990, Paul Wong invited me to contribute to the *Yellow Peril: Reconsidered* catalogue which you also contributed to. With 26 artists, this was one of the first large-scale exhibitions predicated on racialized categorizations and self-identifications. It's because of these self-definitions that we can continue to speak with terms like "people of colour" and "First Nations artists," because these coalitions were repeatedly being formed and self-named from within our communities, in spite of the multiple problems that are created by these general terms.

I think that one of the first times I met you was through Lloyd Wong,

then managing editor of *FUSE*. We were discussing the event being organized within the independent film and video community that became About Face, About Frame in Banff in 1992, which we participated in. Race and the Body Politic took place in the Art Studio Program at the Banff Centre that same summer, bringing together dozens of artists of colour and First Nations artists for the summer residency. It was a year later that Minquon Panchayat formed within the artist-run centre community. And in 1994, Writing Thru 'Race' brought together 180 writers of colour and First Nations writers in Vancouver. That these small movements and events were precipitated within communities of artists and writers is telling about how change gets kick-started and generated. Interestingly, this broader legacy of self-organizing and self-definition is at the foundation of artist-run centre movements in Canada and Québec during the 1970s, which developed their own sites of exhibition and legitimation.

I'd also add that there was always a sense of the double-edged effects of self-identifying in these racialized ways—it was never simply about celebrating “marginalized” identities, but knowing its empowering capacity as well as what some of the paradoxes of these identifications were.



## DANA CLAXTON

**Monika Kin Gagnon:** I first met you in 1992, when you were director of the Pitt Gallery in Vancouver and I was director at Artspeak. You had galvanized a vibrant community of Native artists around the gallery during your tenure at the Pitt. As well, you began making films and videos during this period. Can you talk about how you became involved in the art world?

**Dana Claxton:** I decided to get involved in the white art community because of the Oka crisis in Québec in 1990. I realized there was much work to be done, that Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities were not communicating with each other. I asked myself, how could I facilitate this huge gap in a meaningful way? Prior to working in the visual arts I had worked in the Aboriginal community for ten years, with Spirit Song, the Aboriginal theatre group. I was also working in Aboriginal media, where some of us were trying to bring an Aboriginal voice to cable TV. In 1982 we produced "The Canadian Indian Television News," which was a TV show with Cable 4 in Vancouver in which we tried to emulate the news. This was quite funny, although I'm glad there aren't any more tapes around!

Reflecting back on the recent history of Aboriginal artists, what first comes to mind is what Daphne Odjig did in Winnipeg in 1974, in creating the Indian Group of Seven. This included Daphne Odjig, Jackson Beardy, Eddy Cobiness, Alex Janvier, Norval Morrisseau, Carl Ray and Joseph Sanchez. Our "Group of Seven" had an official woman leader! Essentially, Daphne Odjig opened up a commercial gallery that functioned as a collective. Once again, here was a marginalized group of Indian artists wanting to have some visibility. The artists who exhibited, gallery-sat and helped out with gallery tasks such as hanging and exhibition mail-outs. It was significant that she accomplished this in Winnipeg, which had a large urban population but where artwork simply wasn't being shown. She simply took matters into her own hands. I

think the question that emerges in reflecting on her work during this period is why Aboriginal artists are always having to multitask—not simply being artists, but creating exhibition spaces and on top of that, also doing all the administrative work involved in staging exhibitions. I also think that what has to be recognized is how many Indian women have initiated activities in the arts. Joanne Cardinal Schubert is very active in the Aboriginal community in Calgary. I was working at the Pitt in Vancouver in the early 1990s. Lori Blondeau started up Tribe in Saskatoon in the mid-1990s, and a group of young Aboriginal women recently started up Urban Shaman in Winnipeg (both of which are Aboriginal artist-run collectives). Oh yes... it was primarily women who developed Saskeewak in Regina.

Another issue that I think is important to underline is that the work that was exhibited at The New Warehouse Gallery was traditional woodlands painting, which Norval Morrisseau eventually made famous. In the 1970s this work wasn't even considered contemporary art; it took a long time for it to be considered contemporary. There are still arguments going on about traditional Aboriginal art and whether it should be exhibited in contemporary galleries. More specifically, there's the complicated reception of carving on the West Coast, or basket making, or birch bark biting.

Following Oka, when I decided I wanted to participate in a larger cultural arena, I began working at the Pitt Gallery in Vancouver. I first curated the *Neo-Nativist* show in 1991, and then *First Ladies* in 1992. This latter exhibition involved seven Aboriginal women artists, including Joanne Cardinal Schubert, Jane Ash Poitras and Teresa Marshall. One of the artists was Angelique Merasty Levac, who was one of two or three birch bark biters still creating this type of work—it involves the artist biting designs into thin pieces of birch bark. I was so excited about having her in the exhibition. I was also so determined to make her work look like “fine art” that I stuffed the birch bark between two pieces of Plexiglas and bolted it to the wall, thinking that I



would give it some kind of post-modern birch bark biting look. Well, it was a disaster. I ended up destroying the poor birch bark, because the plastic had chemical emulsions on it and damaged the bark; it just completely shrivelled up by the end of the exhibition, well before it ever got to A Space in Toronto, where it later travelled. I also curated a star quilt made by Kelly White. It never occurred to me either prior to or during these exhibitions to really analyze what I was doing. It was only a few years afterwards that I realized what I had actually achieved. We, as Indian women and people, were engaged in a process of articulating our own culture, our own history, as well as selecting and exhibiting what we wanted to. There is a whole history of ancient peoples of this land, and there are very different cultural forms that reflect different tribes. That some of these items are still being produced is amazing, whether it's carving, basket making and pottery, or ceremonial activities. And here we were, Native women making art, and I was curating a show of Native women's art! At the opening, many people asked why I curated birch bark biting and the star quilt in the exhibition. And the same questions came up again at A Space. I think it was considered hokey: "Aren't they nice little Indians?" To be honest, it never occurred to me that Angelique Levac's birch bark biting or the star quilt were not art. But this discussion *still* goes on. I don't know when it ends. I think it's about *who* defines what art is. When I first got involved in the art world I hadn't read much Western art theory, never having had much interest in it. I had only read a lot of Karl Marx, and some feminist literature. I've always been interested in issues related to class and value. I'm only now starting to formulate a sense of the use-value of Aboriginal culture to the rest of Canadian culture. There are still discussions about access and definition. It's still the West that decides if it's art or not, and decides who and what works can participate in art's arena. I think these questions profoundly inform my own practice.



## ANDREA FATONA

**Monika Kin Gagnon:** You were co-director of the artist-run centre, Artspeak, in Vancouver from 1993 to 1995, and then you moved cross-country to Peterborough. Can you talk about some of the exhibitions you've curated or programmed in the last few years?

**Andrea Fatona:** I was curator and director of Artspace in Peterborough from 1995 until 1998. One exhibition that is close to my heart was called *The Atmosphere and its Double* (1997), which looked at issues of digital surveillance at a time when it wasn't yet being talked about in my community. The exhibition was by the duo Screen (Eric Rosenzweig from Montréal and Willy LeMaitre from Toronto). During a one-month residency at Artspace in 1996, the two completed a new video work exploring themes of audio-visual prosthesis and surveillance. Images were acquired from a news gathering satellite and were presented at various sites in Peterborough, and numerous interviews were conducted with individuals in the local community. In the summer of 1997 the exhibition was presented in two venues: at Artspace, where a screen was suspended in the storefront window, exhibiting the complete video document; and at an outdoor evening event, where there was a single screening of the work. A symposium called *Mediated Extensions* also took place in conjunction with the exhibition. This two-day conference/symposium brought together media artists, curators, academics and the public to discuss the understated dimensions in the application of new digital technologies within everyday life. The participants involved in the symposium were Caroline Langill, Su Ditta, Doug Back, David Rokeby, Janine Marchessault, Margeree Edwards, Richard Pinet, Tim Dallett, Eric Rosenzweig and Willy LeMaitre. One of the exciting things for me about the symposium was that it created a venue for artists and curators who reside in Peterborough County to converse with their peers from across the country.

Another exhibition I brought to Artspace in 1996 was *Native Love* (organized by Skawennati Tricia Fragnito), which was a collaborative group exhibition that paired works by contemporary First Nations visual artists with First Nations writers to explore the theme of love from a First Nations' perspective. There is hardly any recognition that Peterborough is a settler space with a particular history in relation to First Nations people. I was very conscious of the need to have representations of that history, as well as create a more tangible connection with these communities. Interestingly, it was the first time I had contact with these local First Nations communities. They visited the gallery space, which became accessible not because of a concerted outreach effort, but in some ways, simply because First Nations' works were here. Stephen Foster's *Curios and Trinkets* (1998) was also a significant video installation to have been exhibited at the gallery. It deconstructed the works of anthropologists and ethnographers and how they document First Nations traditions.

In 1996 I also curated *Across Borders*, a group exhibition with Jamelie Hassan, Shelley Niro and Catalina Parra. (The show also travelled to A Space in Toronto.) It dealt with cross-cultural collaboration and anti-colonial strategizing. Each of the artists created a mixed-media installation that reflected elements of her own particular cultural background, and referenced ideas drawn from a book that we all read, about the life and death of Ana Mae Aquash, a First Nations activist involved in the American Indian Movement. The artworks were positioned in a way which made it possible for viewers to form visual linkages between specific pieces and the exhibition theme. Shelley's installation, *The Border*, was located in the centre of the gallery and consisted of a large metal sculpture of an Indian woman's face in profile, that was mounted onto a wooden map of North America. Three colour photographs of the artist's daughter were also mounted on the southern wall of the gallery. Jamelie's work, *Untitled Project*, was situated in the eastern quadrant of the gallery, and consisted of a black and white photograph of her grandfather



seated in his café in South Dakota. A mirror, along with circular glass pieces in the shape of snowballs, surrounded the photograph. The names of the places through which her family travelled were also imprinted in Arabic onto the glass pieces. Scattered on the floor were several ceramic hands that made reference to the Aquash story. Much of her work in this exhibition dealt with her family's migration to North America from Lebanon (Peterborough, Ontario was one of the spots along the route to their final destination). Catalina's installation took up an international perspective. It inhabited the northern and western spaces in the gallery. A floor piece consisting of corn and red, white, black and green beans formed the flag of the American Indian movement, in homage to Ana Mae Aquash. Red and white candles were used to spell out the words "For Cuba," which illuminated the flag. A mural of collaged images and text from mainstream newspapers which called into question various atrocities, were sutured together by the artist and spanned the length of the western wall. Jamelie, Shelley and Catalina were also very involved in animating the outreach activities of the exhibition. Together we experimented with different ways of encouraging conversations about the exhibition themes with both artists and non-artists. A 24-page tabloid was also produced in collaboration with members of the Trent University student paper and local community members, and included contributions from across the country. I believe that *Across Borders* provided multiple entry points for visitors to the gallery because it engaged not only with the local community but also with communities and artists across the country.

**MKG:** In 1999 you curated an exhibition by Melinda Mollineaux, who was based in Vancouver at the time. Can you talk about this work?

**AF:** The exhibition was called *Cadboro Bay: Index to an Incomplete History*. The installation juxtaposed present-day landscape photographs of Cadboro Bay—a site on Vancouver Island where Emancipation Day picnics used to



take place in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century—with records and names collected by Melinda through archival research concerning the black community. It consisted of five large sepia-toned, soft-focused pinhole photographs mounted on concave aluminum, which evoked a lingering yet absent presence of black people's history in that landscape. There is little documentation of this place, where significant communities of black people gathered and lived. Individual's names, as well as poetic texts of what Melinda imagined might have been conversations between individuals at the picnics, were rubbed onto the white wall in graphite. The texts, coupled with the images, are suggestive of another world and the fragile space that black history occupies in this country. *Cadboro Bay* was really about the persistent absence of memories of black communities in mainstream culture and from black peoples' imaginations because of the dearth of information available. It also concerns the absence of certain bodies in the land- and culture-scape here. The work gives visibility to the invisible, and is concerned with the processes and forms by which this can happen. And really, that's what my own work is about as a curator; it's about trying to create spaces for visibility, while exploring invisibility at the same time. I consider my work to be political, and use my understanding of the local as a starting point for discussions concerning issues of visibility.

**MKG:** Richard Fung mentioned having an interesting conversation with you about the Vancouver scene, and I wonder if you could talk a bit about how you see the positioning of blackness in the Vancouver context.

**AF:** My concerns about the positioning of blackness go beyond the Vancouver context as well. They are related to my Caribbean background and having a certain understanding of the colonial construction of race hierarchies in the Caribbean. I think that we've reached a certain level of maturity in our practices and experiences as artists, curators and critics. And therefore we now

need to deconstruct how we've re-inserted some of the colonial hierarchies into our current political discourses, practices and struggles for equity as people of colour in this country. My conversations with Richard came out of a particular understanding of the Caribbean context, where the hierarchy is white, Asian, South Asian, black. I've been thinking about the energies and commitments that have gone into organizing against marginalization, and now I would like to engage in discussions about how our particular cultures and histories re-inscribe hierarchies within the framework of coalition building.

Concerning Vancouver more specifically, I'd have to add that my intent in curating Melinda's work was to actively inscribe the fact that black folks took up a geographical and political space within West Coast communities. Somehow this presence is continually erased, even within the situation within which we currently live. It's continually made invisible. This invisibility of black people's historical and contemporary contributions on the West Coast may be due to the relatively small number of people of African descent in that region. But it's perhaps also because of a politics that privileges certain tellings and retellings of stories, and who is included in those stories. I think the particular history of Vancouver and the West Coast allows this to happen. There are physical reminders of Chinese Canadian contributions to the construction of Canada on the West Coast, and I think these reminders enable certain stories to emerge. This, however, does not account for the marked absence of black people's stories throughout Canada. It's from my experiences of the Caribbean that I wanted to start reworking this issue of absence, by saying, "Let's look at the ways in which racial hierarchies have been constructed to rank our worth and determine whose voices get heard." I am still trying to work through this issue, but I think that artists' continued excavation, telling and documentation of the stories in visual forms is necessary in order to change our understandings of the multiple cultural influences that shape (our) local and national culture.



**MKG:** We've spoken before about how there seems to be a sense that work on cultural race politics has been "done." Do you have any reflections on this?

**AF:** I think several things are happening, and it's complicated. In the 1980s the issues were pretty clear cut: there were issues of funding, access to institutions and a real push for structural change. A certain type of gesture was made by some individuals and institutions during these moments, which perhaps *seemed* to open things up, so in the current moment the attitude is, "it's been done." I also think that the generation of artists and producers from ethno-cultural communities who followed us have emerged at a time when the road appears to be evenly paved and things are indeed a little bit easier. It seems as if things are opening up at the institutional level, yet at the same time, younger artists also realize that this opening is not complete. There are several groups and collectives of artists that are starting to move completely outside of existing systems, because it is seen as too difficult to break through. But it's not that simple: there is the financial motivation; there's a kind of veneer at the front end regarding issues of access; and there's a certain face to institutions that suggest the work on equity has been done. This closes any kind of discussion on the fact that it's not just something that you do and it's done, but it's a continual process. This discussion must be ongoing. The discussions by people of colour have evolved and now take place in a host of different places and tones. The issues might be framed differently, but the actual fundamentals of representation haven't necessarily changed. One of my fears is that issues of representation are now falling outside of public discourse because of the ways in which they have been co-opted, particularly by institutions. I believe these issues need to be out there in the public sphere. Otherwise, they get sucked into spaces where they are no longer visible or important, and as a result of the "it's been done" attitude certain bodies and voices continue to be left out of the conversations.



## ART +/-OR POLITICS?

**Monika Kin Gagnon:** Within the cultural systems that you referred to earlier—education, creation, exhibition and reception—there are also the issues of creation and aesthetics. Identity politics has also had an impact in this realm engaging and questioning the very subjects appropriate to art, for instance, in making identity somewhat acceptable as a subject and process of investigation. I think feminist artists and producers inaugurated this shift in the 1970s, even earlier perhaps. But there may be a downside to what became an institutionalizing of identity. It's almost as if a thematic genre developed in part from programming. There seemed to be curatorial expectations and mandates for artists of colour or First Nations artists, that they should actually produce work that explored issues of identity. I'm talking about a pressure that comes from outside. It's a genre based on self-exploration, exploring family histories, exploring cultural histories. So while identity politics opened up funding, exhibition and dissemination possibilities, it in part also created certain demands that may have begun closing things down as well. I think you're quite right to point out the range of resistances and animosity that existed during these early shifts. But it also seems that a broader discomfort has set in. My perception is that there are now various forms of backlash—by individuals, mainstream culture and cultural institutions—against what

could be understood as identity-driven approaches and criticism of organizations and processes, and also of artistic work itself. It's more than simple fatigue. It's more active and deliberate than fatigue. And it's certainly not because systemic racism has been resolved. I think it's about a simplification and containment of the discourses concerning race and ethnicity. And I worry that dismissing engagements with race as "having been done," or as no longer being relevant because it's become predictable, is a way of circumventing the importance and value of an entire set of far more complex processes concerning how ethnicity and racialization are produced, performed and complicated by culture. Easy dismissals stop us from examining and engaging with these processes more closely. It may also stop us from seeing if there are racist dimensions to such dismissals.

**Richard Fung:** And you're right to worry. The problem is that the issue is so complex, and it's difficult to come to terms with and respond adequately to that complexity. Here are some of the contradictions as I see them: On the one hand, the resistance to work about "identity" comes from the fetish for the new that exists among art students, critics, curators and the art market. I say art students rather than art schools because I think many people arrive with this idea already in their heads, and most teachers I know try to temper the obsession. The automatic dismissal of a whole field of investigation because it's supposedly old hat is silly. Another factor is that if an Asian artist uses an image of an Asian person, or a black artist of a black subject, the work is automatically assumed to be *about* race and *about* identity, the two being conflated. Of course, white artists working with white subjects don't face this straight-jacketed interpretation. But on the other hand, so much art around racial and cultural identity seems stuck, so that it has little to add to the debates, and therefore it leaves you unenlightened about the issue and unmoved aesthetically. It's become a genre, as you say. So while we need

to defend the space for these explorations, we need to maintain criticality. We've moved well beyond a time when we could validate something simply because it dealt with minoritized experience from a minoritized perspective. The agenda of institutional access and change was intertwined with the earlier artwork on identity, and the two—politics in the art and politics on behalf of the art—may need to be disentangled.

**MKG:** I think these distinctions you're making between explorations of racialized identity in artistic work, as distinct from the many issues of access to resources and power, are important because the two are often conflated. You once mentioned that the debates around cultural equity that you participated in at the Canada Council significantly involved questions of "professionalism." Did this have to do with a certain "white" anxiety around definitions of art making? I think these anxieties still circulate around issues of aesthetic "quality." It's routinely perceived, I think, that to be accountable to a process of equitable representation necessarily involves a loss of "quality" work, rather than seeing how this very notion of quality is frequently an alibi for a whole set of exclusions and inclusions that maintain the primacy of a white expert, and ethnocentric notions of artistic production. Mieke Bal's essay, "The Discourse of the Museum" in *Thinking Exhibitions* (1996) compares the ethnographic and the art museum, to show precisely how cultural difference is manufactured through various museological discourses, and how this is maintained through repetition.

An interesting manifestation of this tension was a *National Post* review of Vancouver artist Brian Jungen's exhibition, *Shapeshifter*, at the artist-run centre Or Gallery in the Fall of 2000. It was interesting to see how Jungen and his work were being discursively groomed by the critic, Sara Milroy, and by those whom she selected to anoint his passage into the higher temples of art. One of Jungen's earlier series of 1998-1999 works is entitled *Prototype for New*



*Understanding*, which are masks constructed from Nike Air Jordans. I've thought about this work as being at least in part about inter-Aboriginal national boundaries and codes. Reid Shier's essay, "Cheap" (from the exhibition at the Charles H. Scott Gallery) explicitly draws attention to how these masks relate to designs from Kwakwaka'wakw, Nuu'chah'nulth and Bella Coola designs in a really interesting way. But in the review of Jungen's more recent Or Gallery show, any inter-national aspect (in an Aboriginal sense) seemed evacuated. Instead, the review recruits not one but four white art experts—Reid Shier who curated the work, the Vancouver Art Gallery's Daina Augaitis, curator Kitty Scott from the National Gallery of Canada, and Scott Watson of Vancouver's Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery—to attest to its artistic merit. And it's not about these individuals' statements being problematic, because they're not, and that's not my point. Rather, it's the way that these voices are brought together to construct an implicit distancing from cultural race politics—a desperate distancing that permeates the review. *Shapeshifter* is a remarkable sculptural construction of a whale skeleton, a recognizable West Coast Native art symbol, moulded from Canadian Tire plastic lawn chairs. While reading the review, I thought of how interesting it might have been to gather commentary from established First Nations artists who worked in more traditional ways with such Native motifs, such as Robert Davidson, for instance, or a curator like Doreen Jensen, who is familiar with vernaculars which include the whale. But to bring myself back to my earlier point, I think there's a way of conflating issues of access to resources and power with questions of aesthetics and representation. And in this case, we can see how paranoia of the former—access—affects and limits one's engagements in the aesthetics. It seems to me that the work is interesting because of its provocations, and the cultural intersections within which it plays. The critical reception by Milroy cannot fully elaborate these potential dimensions suggested by the sculpture itself. Interestingly her engagement becomes, in my view, about the limits of white culture.

**RF:** It sounds like there are two elements: first, that the chosen experts are all white, and second, that they are selectively quoted to fashion an entry point into the work, one that erases any Native connection. As you're suggesting, I think this article illustrates the process by which one becomes recognized as an artist, un-hyphenated, as opposed to a racially or ethnically minoritized artist, one with relevance to issues of difference or "specificity" perhaps, but without impact or significance to "Art History." To accomplish this, it is absolutely necessary to have white critics or curators authorize the art; to interview Native artists would be to "limit" the work's significance. In a similar way, it would be important to discuss the work as "art," not as "Indian art," to banish any trace of the ethnographic. Reductive framings have consequences for artists. There's a legitimate fear that labels become not just descriptions of their backgrounds, but prescriptions for the kind of work they are supposed to do. At a workshop at the symposium "On Aboriginal Representation in the Gallery," at the Vancouver Art Gallery in 2000, Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun conjured this image of himself trying to get into the art gallery and there are these anthropologists grabbing on to him and not letting go. At the same time, I don't think non-white artists necessarily want to be disconnected from community either. Whether ethnicity is fetishized or erased, problems arise when critics and curators are insensitive to what the work is about.

Milroy's article is instructive but not extraordinary at all. She's trying to play her role well. In fact, when I have to gather support letters for a project, I'm very strategic about whom I ask; everyone I know is. If the subject at all touches on race, it is important to show the stamp of approval from a disinterested (hence white) authority figure, while simultaneously demonstrating the work's racial or cultural authenticity by having someone from the same group attest to its merit. If it's an American application, I would include at least one American referee, a known quantity, as well as at least one Canadian



to validate its local relevance. This is how I negotiate the context wearing my producer hat.

I suppose we could have a much longer conversation about the notion of quality itself, because it's not self-evident. Quality is contextual and constantly shifting: what is dismissed today might be in vogue tomorrow, what is panned by one critic might be lauded by another. We are all caught up passively and actively with these constructions of quality, absorbing and redefining ideas about what is "good," what is not. Styles are also being recycled. Faced with the overwhelming possibilities of digital technology and its use in Hollywood cinema and corporate advertising, many media artists are returning to the tactility of super-8 film, the casualness of low-format video, and the spontaneity of performance. Students today are mesmerized by the early low-tech performance videos of Lisa Steele, Colin Campbell and Paul Wong. Among young video artists there's a distrust of, or at least an ambivalence towards, slickness and polish, which only a decade ago my generation was striving for. I also see a real interest in documentary again. At the same time I see the technical possibilities of non-linear editing systems and the influence of web design encouraging different kinds of video effects. So you can never ever talk about quality as this stable thing. It's subject to fashion.

The problem arises when the arbiters of quality all come from the same sort of backgrounds and attend to similar criteria. In Canada the gatekeepers, whether they are knowledgeable and progressive or uninformed and reactionary, are almost all white. And this leads to the situation both you and Dana are talking about regarding cultural value. When Cameron Bailey started writing film and video reviews in the Toronto weekly *NOW* over a decade ago, he made a huge difference. He took independent and experimental production seriously, and he took race seriously. He is also a fabulous writer. Sadly, I haven't seen many other non-white critics either following in his footsteps or blazing their own trails. Rinaldo Walcott, the cultural studies



academic who also writes in popular venues, is one of the few.

It is also a problem when the stylistic shifts are impelled not by the artist but by disabling developments in the infrastructure. In the late 1980s and early 1990s there was a blossoming of what Kobena Mercer identified as “dialogic” film and video on race and difference, that blended political investigation with formal experimentation—work made with healthy budgets. Tracey Moffat, Ngozi Onwurah, Pratibha Parmar and Isaac Julien come to mind. This was much less the case in North America, as we never enjoyed the progressive television context that existed in, say, Britain at that time. But still, there were individual films by makers such as Srinivas Krishna, Midi Onodera and Clement Virgo in Canada, and Marlon Riggs and Julie Dash in the U.S. Today, there is little funding and infrastructure to support that challenging work, and it is not being made. Most of these artists have gone on to other media—particularly installation art—or have stopped producing altogether.

**MKG:** You mentioned earlier both the primacy of experience in early cultural race politics, and also a kind of uncritical validation of minoritized experience that may have characterized some early artistic work. I think this is what Stuart Hall was getting at when he talked about the “end of the innocent Black subject” in his “New Ethnicities” essay 15 years ago. This seems to be exactly about a shift away from simply celebrating marginalized experiences and identities. But also, do you think these earlier conditions of simply celebrating marginalized experience might have set the stage for the kind of conflation of access and aesthetics that we’ve been discussing? Do you think it contributed to this rigorous need we now see for both artists and art’s gatekeepers to distance themselves from identity politics? I’d say there is a generational quality to some younger artists’ indifference to cultural race politics, in that they are the first generation of young artists of colour, and First Nations artists, to specifically emerge within the institutional frameworks of the last decade’s cultural race

politics and the progress it precipitated. I think this is double-edged, and this is partly what I mean by generational differences. I think some artists have benefited from these earlier politics having created space, but others are burdened by the explicit articulations about race and ethnicity that were so intent on naming things in an often reductionist manner.

**RF:** While I agree that there is a current disengagement that may have to do with generational difference, I don't think it's just generational. As an "older" artist now, I know that my concerns have changed since the 1980s. My first tape *Orientations* (1984) was a collection of interviews with lesbian and gay Asians. It came out of my roots as an organizer and the need I saw then to represent complexity against what people thought "gay" was and "Asian" was. I am no longer that interested in explicating issues of identity in my videos, though the work is still clearly informed by who I am, including my "race," cultural background, sexuality, gender and so on. At the same time there are younger artists tackling questions of race, culture and power today, though they may be taking up these questions differently because the context has changed. Artists like Karma Clarke-Davis, Wayne Yung, Thirza Cuthand or Dana Inkster make interesting work in which race and culture interact with other concerns. In terms of institutions, there is a sense that the arts councils are on the road to producing a more level playing field. But young artists also fear that in a period of budgetary constriction, they may never be able to compete for support with already established artists, many of whom are non-white.

In the late 1990s, I was involved with programming at Inside Out, the gay and lesbian film and video festival in Toronto. The festival gets a huge number of submissions, many from younger filmmakers and video artists straight out of school, or still in school. You have artists making their first or second piece, and they talk about what is closest to their experience: family and coming out stories. On the one hand it's well covered ground, but sometimes their



stylistic or conceptual points of reference are different so there is still a freshness to the work. Then there are other young artists who don't follow that direction at all, but go straight into cyberspace. I see parallels in work by young Asian film- and videomakers and the ways they take up or completely bypass issues of identity.

**MKG:** You said earlier that some art dealing with questions of racial and cultural identity doesn't really push these issues, nor take on aesthetic engagements. I wonder if you can elaborate on this? My own sense is that this has been a fundamental contribution of cultural race politics in fully engaging that familiar dictum: the representation of politics and the politics of representation. It seems to me to be primarily within aesthetic arenas and sites of representation that some of the most interesting developments arising from cultural race politics have occurred; at its best it's pointed toward the limits and boundaries of existing discourses. Jin-me Yoon's earlier work, *(In)authentic (Re)search* (1990), for instance, works within and against the discourses of the museum. Dana Claxton's *The Red Paper* (1995) plays with the limits of Eurocentric history and focalization or perspective. And your own tape, *The Way to My Father's Village* (1987), explores the limits of travel narratives. Much of the black British filmmaking of the 1980s interrogated transformation of form as an essential aspect of creating new perspectives, as the avant-garde has maintained for decades.

One problem is that there's frequently an over-simplification of what identity politics was and is. There's a tendency towards being reductive, whether its artists or critics who are for or against, who stay within certain rigid parameters and definitions, or curators who begin working within restrictive categorizations and identity themes. Many of the debates that took place around events and conferences were quite complex and not at all straightforward. The closing sessions at Writing Thru 'Race,' for instance, were about whether



race politics were simply about assimilation and acceptance by the white mainstream, or about transformations of community, language and literary forms (the session ended in disagreement). I'm sure we could both cite many examples. But such nuance is frequently lost. I think what's most perilous is that we end up missing a sense of transition and process within the movement.

**RF:** I totally agree. It is as if racism involved a series of questions in the 1960s or 1980s that are now behind us. Besides the fact that there is unfinished business even from the old civil rights agenda, racism is constantly shifting. The current anti-Arab/anti-Muslim discourse following the events of September 11 is as frightening as anything we've seen in recent history. Europe and Australia are caught up in a hysteria about illegal brown immigrants. That bedrock of white racism is coming to the surface again. So the "mainstream" is clearly obsessed with identity. How will artists, critics, curators and institutions respond?

## KARMA CLARKE-DAVIS

**Richard Fung:** I think of you as one of the more successful artists of colour of your generation...

**Karma Clarke-Davis:** Can we define success, please? Because I'm not making any money, if that's what you mean.

**RF:** I was thinking in terms of shows and recognition. You've exhibited at all the major spaces in the city, including the Art Gallery of Ontario and the Power Plant, you're on the international circuit with shows and residencies, and you're active in many organizations. So I was wondering how institutions and curators respond to your work, and not just in terms of race? How do you feel as a participant or player in the arts community?

**KC-D:** I acknowledge the fact that I have had a lot of support, and I'm grateful. It sucks to have to say this but sometimes I feel that in some ways I'm the palatable other. Maybe?

**RF:** Why do you say that?

**KC-D:** I don't think a caucasian artist even begins to understand how painful it is to always have to question why you are getting something. I feel I can never just say, "I did a good job." I can't ever just sit back and enjoy my success, because people will always question me about why I'm there: "They want her on that board or in that show because they need a woman of colour." At the same time, I feel that there is an invisible glass ceiling for minority artists and work that cannot be categorized in the current Canadian art scene.

**RF:** Tell me about your training as an artist.

**KC-D:** I took ballet early on and thought I was going to be a dancer. That was

a very “Waspy” and upper class world, and it was uncomfortable for me, as much as I wanted to express myself through movement. I remember going to an exclusive summer programme for dancers, and as usual I was the only person of colour and I came from a lower income family with a single mother. I remember feeling apart from the other girls.

**RF:** Did you do the art school thing?

**KC-D:** Yes, I went to Concordia in Montréal, and there again there was a shift in my race consciousness. There, racism could often be predicated on race and/or language. That was really interesting for me because I felt a degree of empathy to their cause (the Québécois). However, I don’t speak French fluently and I was often made to feel bad about this. I felt torn between my sympathy and the open animosity and exclusion that I experienced. In other ways, with my Trinidadian roots, there were aspects to that culture I felt far more at home in: an openness towards emotions, a different way of looking at how you expend your energies. That is something I’ve always felt removed from in Toronto. This was the late 1980s early 1990s, and I had a graduate exhibition where I had done work that for me drew on Western history and perhaps, through its aesthetics, spoke a bit about my Eastern culture. I say “perhaps” because I used gold leaf and certain colours. In front of the entire class this professor said, “Obviously you’re using this bright red and the gold leaf because of your East Indian background; that is pretty evident.” But it was not at all evident to me. It was about alchemy!

At that time identity politics in art was all the rage. I tend to react by running in the opposite direction, but invisible hands were pushing me. I was expected to make work that had to refer to race and identity. There was some unspoken contract out there that if you are an artist of colour you must make art about your race. It was a little confusing because I didn’t want to jump on the bandwagon, on the one hand, yet I was ripe to explore, if I so chose...



**RF:** Your work has a kind of question mark around references to race and culture; it's very subtle. It strikes me as being about identity in the purest sense, in terms of the complexity of psychic processes.

**KC-D:** Yes, absolutely. I had an interesting experience with another professor who was half-Native. He and I got along and he took me aside and said, "You're using shades and iconography, etc., that seem to reflect your culture." And I'm thinking to myself, "Little does he know I'm of mixed heritage as well. What is 'my' culture?" He told me of the pain and struggle that he grew up with as an artist in Québec back in the 1950s, and he chose to hide his Native identity as he said it was nothing but a detriment to him. He said to me, "You better question whether or not you want to put evidence of your race in the foreground of your work." Heavy duty stuff! I was sad that he had felt this way, but it also crystallized my need to speak about race, identity and culture in my work, but in a manner which hopefully touched on certain aspects of humanity that we all share. I had to speak from my instinct, my heart.

When I came back to Toronto after those sorts of experiences in university, I sat back and had to think about it. I am East Indian, Trinidadian, black, white, all of those things, and I had to deal with that complexity. By choosing to implement these references in my work I acknowledge it is part of my heritage and that's okay, and if it happens to be popular right now that's not my doing. On the other hand, I also grew up in this country and it's okay to incorporate Canadian culture because that's mine, too.

**RF:** The motif of the outsider forms a thread in your work, from your earlier performance-videos right through to your latest installation on Gestalt theory, significantly titled *Auslander* (2002).

**KC-D:** I have always felt different and I empathize with the outsider. In the 1970s, when I first came here, there was still a notion of the other as being mysterious. It was hippie times, and with a name like Karma, it was easy to

target me as this kind of exotic being. After being questioned about the meaning of my name from a very young age, I realized people's need to define me: a) as something distinct and apart from them; b) to somehow hook me into Asian motifs, history and religion as seen in popular culture.

**RF:** The 1970s in Toronto also saw the phenomenon of "Paki-bashing."

**KC-D:** Yes, that's what I got: people either being into it, or, I remember the first time I was called "Paki" and ran home and said to my mom, "What does that mean?"

**RF:** The earliest work of yours that I've seen has a psychedelic, sci-fi aesthetic. When did this develop?

**KC-D:** I come from a West Indian academic background. My mother studied linguistics at the University of the West Indies, and my father was a poet and outspoken Black Power leader. These were strong influences that I fought against. From a very young age, trends and popular culture fascinated me. Psychedelic and head-banger cultures were really key to the kind of trashy neighbourhood that I grew up in. What was banal to Canadian kids was rather weird to me. Using those fantasy and sci-fi scapes, I could materialize another space with a degree of hope for myself as an outsider to co-exist. Also, in a historical sense, I think that a lot of black artists like myself have chosen to refer to outer space as a way of psychically dealing with feeling literally alienated.

**RF:** I'm wondering what shifts you see in the art world? For instance, race and identity were supposed to be over but I'm wondering if there is a re-packaging of some of these issues through transculturalism, globalization and so on?

**KC-D:** I have international curators come and visit me and ask me what the work's about, and if I say the "I" word, all of a sudden their faces shut down. That's bullshit!

**RF:** It's interesting that you should have this experience, because your work doesn't fall into what's seen as the genre of cultural reclamation and family stories.

**KC-D:** But it doesn't always matter, because it's just who I am, the colour of my skin, the fact that I am physically in the work, the fact that I often deal with racism even in an oblique manner. There has been a concerted effort to represent artists of colour in the international art world. Often the work does have a (some-what) political edge, yet I see the current trend as almost a move towards a type of anthropological curating. Many of these works are not necessarily challenging a given artist's place within Western culture, just acknowledging their place within their own (essentially representing their tribe, like some strange curiosity!). I think there's a new kind of cachet around being a global being. For some curators by including people of various races from around the world they're able to exhibit their sophistication, their level of worldliness, and ironically their generous acceptance of the work of the other. Ironically this cosmopolitanism is their personal socio-economic privilege. It's a weird throw-back, very Victorian. But who is still pulling the wires? Even people of colour who are now curating, what are the parameters that they are allowed to operate within? Who do they still have to answer to? These are the hidden workings behind the scenes that are still not truly being dealt with.



## KEN LUM

**Monika Kin Gagnon:** You've expressed having some reticence about the ways in which cultural institutions took on the challenges of identity and difference. Can you describe what you mean by this?

**Ken Lum:** My reticence is not directed at the cultural funding institutions so much as the artists who do not problematize the move by cultural institutions to heavily modulate, if not at times direct, issues of identity and difference. The example I would give is not so much an obviously heavy-handed case of institutional misdirection but the lack of a developed discursive response on the part of artists to the situation of funding shortages. What I mean is that the mantra of restoring funding cuts is all you hear. Of course, let's fight for more funding but the fight should be accompanied by more creative analysis of the bigger picture, including an ongoing interrogation of the relationship between artists and the funding institutions. The extension of interest into such concerns on the part of cultural institutions has an expected and internal logic, but some artists uncritically sought the succour and guidance from the institutions. I am not suggesting a revival of the conceptualist idea of doing away with the institutions, were that even possible, but I am suggesting that there was a problem when so many artists and artist-run spaces cried foul whenever financial support was not granted to them.

So, I believe in public funding of the arts. I also believe that institutions should take on the challenges of presenting the problems of identity and difference. But such beliefs also demand that artists be more vigilant in terms of the larger questions of whose interest is being served by institutional acculturation of such important issues and to what degree the process of acculturation repackages the terms of discussion.

**MKG:** Whose interests do you think are being served in this process of institutionalizing racialized identities?

**KL:** First of all, I am not suggesting anything untoward or ominous in terms of the institutionalizing of identity. What I am suggesting is that an ominous potential is certainly there. I mean, look at Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS), the whole defense of racial profiling, and the tabulations on various ethnic communities. I am not going to elaborate here for fear of seeming paranoid, which I am not, but perhaps a little dollop of paranoia would be a good thing for artists.

Now, to respond to your question, I think the answer is manifold. On the one hand, the institutionalizing of identity issues is related to the massive post-Second World War project of Canadian nation-building and the desire, I think, to project a so-called “third way” image into the world. On the other hand, institutionalization begets an increasingly institutionalized discourse and the relationship to the voice of individuals can become attenuated.

**MKG:** Some of your most recent public art projects take on issues of ethnicized identity and nationalism in the public sphere. Do you see this as related to any of the identity-based arts practices from the 1980s and early 1990s?

**KL:** I hope it does not come across as immodest to say that I have done a couple of other public art projects, the earliest dating back to 1989—beginning with a very large permanent billboard in Rotterdam of my work *Melly Shum Hates Her Job*. This work consists of an image of a young oriental woman sitting by her work desk and looking a bit flummoxed, perfidious, bored and tired all at once. Essentially a diptych, the text side tells you in supergraphic lettering that she hates her job. My interest in taking on issues of identity in the public context now dates back many years. In answer to your question, the answer is, yes, I learned a lot from identity-based art practices from the late 1970s through to the early 1990s. I was interested in the



same issues: identity, deconstructing publicity modes of address, the codification of private life, ethnic hybridity, etc. These included Martha Rosler's early work, Zacharias Kunuk videos, performances I took in at various alternative spaces such as the Living Art Performance Festival (which I participated in here in Vancouver and took place in many artist-run spaces). I remember seeing a fabulous performance by the American artist Dan Graham in 1978. I recall being utterly floored by it. I was still a science student then and my conceptions of art were very undeveloped at that time. At any given moment, there would be an exemplar, or perhaps a few exemplars, of how such issues should be guided in terms of art. I often found myself disagreeing with many of the strategies despite sharing a common interest in terms of the subject matter. For example, from day one I was wary of any overemphasis of the idea of ethnic authenticity and uniqueness. I did not like the work that rested on recounting family biographies for example. Let me be clear here: I am not saying that such histories should not be the purview of art—of course they should. I am saying that the literal forms that they took as art were uninteresting to me. I would even go so far as to say that there was always a subtext of criticism of the narrowness of contemporary art in the refusal to engage in anything aesthetically interesting. The criticism is correct, but I found the strategy to be counter-productive. Also, much art that dealt with identity tended to essentialize identity. I believe identity is a problem precisely because it is always present as a loss perhaps, or as some fused sets of feelings and memories related to race, ethnicity or cultural background. It's my sense that rules were quickly developing regarding what the "proper form" for the subject matter of identity would be. I speak of blown-up archival pictures of a grandmother or grandfather accompanied by texts about their struggles. I thought the form was dull and it shut down criticism because it was only the subject matter that counted. I suppose that was partly a kind of implicit rejection of aesthetic potential and the attendant



pleasures that could be derived from developing this potential. I did not object to the subject matter, I just thought such works did not contain enough richness of aesthetic form to be propelled to a later development. As an artist I think this is important. So I learned a lot from much of this art, but much of it also did not go anywhere. Of course, I was criticized back then as an “art world” type and so on. The irony is that in the late 1970s and early 1980s, I could never really be an art world type.

**MKG:** Can you talk about how your work is received in the different international contexts you exhibit in? For instance, how did *Melly Shum* resonate in the Dutch context? How does the cultural specificity of some of your works travel into different cultural spaces? Does *There is no place like home* (2000), your huge public art project in Vienna, strike different chords than it might elsewhere?

**KL:** Well, it has been over 20 years that I have been making art and I would say the first half of that time I felt largely misunderstood. Even today to some degree I am criticized by left artists as an artist who fawns leftism. I get rabid reviews on occasions from right critics who decry the presence of what they sense as leftism despoiling my otherwise humane works. I have been told by a group of artists of colour that since I had some position of success in the big bad art world, I could no longer be considered an artist of colour. I have to say that much of this criticism I received only in Canada. In Europe it was different, though not necessarily better. In Europe, I would often meet someone, a curator say, and the first response would be “I did not know you are oriental.” Or, “But your work does not seem Chinese to me.” I mention all this because much has changed in the art world over the course of the last 20 years.

*Melly Shum Hates Her Job* was in part addressed to the very high population of single Asian women in Rotterdam. The billboard was first met with a lot of graffiti, some pernicious, some silly, such as moustaches and goatees.

The billboard had to be frequently reinstalled with a new copy. Most people seemed to like it. For some reason, the billboard was taken down for a short while so that a frame could be built for it, and apparently a lot of people demanded that it be re-posted. The Vienna project, *There is no place like home*, was much more grand and of course realized in the context of Joerg Haider and his neo-fascist Freedom Party. Again, it is an image/text work consisting of six portraits of different individuals and six accompanying texts colour coded to the appropriate portrait. Each of the texts tie viewpoints of the "home" to one of the depicted persons. For example, one young woman, obviously a tourist, says, "Wow, I really like it here. I don't think I ever want to go home!" Another angry man shouts, "Go back to where you come from! Why don't you go home?" These six persons form a kind of group without any sense of community. My proposal was rejected by officials with ties to the Freedom Party, so there was suddenly some urgency to realize the work by other means. I waived my fee, and the League of Human Rights chipped in. The Canadian Embassy also chipped in without hesitation. After it went up, there was a lot of media coverage and barely a peep from the extreme nationalists; this despite an ongoing election campaign. Much of the public seemed to really take to my work.

I cannot resist telling one more story attached to this work. I was being interviewed by a reporter for one of Austria's big news magazines and one of the questions he asked me was, "Why did you decide to put yourself in as one of the six people in your work?" I paused and replied calmly that that oriental man up there in large and behind me was not me. The reporter turned beet red.

## INTO THE INSTITUTION

**Monika Kin Gagnon:** I want to pick up on one of the points you mentioned earlier. When your work on the Advisory Committee to the Canada Council for Racial Equality in the Arts began in 1989, it must have been both fascinating and vexing to be initiating these discussions within a high-level national cultural institution. The process you participated in engaged at an ideological level with definitions of what constitutes and is valued as culture, and more specifically, national culture. While there's a so-called "arm's length" relationship between the federal government and cultural funding, there's a manner in which the Canada Council still represents state-sanctioned culture. In some ways there's an interesting paradox here. On the one hand, liberal democracy upholds that all citizens of a society should have access to the same resources and be enabled to participate in the production of culture. Because there's a certain level of public accountability to be democratic, equitable and non-discriminatory with the distribution of these funds, the Council initiated and pro-actively supported this process on equity with its Advisory Committee in 1989. On the other hand, the very premise of your Committee was presumably that there were fundamental exclusions occurring at different levels of the Council's programmes, that it wasn't inclusive. The notion of "differences" that is at the heart of identity politics is in some ways about the



impossibility of a homogenous public culture. Some of the other Toronto examples you give, of the opening up of *A Space*, *FLUSE* and *Fireweed* to non-white artists and writers in the 1980s, are related structural processes: organizations recognized what they were lacking and missing out on in terms of cultural heterogeneity because of who they were made up of and how they functioned exclusively as a group.

It's also interesting to recall that it was only in the early 1980s that Sasha McInnes-Hayman, Jane Martin and Margaret Dagg released various reports and studies which in part noted how women visual artists were grossly under-represented at the Canada Council, both as jury members and grant recipients. These imbalances are almost unthinkable today. And it's not even that this process of equitable gender representation is laboured or forced anymore.

**RF:** That's true. When the Canada Council finally brought women onto juries in the mid-1980s, not only did women start getting grants, but more crucially, women artists started applying. And this is what's happened at the councils thanks to the work of individuals like Sharon Fernandez, Betty Julian, Marrie Mumford and others. Non-white artists start seeing these agencies as a possible source of support rather than as scary, patriarchal institutions. The difficulty of course is that in the era of cutbacks, how do the councils maintain support for artists working at different stages in their careers? They've been good at helping emerging artists, and once you get to a certain level of recognition things become easier, but it's the in-between—this is a hard stage for all artists, of course, no matter what colour or gender.

But coming back to the idea of state-sanctioned culture, I think Ken Lum also raises an important question about how some strategies of cultural equity can inadvertently serve to integrate the individual into the state through an uncritical adoption of racial self-categorizing and the like. There's in fact a central irony with the politics of representational inclusion. For example,

when we complain about the exclusion of non-white faces in advertising, we're also demanding of corporations that they more effectively hail people of colour to buy their products. It's inadvertently a call for better integration into the system of capitalist consumption, a peculiar contradiction. But when it comes to the government arts councils an important safeguard is the peer review system whereby artists, not bureaucrats or politicians, make the decisions about funding. Artists have fought for this and we must fight to maintain its integrity.

**MKG:** I think we'd probably agree that there have been some identifiable changes in the ways that issues of cultural equity and difference are now discussed within some institutions, compared to a decade ago. In an institutional frame, the Canada Council is one dramatic example of the ways that categories of creation were re-shaped, specialized programmes were developed to target particular communities, and the constitution of juries were closely monitored in terms of diversity of representation from different communities. I also think it's no longer totally inappropriate to point out the whiteness of certain cultural spaces. The response you get is another matter! But it's become a recognizable critique. Coco Fusco remarked on how profoundly the cultural funding in Canada shapes our public culture, and how sharply different it is from the U.S., where if there's no gender or cultural equity in an organization, those in power can say, "So what?!"

**RF:** It's ironic, though, that you come across a much greater proportion of people of colour in high level positions in U.S. institutions, including the powerful private foundations and the elite colleges. I think this has to do both with different demographics historically, and with the more assertive role played by people of colour, particularly African Americans in the United States. The civil rights struggle galvanized and changed society there as a whole,



and the later Black Power movements and other ethnic nationalisms also forced the state and institutions to respond, not just with repressive measures but with accommodations. The different conditions in Canada, and especially official multiculturalism, for the most part preempted this type of activism. On the other hand, state multiculturalism in English Canada, though often criticized—by me among others—for displacing attention to racism with a song and dance celebration of exoticized cultural differences, nevertheless provided a lever and a context for raising the question of systemic racism in the arts. It put race and ethnicity on a public/political agenda in a way that could be challenged from a more radical standpoint.

“Cultural diversity,” which is being bandied about in institutional circles, seems to be the new multiculturalism in that it seemingly acknowledges racial and cultural difference, but there is no reference to power and history. So it seems we may be facing that battle against co-optation again. But I also have to point out that of the state cultural institutions, only the arts councils have really addressed the inequities. Other national agencies such as Canadian Heritage and Telefilm Canada are way behind. This is not to mention the appalling representation at our educational institutions, in the critical establishment, and at the large galleries and museums. Su Ditta’s tenure as Assistant Curator of Film and Video at the National Gallery of Canada in the late 1980s and early 1990s brought an exciting range of differences into that pristine glass palace. But that era now seems like such an uncharacteristic blip. The success of the arts councils in dealing with these issues has to do with the tradition of accountability, the idea that these institutions must serve the interests of their clientele, the artists. The gains of racial and cultural equity in the arts are built not only on the earlier work of anti-racism activists, but also on the struggles by mostly white artists and cultural producers of previous generations. At crucial moments there have been white artists, critics and curators who have been willing and interested to articulate these agendas. For



me, these have included people like Su Ditta, Dot Tuer, Sara Diamond, Clive Robertson, John Greyson, Susan Crean, Lynne Fernie, Lisa Steele and Kim Tomczak, to name a few.

## RICHARD WILLIAM HILL

**Richard Fung:** Perhaps you can start by talking about what, if any, movement you see Canadian art institutions making to veer from the traditional Eurocentric trajectory.

**Richard William Hill:** Given the limitations, I think I'll talk very specifically about Aboriginal representation in large art museums that I am familiar with. This means basically the National Gallery of Canada and the Art Gallery of Ontario (AGO), where I've been a curatorial resident, then assistant, in the Canadian Art Department since 2001. Since the exhibition *Land, Spirit, Power* (1992), the National Gallery has continued to give profile to contemporary Aboriginal art. We could debate the merits of how this has been done, but nevertheless the commitment seems to be there. They have also recently hired an Aboriginal curator, Greg Hill, who I understand will be working on integrating Aboriginal art into their historical Canadian galleries as well. This is all good news. My own position at the AGO is also a sign of commitment to more significant inclusion of an Aboriginal presence in the Canadian wing, and I'm feeling confident about the possibility of real change occurring here. Whether these sorts of changes are occurring simultaneously in other galleries or in art history departments at art schools and universities, I don't know.

**RF:** What do you see as some of the challenges to this development?

**RWH:** There is the problem that as governments de-invest in public institutions, it becomes harder and harder to demand public accountability of institutions if they aren't moving along. This means that a very small group of wealthy people and corporations have a great deal of influence, and other publics have to depend on their benevolence and the benevolence of those working at a high level inside the institution. I'm lucky at the AGO because I work with many good people who want to achieve the same goals that I do.

If this weren't the case, it would be hopeless.

At the same time, I'm also a bit concerned that while progress on the historical side seems inevitable, if slow, we may lose some ground on the contemporary side. I get a sense that many people who take their cues from "the very serious international art scene" see any work with culturally-specific references (or those that don't function within the idiom of international art) as identity politics, which is, as you know, "so five minutes ago." I'm afraid that the arguments (which I have made myself) against a too-rigid identity politics might get turned around as an excuse not to deal with diversity and difference.

**RF:** Could you talk more about the differences you see between historical and contemporary Aboriginal art and how they fare in the institutional space of a large gallery?

**RWH:** We don't have any concrete models for how historical Aboriginal art will fit in a large gallery, because nobody has done it yet. We have the experience of museums, but not art museums. I think that historical Aboriginal art raises some questions immediately about what art is. The story that large art galleries have tended to tell us thus far is about a fine arts tradition that represents, for the most part, the interests and concerns of a certain class of people within the Western tradition. I don't see a comparable tradition in historical Aboriginal art, and why would you want to limit yourself like that anyway? Why not shift the focus away from connoisseurship and toward the critical investigation of visual culture? Ideally, there is an opportunity to play with the ways in which Aboriginal art interrupts and expands that old story in order to invite visitors to rethink many basic assumptions about what is important visual culture and why.

The situation for contemporary artists is often very different. Many, like Rebecca Belmore or Carl Beam, for example, function in ways that at least part



of the mainstream contemporary art world understands and values. Of course they could still end up out in the cold if interest fades in the issues that they address, but their work is at least comprehensible within a critically engaged international art tradition with roots in modernism. Other artists who work in more traditionally Aboriginal or craft-related forms still find themselves on the outside. They may have huge public followings, but what exactly is the status of a Bill Reid, or even a Norval Morrisseau within mainstream contemporary art? The inclusion of historical Aboriginal art in large art galleries may set up a context for their appreciation, but this remains to be seen.

**RF:** Visual culture adds a political perspective and an ethnographic nuance. Do you agree? Can you talk about how you see its advantages over art historical frameworks?

**RWH:** I've never really committed to one intellectual discipline and wouldn't want to start now. 'Visual culture' is a compromise term and we seem to need it only because the term 'art' is so over-filled with competing definitions that, in my mind, it has come to be almost empty. We have an institution, art history, which seems at last to be shaking itself out of its origins in connoisseurship, but slowly and by no means completely. We have ethnography which has its own history of problems. And we have art museums and their collections, which we hope include not just visual culture, but visual culture of special meaning, power and impact. But meaningful to whom? That is a political question. And meaningful how? That can also be a political and a sociological question. What has become increasingly clear to me during my time at the AGO is that bringing Aboriginal art into the collection and exhibits needs first and foremost to be about creating relationships with communities. Academic specialists of whatever discipline can tell us a great deal about historical objects and the context in which they were produced and so forth, but they can't tell us all the complex ways that they are meaningful

to Aboriginal people now. For that, the most direct root is real, hands on community involvement.

In the Canadian Department I think we're in the process of learning how these sorts of relationships might develop. Our first effort has been to bring together an Aboriginal Consultancy Group. This group includes artists, activists and curators, and has worked out well beyond my wildest dreams. I have been really moved to see such a smart group of people willing to be so generous with their intellectual energy, when they might have had every reason to be cynical. In the face of that sort of generosity you are absolutely morally compelled to ensure that the consultation is genuine, that you make as much use of what they have to offer as possible and effect real change. I can give you one quick example. We are currently looking at an early 19th Century Anishinabe gunstock club as a possible acquisition. As a group we talked about concerns that exhibiting a weapon would play into negative stereotypes about Aboriginal people. But we also talked about the opportunity that it might present to counter some of those stereotypes as well. We discussed differing notions of warfare between European and Aboriginal cultures at that time, different ideas of masculine identity, of community protection. We talked about how some of those ideas continue to play out in communities and effect, for example, enlistment in the military up to the present. Could we interview Aboriginal veterans to talk about this? And could we look at how some of the negative stereotypes continue to be played out in the present—for example, could we look at how the Canadian government used them against Mohawk warriors during the Oka crisis? Now if we are able to bring even a portion of this discourse into the gallery exhibit we will be miles beyond simply placing a beautiful but mysterious object into a glass case. What sort of knowledge are we dealing with in that case? I don't know, but I'd like to make room for it in my definition of art history.

**RF:** This sounds exciting and hopeful. It prompts me to ask a question, though: Do you think the gallery could have elicited the trust to create this kind of complex conversation without someone like you working within, and in a sense representing, the institution?

**RWH:** I think that having someone here is important. It signals a real, ongoing commitment and it creates all sorts of opportunities that might otherwise be missed by the institution. I think another thing that helped was that at our first meeting all of the staff involved on the project, including Dennis Reid, our chief curator, spoke very personally about their commitment to the project and why they felt it was important. I knew this was an important process because I had needed to hear the same thing myself before wanting to become involved as an employee at the AGO.

It is strange though, to be, as you say, "representing the institution," which is quite true. I'm really used to being on the other side of the table. At the same time, as a curator I now have responsibilities to many communities. This is a bit new to me also. As a critic I really only ever felt obliged to add my two cents to a larger discourse. If my opinion seemed eccentric or controversial, even within the Aboriginal art community, well, so be it. As a curator I of course still bring my opinions to bear, but I'm also now responsible for facilitating a much larger discourse. This is a very different business. Somewhat to my surprise I'm finding that I really enjoy it.



## SHARON FERNANDEZ

**Monika Kin Gagnon:** You have an interesting vantage point as the outgoing Equity Coordinator at the Canada Council, a position you have held since 1996. Do you have any observations about what has shifted and changed over the last decade or so within art communities of colour throughout the country?

**Sharon Fernandez:** My response to this is conflictual, in that it is hopeful in relation to certain inclusionary trends, and troubled in relation to others. I can talk about what I see happening here at the Canada Council for the Arts, where I have worked for the past five years as Equity Coordinator. But I have to place the discussion within a larger context of the current pace and pressures of globalization, where certain economic ideals have gained structural control and where culture is now intimately linked to economic patterns of trade and "development."

At the Council, 13 years of peer influence, since the Advisory Committee to the Canada Council for Racial Equality in the Arts began in 1989, have contributed toward racial equity and principles of cultural diversity. I've referred to this as *progressive stamina*. This longevity of vigilance is tied to the pressures of contestation and structural advocacy, such as the maintenance of an empowered Equity Office and Racial Equity Advisory Committee. As well, representation on juries of approximately 525 peers of colour between 1997 and 2001 has had the results that meaningful *presence* affords. Through policy and practice the perspectives of artists and staff of colour at the Council are currently equitably incorporated into the culture of the institution, and thereby somewhat incorporated into the cultural discourses of the nation. That said, elitism, cronyism and racism continue to be forces in the struggle for plural cultural symmetry. The Council is only one cultural agency, which in 2001 had 4% of the approximately 3.3 billion dollar federal cultural budget. It is, however, an influential one nurturing excellence partially through the

recognition of the value of heterogeneity and difference, which enables the country to risk, re-think and deepen the quality of life of its diverse peoples and enhance its capacity to adapt to many newly manufactured threats.

Similar advocacy mechanisms linked to representation are not as apparent in the arts milieu across the country. It also varies across the country: if we travel west certain provinces are still stereotypically 'tolerant' of cultural difference; and if we travel east, certain provinces promote cultural assimilation into a static construction of identity that is about a denial of difference. With some exceptions, what I see appears to be a cultural amnesia with regard to racial equity, as though the debates of the 1980s and 1990s are frozen in time and irrelevant to today's complex world. Everywhere, from festival programming to artist-run centres, I notice slippage. Those arts organizations whose reactions to equity challenges were token in the 1990s, are back to being homogeneous in 2002. Ironically the urban centres they are located in are richly diverse. What this demonstrates, perhaps, is that pressure and presence creates change—without ongoing pressure the status quo persists.

**MKG:** How does this impact on the activities of artists themselves?

**SF:** Well, another observation I have made is that the next generation of artists of colour are not as quick to form independent organizations of their own based on racial identity, nor are they as willing to be involved in volunteer capacities within art organizations. In today's urbane post-modern contexts, identities are multiple and mutable, which is empowering but it also diffuses focused dialogue around "the social relations of power." Reductionist approaches are being eschewed by a highly versatile, confident and entrepreneurial next generation of artists of colour. Yet reductionist oppressions continue to thrive in both fluid and consolidated forms. More often than not what I witness amongst artists of colour is a type of political disengagement. No one is giving up anything anymore. Has collective desire been so successfully harnessed for



specific orthodoxies? Of course at the same time there are also those artists of colour that resist and insist on asserting culturally pertinent memory, history and de-ideology. Yet, historicized analysis is often absent from the current *modus operandi* and the terms of inclusion are rarely scrutinized.

At a more general level, if we look at our “developed” Canadian culture, we can see environments of excess shaping a popular culture that is comfort-driven and materialistic. This cultural field of “liberation” is nurturing a civil society that *appears* generally less civil, more angst-ridden and imaginatively wired to packaged bites of disjointed memory. As artists of colour, we are not exempt from the bombardment of high material culture or from the processing of memory. Are we simply being culturally constituted to become part and parcel of a global divide?

Another trend I am weighed down by is the rarity of intellectual courage in our “mainstream” Canadian civic discourse. It is not merely the courage to be defiant, but the courage to inspire and challenge a complacency that appears neutral but which is deeply ideological. There are very significant “structural” reasons for the lack of critical discourse and politics, as well as a contemporary severing from historical memory in the public sphere. This is not just a concern for artists of colour but requires a *questioning* from artists and citizens in general. Who is controlling the terms of public discourse? More than ever there is a desperate need for intellectual activism and loud visionary interruptions of the deadening “tuning-out” that has settled over us. I would even suggest that many of us are bewildered by an ethical, political and intellectual malaise; we may be speaking in corridors, or shouting in the wind, yet rarely are we engaging with the anachronistic views that pass for public discourse.

If the arts and humanities are marginal, and public space shrinking like the water table, the space for critical debates by artists of colour is even more invisible. How do you nurture the next generation of artists, when critical discourse is inadequate and connections to politically active mentors are



tenuous? How does one do this in institutions of learning such as art schools and universities when the diversity of cultural practices and histories of anti-racist struggle within the Canadian cultural scene are absent from most curriculums? The renewal of vision that comes from grounding in quotidian communal realities is disappearing as the significance of the local that nurtures community is being reconfigured. What we need are new forms of localism that are imbued with the subversive potential of multiple points of origin amidst the common intersections we all experience.

This brings us back to the paradoxes that inclusion creates, on that slippery ground that artists of colour walk between commodification and cultural pertinence. British art historian and critic Sarat Maharaj has warned about “the titillation of globalization that creates endless opportunities to consume the other.” Yet, we cannot take for granted the real gains that have occurred. A critical mass of artists of colour have created a space for themselves in the Canadian cultural landscape due to a history of struggle and significant contributions to contemporary cultural practices. From my national perspective, I see hundreds of artists who are able to contribute their creative voices to the depth and distinctiveness of our cultural lives. Yet the ambivalence I continue to feel in the current context is related to *values* and questions of nurturing a deep-rooted, humanitarian rather than “clichéd” diversity. Are we, as artists, so individualistic that cultural inclusion simply becomes a tool of governance to reinforce hyper-capitalist values using an empty rhetoric of cultural diversity? Or do we have the negotiating power, independent imagination and collective faith to struggle for what political theorist Chantal Mouffe terms an “agonistic” model of inclusion? This model knowingly places the question of power and struggle at its very centre and situates the confrontations of creative engagement on rough ground. This might unify a plurality of communicative, cross-pollinating views, as well as other intersecting experiences that create a “worldly” Canadian commonality.

## IMAGINATIVE GEOGRAPHIES

**Monika Kin Gagnon:** I wonder if you could speak to the development of cultural race politics in different national contexts. I have a sense of the way that many of the issues pertaining to cultural race politics travelled because of individual artworks, artists, writers, critics and curators moving through different contexts and carrying questions and debates along. You seem to have had numerous opportunities to overlap and intersect across various national contexts, also along gay and lesbian cultural circuits. Can you speak to the particularities of the Canadian context?

**Richard Fung:** There are differences in the way that Canada is constructed as a nation in relation to these issues, and connected to that are the ways that race has played out institutionally and politically here. The Underground Railroad has played a large role in defining Canada's official identity, for instance. As a haven for escaped African slaves, Canada is contrasted to the United States. The fact that not all white Canadians were welcoming to the escapees has been circulating a little more now, as has the fact that Canada also had slavery. But the point is not to recite a list of complimentary facts, or a list of disparaging facts; that would be to simplify a complicated situation. What interests me is how the notion of Canada as a liberal, caring nation produces

a specific spectrum of responses when it comes to dealing with questions of race and nation. At one end this has fostered a set of liberal policies, or rather, liberal policies are often clothed in an aura of national difference: "We do this because we are not American." At the other end, because Canada is seen as being this "good" country, any criticism can be dismissed as unfair or ungrateful and the reaction to criticism can be quite hostile: "How dare you?" This has led to a kind of self-satisfied stagnation in many areas.

I'm most familiar with the American context. In practical terms the most striking thing about dealing with American institutions is that the hierarchies are much more integrated than in Canada. You can see this in the case of public intellectuals like Angela Davis, Cornel West or Henry Louis Gates Jr. The closest, and perhaps only equivalent of a non-white public intellectual in Canada would be David Suzuki, the crucial difference being that he is almost never situated, nor does he usually situate himself, according to race or ethnicity. He is not a Japanese Canadian public figure in the way the others are African American. Not that he should be. People like Gerald McMaster, First Nations artist and academic formerly with the Canadian Museum of Civilization, are very rare. And now he's relocated for at least five years to the National Museum of the American Indian (Smithsonian). But it's not just the stars. When you look at the real power broker institutions in the field of culture, like the Rockefeller or Ford Foundations, you find a substantial number of Asians, Africans and Latinos right at the top and all the way through in a way that has moved beyond tokenism. How many people of colour do we have within the boards or senior management of our large cultural institutions? We think it's a victory if there's one! And what this does is produce a burden on those individuals to be representative, to speak on behalf of race or ethnicity.

**MKG:** As you mention David Suzuki, one person that comes to mind is our Governor General, Adrienne Clarkson, as a highly public Asian woman figure



who has brought an incredible vitality to her position and public office with her support of the arts. She's also gotten into hot water for making "political" statements which are supposedly outside of her non-political symbolic function—notably on the plight of Inuit youth and substance abuse in Labrador. With regards to institutional representation, an example comes to mind. The Montréal-based video artist, Julian Samuel did some accounting of "visible minorities" in key positions in Québec cultural institutions in 2000, and his numbers were dismal. He identified 14 people of colour out of 512 directors and managers at Radio Canada, for instance; one person at Telefilm in Montréal; and there were none at the Québec Conseil des Arts et des Lettres, the cultural funding agency which has five key positions and 50 employees. How do these kinds of numbers play out across the country, similarly or differently? What impact do these kinds of demographics have on the funding and production of culture?

I think in Canada the particularities of regionalism deeply affect culture, as do the particularities of the sovereignty issue in Québec. There is a distinctiveness here that warrants its own discussion, but on the other hand, isolating Québec on these issues may also have a problematic effect. Personally, coming back to Montréal from Vancouver after an 18-year absence has been interesting. One striking thing in Montréal, in comparison to Vancouver and other urban centres such as Winnipeg, for example, is that there seems to be a notable lack of an urban Native presence, especially in relation to the recent history of Kahnésatake a decade ago. This absence is a horrifying reminder of the very deep schisms between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities here. (Alanis Obomsawin is someone who has been working painstakingly to re-centre this recent history through her films.) One of the sharpest contrasts between Vancouver and Montréal, I'd say, is how First Nations politics are very present in the day-to-day life of Vancouver and the B.C. region, which is not the case here, at least not from the perspective I now have. This may in part have to do with my shift from an arts-based

context in Vancouver, to the academic and institutional affiliations I hold here at Concordia. On a day-to-day basis, though, I'd say that in Vancouver you think about the entwined Native and colonial histories as a set of living and breathing day-to-day issues, whether it is ongoing treaty negotiations that you hear being debated, or the Aboriginal "Welcome" ceremonies that occur at so many cultural events that remind you of whose land you are walking on. But there are also very active discussions about traditional and contemporary Aboriginal cultures amongst older and younger artists. These conjunctions move through the artwork that you see out there.

**RF:** Yes, I notice that presence in Vancouver. Also, because there are such a number of different Aboriginal nations there, you get a different sense in Toronto.

**MKG:** Absolutely. And I think some of that has to do with the way in which the cultural specificity of different First Nations is visible and actively circulates. I don't know whether this has to do with the more recent history of colonization out West (since the 1850s), as opposed to the longer colonial histories of Québec (beginning in the early seventeenth century), which have become more impacted and repressed within the culture, rather than remaining open, visible and ongoing.

The idea of an immigrant culture, the more recently immigrated the better, is far more easily accommodated within the existing Franco-Québécois culture, than a cultural presence that's been mingling for much longer. Taken from a different perspective, attempts to will away the First Nations of Québec, whether the Mohawk or the Cree, have been met with powerful forms of resistance by these communities. The Cree held a simultaneous referendum to the Québec government's referendum on the separation of Québec from Canada in 1995. The Grand Council of the Crees (Eeyou Astchee) have actively



self-published books asserting their rights within Québec, such as *Never Without Consent* (1998). A strong cultural presence of colonized First Nations rather complicates a history that has amplified its colonial relation to the British, and downplayed its own role in colonizing Aboriginal nations.

With this in mind, from the perspective of a nationalist Québécois culture, maintaining the specificity and definite contours of “immigrant” cultures seems important, with regards to cultural protectionism. What will become interesting are the emerging francophone generations of people of colour that have been raised under the language and education laws of the Parti Québécois governments since the mid 1970s—impeccably francophone, but somewhat disjunctive to the “white” francophone ideals which are at the foundation of a sovereignty project. I’m open to acknowledging that I’m somewhat out of touch with younger francophone generations here, though. My experience of having lived in Toronto, Vancouver and Montréal, is that it seems that there are perhaps more differences in the regions across the country and in Québec, than connections. As you’ve said, too, there’s an emerging sense of how small the cultural communities really are that are engaged with issues of race. The other issue we need to recognize is that we are focusing on the larger urban centres, rather than rural contexts. This would of course be especially pertinent to Québec, where a huge number of artist-run centres are outside of either Montréal or Québec City.

**RF:** Whenever I’ve met artists of colour from Québec, I’ve been struck by their feelings of desperation about the racial politics there. At the same time, with francophone artists of colour, I’m also aware of the linguistic issues, of the dominance of English within Canada as a whole.

**MKG:** But I also think that the language issue within Québec has displaced more complex discussions around race, ethnicity and cultural difference. This



is the challenge facing cultural race politics here. There's no question for me that within Québec the cultural politics of race face a different set of conditions and challenges than in Toronto, for instance, or Vancouver. I'm still trying to work out what these are. I'm currently working on a project in which we're exploring the various histories of alternative and community media that were developed by communities of colour and First Nations communities within Montréal. One of the first stages has been simply investigating how existing histories of the city have been written: Who's in and who's out? Judith Nicholson, who has been doing research on this project, was pointing out that in dominant ethnographic accounts of ethnic communities, 'The Main' (boulevard St.-Laurent) is a privileged site for investigation (it is the principal street in Montréal which divides the typically francophone east and anglophone west), and the cut-off point for research is always north of Sherbrooke Street. This means that 'ethnic' communities are constructed as those in a limited geographical area which includes Italian, Greek and Eastern European communities, but excludes any discussion of Chinatown, which lies just south of Sherbrooke. Brian Aboud, a sociologist, is working on an exhibition of archival photographs of Montréal's Syrian community in the 1920s. Many of their businesses were located near the old ports, again south of Sherbrooke Street, and have thereby been excluded from dominant ethnic histories of the city.

**RF:** I'm no expert on Québec, but from my observation it seems that the mainstream version of Québécois nationalism is tied to the experience of conquest by the British. The discourses of First Nations and people of colour trouble this narrative by recasting the roles of victim and oppressor. This is often greeted with hurt and defensiveness, which shouldn't be surprising. It is a problem with nationalism that it has trouble coming to terms with complex relationships of power. Its impulse to flatten can have scary consequences. At the recent conference Critical Race Scholarship and the University, organized

by the Centre for Integrative Anti-Racism Studies at OISE/UT, keynote speaker Indrapal Grewal talked about how, since 9/11, brown Americans have sought protection by taking on the mantle of American nationalism, sometimes literally, by draping themselves in the flag. And in fact, on a trip to New York, post 9/11, nowhere did I see as many posters with American flags and nationalist sentiment as on the windows of Chinatown shops.

As for Québec, in the earlier days especially, more progressive currents of Québec nationalism were more evident: I'm thinking of the discourse of Pierre Vallières in *Nègres blancs d'Amérique* (1968), for instance, where his framework is of workers and justice. The whole solidarity with and appropriation of black experience is interesting to consider in terms of what room it had for actual black people. But conditions and politics have changed since then, in terms of how the sovereignty movement has developed, though even then Vallières was critical of the conservatism of petty bourgeois Québec nationalism, including its racism and anti-Semitism. He saw his project as being in line with American Black Nationalism and the anti-colonial struggles of Vietnam and Algeria.

**MKG:** It's interesting that you are giving the sovereignty movement a sense of historical and transitional depth. Vallières' book had apparently been influenced by Frantz Fanon's analysis of French colonialism, and you can see this trace in the title. He is an interesting figure who came out publicly in solidarity with the Mohawk during the Oka crisis.

**RF:** I guess what I am getting at is that I don't think that these interests—language, race, culture, etc.—have to be mutually exclusive. Travelling in Europe and the Antipodes over the last few years, I've come to appreciate the importance of much of Québec cultural policy. Whether it is in Spain, Germany or New Zealand, it is hard to turn on a popular radio station and hear a tune that is not in English and already a British or American hit. In



Rome you hardly see posters for Italian films; it's pretty much all Hollywood. The vibrancy of francophone culture in Québec is quite remarkable in the world context. In general, I also support the "protectionist" approaches of bilingualism in English Canada, and Canadian content rules.

**MKG:** Well, debates around American cultural imperialism and cultural protectionism have certainly become more heightened with increasingly globalized media distribution; language seems to create 'natural' boundaries, or marking points, for cultural circulation.

I'd like to return briefly to the British context which you made reference to earlier. As you suggested, the state response to race "riots" and unrest in and around London in the summer of 1981 resulted in the allocation of targeted cultural funding to black communities. (I'm using "black" here in the general sense in which it operated in Britain at the time, to refer to all people of colour as a political term of self-identification.) Coco Fusco, Isaac Julien and Kobena Mercer, as well as Stuart Hall have analyzed this period in complex ways that we can't really adequately address here. But suffice it to say that the interest in this response to the race "riots" was how increased access to self-representations by people of colour in community media was understood by the Greater London Council as a significant solution to alleviating pervasive racial conflict. This emphasis on "black rights to representation" also informed discourses of multiculturalism and "equal opportunity" policy at institutions such as Channel Four, the British Film Institute, as well as the Greater London Council (as Julien and Mercer point out). John Akomfrah and Black Audio Film Collective's *Handsworth Songs* (1986), as well as Sankofa film workshop's *Passion of Remembrance* (1986) are two major films that came out of this period. As well, they significantly contributed to interrogations of traditional aesthetic forms in film, such as documentary realism and conventional narrative representation. These experiments go back to some of the concerns Ken



Lum raised about identity-driven work, and what I mentioned as being amongst the more important contributions of cultural race politics in the arts.

The other question that comes up, which I think is worth touching upon, is whether or not we might consider Native blockades, including those at Oka in 1990, or the confrontations at Burnt Church (Nova Scotia) in the summer of 2001, to be forms of “racialized” unrest equal to the British “riots” or the L.A. uprising surrounding the Rodney King trial in 1994? I wonder if it’s important to consider these events in terms of their impact on the national psyche?

**RF:** I think the issues are different in that these Aboriginal protests aren’t simply racial, but also national struggles. They are not primarily expressions of anger at discrimination as are the American and British cases, but a defense of land and historical rights against encroachment. Though they’re at least as significant as the other uprisings in their respective contexts, another difference is that the Federal and provincial governments didn’t so much attempt to appease as to squash such protests, precisely because the stakes are much higher—they challenge the legitimacy of the colonial state.

In general, how protest is met by the state partly depends on how the mainstream context defines itself politically and in terms of values. I’ve already talked about the specificity of Québec, but in general, to raise cries of racism within a liberal consensus is more likely to elicit remedial actions; to do so in a conservative context, such as Progressive Conservative Ontario, is more likely to bring down counter-accusations of political correctness, reverse racism, identity politics and special interests. I’ve been thinking about current developments in Western Europe in these terms. In countries such as Austria, France and the Netherlands, supposedly centrist governments have dealt with the rise of the racist far right not by confronting their poisonous ideologies, but by moving further to the right themselves. They seem to have adopted uncritically the rightist discourse of crime and unemployment being the result

of immigrants and refugees. From Denmark to Spain, there's hysteria about (illegal) immigration, especially of the darker masses. In this context, cries of racism won't have much power.

As for the impact of Aboriginal protests on the Canadian psyche, I can't definitively say. However, I do think there are consequences to the fact that Aboriginal representation in the public realm usually falls within the narrow framework of "problem"—the problem of land rights and other struggles, alcoholism, drug abuse, homelessness, etc. I'm concerned with what this narrow representation means, particularly for the consciousness of immigrants who constitute an ever larger proportion of the population, and who probably arrive with ideas of First Nations and Inuit peoples drawn mainly from American popular culture, especially Hollywood. This was my experience coming from the Caribbean—Indian-born Ali Kazimi details this marvelously in *Shooting Indians* (1997), his film on First Nations photographer Jeff Thomas.

I sense a move to position Aboriginal people as just another ethnic minority within the multicultural patchwork (a pesky, unreasonably demanding one at that). The infamous Liberal party referendum on Aboriginal rights in British Columbia in 2002 is a part of this broader process. I fear that immigrant people who are not aware of the historical context, and are fed a narrow diet of Aboriginal stereotypes in the media, can become a tool in delegitimizing Aboriginal rights. So culture and curriculum are important sites, not just for Aboriginal people's sense of self, but for the potential to provide a more complex and accurate understanding for non-Aboriginal people as well. Among larger scale positive examples, I can cite the circulation of Zacharias Kunuk's film *Atanarjuat* (2001) (though there were problems in getting it out to Canadian audiences), the Aboriginal Peoples Television Network, and the kind of institutional process Richard William Hill is involved with at the AGO. On a smaller scale I recently attended Dusk Dances, the annual free outdoor dance festival in Toronto, and was glad to

see that the programming presented the world champion hoop dancer, Lisa Odjig, along with the work of Western contemporary dancers and a Maori company from New Zealand.



## ALANIS OBOMSAWIN

**Monika Kin Gagnon:** You're a filmmaker whose practices have been very grounded in the histories of Québec, and its cultural memory in relation to Aboriginal peoples. Can you talk about the relation of your films to Québec history and the current context?

**Alanis Obomsawin:** In Québec our people are quite separate from the rest. Exclusion has always been there, especially if you live on the Reserve, where the politics and the cultural ways of life are different. Politically it has become more and more difficult for Aboriginal people because of the province's current political situation. Only recently has the government realized that they have to acknowledge the fact that there are Aboriginal people here and there always were. They've tried to make us invisible, but now see that it is impossible to continue this way.

From my experiences growing up, and as I see it now, I think the worst thing that ever happened in Canada is the lack of education concerning the country's history. Some universities are currently doing a good job of rectifying this, but in public schools they're not making the effort they should to tell it like it is. As a result of the lack of information concerning the presence and rights of Aboriginal people in Canada, a lot of racism and ignorance has been created amongst the general public. This is why oppression continues to transpire as it has in the past. What we saw in 1990 with the Oka crisis was a result of this. I really believe that. I think if people were well informed about our history, there wouldn't be the kinds of confrontations we have seen and may continue to see.

To think that 30 years ago, when we talked about history, our own neighbours would be shocked because they knew nothing about the lives and histories of Aboriginal people living right next door. It's different now, thanks to the educational work that has been done by our people all across the country.

Imagine, in 1952 we weren't even allowed in universities—that was the law. In Saskatchewan there are currently 18 Aboriginal languages being taught by Aboriginal teachers, wise men and women in the Native Studies Programmes at the University of Regina and Saskatchewan Indian Federated College. It's a different time; and it's so rich and open for all. There's still more work to do, but when you compare it to before, it's like day and night.

**MKG:** Do you see your films since 1990 as contributing to different perspectives on this history?

**A0:** Everything I do is oriented towards giving the word to our people. But I also want to educate and make people realize what is going on.

**MKG:** What's remarkable about the film *Kahnesatake: 270 Years of Resistance* (1993) is the very broad history you present within which the blockades of 1990 occurred. There are often attempts to characterize resistance or opposition as aberrant, or as occurring within some kind of social vacuum, and having no foundation. How was the film received in Québec?

**A0:** When it came out in French in 1993, the French-language press really put it down in general. That's about all I can say, they just didn't like the film. Of course this wasn't the case for everyone, because the film is very much a part of history here in Québec. But many French-language reporters argued with me about certain aspects of the film. For instance, some journalists were angry because they didn't think I should have included the rock-throwing scene.

**MKG:** In 1995, the Cree did a remarkable public protest of the referendum on the separation of Québec from Canada. As a way of insisting that they had to be consulted in discussions around future separation, the Cree held a simultaneous referendum to the one being conducted by the Québec government. Do you have any thoughts on this event?



**A0:** One of the biggest problems was that the Québec government believed it could just go ahead and hold a referendum on separation without first consulting with the Aboriginal people in the province. The land issue is very important to our people—there are no land treaties in Québec, and as a result there are many land claims happening right now throughout the region. In the last year or two the government has developed a new language to address land issues, and I think they are starting to look at the history more deeply than before.

Historically, between the English and French there was a completely different culture and way of thinking. When the French first came here, they didn't feel that they had to have treaties with the Aboriginal people—they felt that they had conquered the place and it was theirs. Whereas the English always tried to push for treaties. They knew that one day their appropriation of our land could come back on them if they didn't have things down on paper; if they could not show a treaty in which the Indians had given up or surrendered land; or if they didn't buy it from us. The English constantly tried to say, "Oh, we have to pay you, because we're living on your land." Whereas the French, not at all. They felt that this was their country, and never thought that they would have to have permission or treaties to be here. But whether it was the English or the French, with our situation it doesn't really make a difference. In the last referendum there was a very interesting moment when the Chief who represented all Aboriginal people in Québec stated that they weren't going to accept "yes" or "no." That wasn't the point, because whatever happened, whether the province were to separate or not, nothing would change regarding the land issue for our people. That was very clear.

**MKG:** When it was announced that you received your Governor General's Award in 2001, you were quoted on CBC radio as saying that it's been difficult for you to make your films. Can you talk about your long history of filmmaking?



**A0:** When I began making films in 1967 it was very difficult, but now I have a lot of support from the National Film Board. It's very special to me that I've been able to work there and make all of these documents. If it wasn't for the Film Board, I could never have made these films. However, when I first began working there, it wasn't easy. There were people who didn't think that I belonged. Politics came into play because there were people working there who were used to making films *about* Indians, and now they had an Indian person working alongside them. My presence didn't necessarily please everybody.

The first film I worked on wasn't really my idea. I was working at the Film Board, fighting for inclusion of Aboriginal history in the educational system—that's always been my big thing. At that time I was singing a lot and telling stories, talking about our history in primary schools, high schools, and universities. I also made a lot of appearances in prisons and concert halls. What was driving me then was the need to educate, to fight for the inclusion of our history in school curriculums everywhere. I visited many residential schools, which were still around. That's what I was doing in the 1960s. In 1965, Ron Kelly made a half-hour film for the CBC that focused on the work I was doing and my singing. Some people at the NFB saw it and asked if I would be a consultant on a film about women making hook rugs in Standing Buffalo, Saskatchewan. I accepted the job, but quickly realized that I was never going to do that again because I was just being used to meet people.

Later on, I began working on a tri-lingual educational kit that teachers could use in the classroom, and it was fantastic. I worked with one nation, the Attikamekw people in Manowan. This was a big victory for me. Then I made another kit with the Salish people in the interior of B.C. Each kit took us a long time to make, and we were so excited when one was finished. We celebrated and went to Indian Affairs, and got all the employees to come and see it. I remember calling the regional agent for the school in Manowan (they still had the radiophones where you have to say "roger" after each phrase). I told him

that the educational kit was finished, and that it could go everywhere because it was in three languages, but I wanted to make sure it would be distributed first to all of the residential schools. He was very rude and said, "I'm not so sure about that, it's made by Indians and I will have to take a look at it first. I'll see, maybe it won't go into the schools." Suddenly I found myself in another fight with Indian Affairs, even though we had done all of this work. I hung up, aware that the whole Reserve must have been listening because you have to keep saying "roger, roger." Then I called the director of education in Indian Affairs (his name was Mr. Crone) and I remember yelling on the phone. He said, "Don't worry, don't worry, its going to go to all of the schools." He was trying to comfort me, but I was still very angry with the man in charge of the Manowan area. The kit eventually made it to the schools, but you can see all the *étapes qu'il fallait passer*. [Stages it had to go through.]

There have been many changes at the Department of Indian Affairs, primarily because residential schools haven't existed since 1985. In 1969, all of the schools were to be closed, but 18 or 19 of them remained open until 1985. Many communities now have their own schools on Reserves, where young children can go and speak their own language. In these schools there aren't the problems that there used to be, where the children were treated badly because they didn't speak French or English. Now Native languages are being taught at universities, and there is a lot of encouragement for people to learn and practice their own languages. So it's a very different time than it was 30 or 40 years ago, since we first started fighting for our rights. Before that, everything was asleep for a long time.

**MKG:** Can you talk about your current film projects?

**AO:** A little. I don't like to talk about a project before I'm finished! Right now I'm working with the M'igmaq. I worked with the M'igmaq of Restigouche in 1981, with the film *Incident at Restigouche* (1984). And since 1998 I've been

back to work with them, looking at where they are 20 years later. I am also working with the people of Burnt Church, and the treaty rights of the M'igmaq in general.

In closing, I don't want to give the impression that I'm against anyone. This was the way the country was taken—against Aboriginal people, against the culture, against the spiritual way of life. It was always *against*. Which is why we are where we are now. One day a man told me something that I will never forget, and the more I see how life is, the more I think it is truthful. He said, sometimes you're walking in the bush, and you touch a plant, and it gives you a sickness on your skin, or you could have pain. This happens all the time. But he told me that whatever gave you the pain, if you look hard enough, you're going to find, very close to it, a plant that's going to cure you. And it's true. We used to know all of these plants. And we know less now. But it's the same with people: if you get hurt by a person—and we can think about what happened with the World Trade Center bombings—the healing is going to come from where the pain came. I really believe that. In my life, when something happened that was very difficult to go through, it took time, but I often discovered that the people who hurt me... maybe it was their relation that helped me. It's always very close: the bad and the good. The pain and the healing are very close.



## GAYLENE GOULD

**Richard Fung:** As someone who's recently relocated from London to Toronto, what strikes you most about the differences between Britain and Canada in terms of how race works in areas of art and culture?

**Gaylene Gould:** I left the UK very disillusioned with the way that the term "multiculturalism" was being manipulated in order to rip us off. Yeah, culturally, we were extremely sexy. There were new "black" films and initiatives, music was wonderfully hybrid, Brixton had become like the West End with a host of new swanky bars and clubs. We even had our share of IBM's (isolated black men) in popular TV shows. But when you look at who continues to dictate and define art and culture, they still wear the same face. Maybe they're younger and dressing down these days. Maybe they even partake of a little Method Man on the weekends, but white boys still retain the power. Because of this illusion, so many of us artists were rejoicing over our increasing power, but like the hypnotic light cast from a prism, we couldn't grasp it. There was much jubilant talk of *East is East* (1999) being the most financially successful black British film of all time, but given the fact we live in a time of rising hysteria around Islam's "evil empire," it's no surprise that white folks queued around the block to see it. *East is East* is a thinly disguised anti-Islamic text that rejoices our successful integration into Brit society by dumping our crazy backward cultures, embracing fish and chips, blonde girls and all that is wonderfully Western. I left depressed. I realized that the days of Black Audio's *Handsworth Songs* were over. The revolution would be televised no more.

So when I came here I was first seduced by the sense of independence that permeates Canada, a throw-over from the free market philosophy of the United States. As in the U.S., there is also a firmer cultural commitment here. People are less scared to call themselves a "black" artist, to work within

their “communities,” and draw inspiration. I was also excited by the amount of cultures that co-exist here, playing out their own cultural rituals and lifestyles without criticism. However, it didn’t take me long to realize that this wonderful Canadian spirit that Trudeau championed had nothing to do with the public way in which Canada presented itself. When I watched its TV, or read its newspapers, I sensed a decidedly threatening 1950’s air of white pride about it. Even when the man himself, Trudeau, passed away, newspapers championed his multicultural ideas, not by employing multicultural writers to describe their own experiences, but by allowing white writers to vocalize nostalgically about the experiences of their “Jamaican cleaner.” I realized then, for good or bad, that I came from a place where the leading broadsheet, *The Guardian*, regularly gives over entire issues to exploring race in Britain, employing new writers, thinkers and artists. Maybe this is part of the illusion, but a constant voice has been forced into the mainstream in Britain, through years of pressure and black bloodshed that we refuse to forget. Blood is being shed daily on Toronto’s streets, in places like Rexdale, but to watch local news you would never believe it. Where’s the criticism, people? Where’s the pressure that forces the mainstream to reconfigure itself even in a token way? When Hedy Fry explodes in frustration with her comment about cross burning in B.C., why isn’t there a stream of support for her pointing to the institutional and explicit racism that many black and Native people face here? Coming from Britain with its own issues, I guess what shocks me most here is the silence and lack of criticism regarding Canada’s cultural legacy.

Really, it’s the same frustration I felt in Britain but from a different position. It’s the time: post-Reagan/Thatcher, post-modern, post-everything. Most artists are more concerned with getting paid and raising families than trying to change their worlds. On a more positive note, though, I know there is a stream of criticism that runs through underground culture. It’s more readily

accessible in Britain, which has outlets, whether they be magazines or alternative music. These keep me sane. But unfortunately more and more black artists, worldwide, are seduced by the offer of money, to either remain silent or non-challenging. It's a shame.



## (CAN) ASIAN TRAJECTORIES

**Monika Kin Gagnon:** One of the areas we've both attended to in our work, has been that of Asian Canadian histories and Asian diasporas, perhaps because of our specific identities as Asian Canadians. Do you think it's still useful for us to continue to think about Asian Canadian histories, and their convergence with artistic and cultural production? Or has this type of operation become too double-edged?

**Richard Fung:** I think it's always been problematic... and useful. Writing history is something like a curatorial project in that one selects a series of events or contexts and re-presents them according to a premise. Asian Canadian would be one such premise, one lens. The first thing I'd say is that Asian Canadian artistic and cultural production is a project that hasn't been exhausted because it hasn't been done very much; you are one of the few serious critics to pursue this train of investigation. And besides, there are always new angles as well as new works and rediscovered older works. Two of the intriguing questions that arise from your inquiry are: What do we mean by Asian Canadian? and, What does this mean in relation to the other histories into which these works have been inscribed or ignored? I have a particular take on the former. I grew up thinking of myself as "racially" Chinese, since

in Trinidad there aren't other East or Southeast Asian communities, and the Indians and Chinese don't co-identify as coming from Asia. When I came to Canada, however, I found myself redefined as Asian, and I began to seek connections with other people who looked like me and were similarly racialized, though usually people with whom I shared little cultural background—as a fourth generation Trinidadian, I don't speak Chinese and have few Chinese cultural references, and I knew even less about other East and Southeast Asian cultures. So for me, Asian pan-ethnicity has always been about the social, and is always a response to a racialized context. This doesn't mean that the connections are not deeply felt, but I don't essentialize Asian-ness. Another factor is growing up in the Caribbean and coming to political self-awareness through the Black Power, anti-apartheid and anti-racism movements of the 1960s and 1970s, I am sensitive to when being Asian or Chinese brings privilege. By contrast, I find that Asian Canadian and American discourse often sees itself only in relation to white supremacy and therefore becomes disoriented when events like the 1992 L.A. riots/rebellion happen. The relationship with other racialized groups is assumed to be one of solidarity. In the attack on Korean businesses that erupted subsequent to the acquittal of Rodney King's assailants, not only did any notion of coherence among “people of colour” become untenable, but Asian pan-ethnicity was also strained along lines of ethnic and class affiliation. We talk about moving beyond a white-black, white-yellow or brown binary, but it's often uncomfortable to do it. I'm also a socialist and see a racial connection to, though not a determination of, class power. I'm committed to democracy in its radical sense, and that requires both an intersectional approach to understanding and resisting domination, and an attention to a broad range of solidarities and affiliations that go beyond the interests of one's group or groups. So when I teach Asian diaspora media art, for example, I emphasize the social construction of race as well as the continental essentialism that makes us think of Asia, Africa and

Europe as distinct and self-contained entities. I show work from the Middle East and West Asia, and ask students to think about the arbitrariness, but also the impact, of these racial and geographical constructions. I stretch way beyond what I think people regard as "Asian Canadian issues" by teaching them something of the history of anti-Semitism or discussing the plight of the Palestinians. I use Asian diaspora cultural production as a launching pad for the group (myself included) to consider the broader context. At the same time, I try to engage them in the specificity of content and form in the work itself, whether it's Michael Fukushima's stunningly beautiful animated film on Japanese Canadian internment *Minoru: Memory of Exile* (1992), Pratibha Parmar's diasporic queer manifesto *Khush* (1991), or Tizuka Yamasaki's ode to Japanese Brazilian coffeeworkers *Gaijin* (1979). I've also used films like Ali Kazimi's *Narmada: A Valley Rises* (1994), which is made by a Canadian but shot totally in India to elicit a discussion of a work's "true" nationality, and Filipino Kidlat Tahimik's *The Perfumed Nightmare* (1977), which represents a kind of transnational Asian moment. Renee Tajima and Christine Choy's *Who Killed Vincent Chin?* (1988) is remarkable for situating anti-Asian violence in a wider context of American racism. In fact, single-stranded histories that lift out one ethnic experience from a broader context can be severely limiting. In making *Dirty Laundry* (1996) (a deconstruction of sexuality and gender in Chinese Canadian historiography), I found it necessary to reference the experience of the Chinese in the nineteenth century to the broader racial landscape of what was happening among the African American ex-slaves, with the colonial push against Aboriginal people, and developing notions of whiteness. We can't appreciate notions of Asians as "model minorities" without understanding the construction of the implied "problem minorities" against which Asians are held up as exemplary.

But why think of artistic production in racial or ethnic terms at all? There is certainly a view that to do so narrows the vision, but I see it as just one



lens through which to consider the work, one starting point from which one can open up a series of interesting questions. Many non-white artists are suspicious of having their work considered in purely ethnographic or social terms, but there are also pitfalls in positing universalized, ahistorical aesthetic criteria, as well. I don't consider these mutually exclusive, and find that holding them in tension can be quite productive. A convincing reason for tracing Asian Canadian art histories, or rather, art histories through an Asian Canadian lens, is that this is a context in which much of this work is created, circulated and appreciated; it represents a milieu, or a series of overlapping milieux. It means a certain engagement and simultaneous demarcation from other histories: ethnic specific histories such as Chinese or Korean production; broader frameworks such as "people of colour;" as well as diasporic and national histories. If one can study artworks according to formal lineages or national histories, why can't one look at production according to minoritized histories, or diasporic histories? It's not as if when one talks about "Canadian art," one suggests that artworks or artists in this nation-state have other Canadian artworks and artists as their only points of reference. There are of course consequences to each of these framings.

Before we move on, I want to say that it's not just a matter of seeing Asian Canadian traces within an art historical framework, but also seeing art and culture within constructions of Asian Canadian histories. As in the U.S., Asian organizing in Canada has been tied up with battles over issues of citizenship and belonging, and over culture. Anti-Asian racism, from its earliest manifestations, has been explicitly organized around discourses of foreignness: the Chinese Exclusion Act, the internment, the Komagata Maru Incident. I was just reading Ali Kazimi's proposal for what will be the definitive documentary film on the Komagata Maru Incident, in which a shipload of would-be immigrants from India was refused landing in Vancouver and eventually turned away. I hadn't really realized the extent to which British

Columbia's Indian community in 1914 not only put all its efforts into trying to make Canadian officials relent and allow the ship to land, but also expended its financial resources to feed the passengers and fight in court. So in questions of citizenship and belonging, culture and representation are a battleground (as Lisa Lowe has so well pointed out in the American context).

**MKG:** I think a distinctive Asian Canadian literature has emerged over the last two decades and made an impact on Canadian literature more generally. Joy Kogawa's *Obasan* (1981), Sky Lee's *Disappearing Moon Café* (1991), Wayson Choy's *The Jade Peony* (1995), and Shani Mootoo's *Cereus Blooms at Night* (1996), have had mainstream impact. There's also Hiromi Goto's *Chorus of Mushrooms* (1994), and Larissa Lai's *When Fox was a Thousand* (1995), and more recently, Kerri Sakamoto's *The Electrical Field* (1999). In Vancouver, in the early 1990s, there were several exhibitions that strongly galvanized the works of Asian Canadian artists, in different configurations. Shani organized *To Visit the Tiger* in the late 1980s. Henry Tsang organized *Self Not Whole* (1991) at the Chinese Cultural Centre. He also developed a programming group for *Racy Sexy* (1993), which you participated in, and *City at the End of Time: Hong Kong 1997*, which he organized with Scott McFarlane, as part of the Pomelo Project (an Asian Canadian production house). How would we go about situating these activities within a broader historical continuum of Asian Canadian cultural identities and communities?

**RF:** The first thing that strikes me about this list of names is the extent to which the writers, artists and activists overlap. Joy Kogawa's novel made the experience of internment more widely known, and she was herself central in the redress movement for Japanese Canadian internment in the Second World War. Kerri Sakamoto also worked on redress, and she is also heavily involved in setting up the Gendai Gallery, a pan-Asian art gallery at the recently



relocated Japanese Canadian Cultural Centre in Toronto. Shani Mootoo, as you mentioned, is also a video- and visual artist, and was a catalyst in the Vancouver art scene. And I first met Larissa Lai when she worked for *Yellow Peril: Reconsidered*, the 1990 landmark travelling exhibition of Asian Canadian media art organized by Paul Wong and Elspeth Sage through On Edge. You can also add people like Shyam Selvadurai, who was active in Khush, the gay South Asian organization from which sprang Desh Pardesh, for many years the leading international venue for the presentation of contemporary culture and political debate within the South Asian diaspora, and one of the premiere events on the Toronto cultural calendar.

The other thing that's striking is that even though we span huge distances, I know most of these people; it's a small community. Wayson I know from my gay Asian organizing days, and I first heard of Sky when she published a story with the *Asianadian*, with which I was involved in the late 1970s and early 1980s. This was a national pan-Asian forum that brought together academics, artists, writers and activists of South, Southeast and East Asian backgrounds. It was an exciting venture, and there's a website being constructed through Tony Chan, one of the founders, who's now at the University of Washington. Kerri also published with the *Asianadian*. Based in Toronto, we had strong links to the Vancouver scene and to Jim Wong Chu and his Asian Canadian Writer's Workshop, an incredibly significant incubator for literary talent. Out of the same milieu as the *Asianadian* sprang the CanAsian Artists Group, which brought together pan-Asian artists in a range of disciplines and which produced a number of successful plays and performances.

The shady area of your literature map, which represents a crucial problem for any "Asian Canadian" project, is the South Asian work (in addition to Mootoo and Selvadurai, whom we've mentioned, Rohinton Mistry, M.G. Vassanji, Michael Ondaatje, Anita Rau Badami and others), and the Indo-Caribbean work (including Mootoo, but also Neil Bissoondath,



Rabindranath Maharaj, Cyril Dabydeen, Ramabai Espinet, and the late Harold Sonny Ladoo). Where and how do these fit? Should they be grouped together? Who decides?

I don't think there's a final or satisfactory answer to this question. Part of the problem is that the concept "Asian Canadian" uses geographical terminology to engage a racial politics, and racial categories and accepted geographical boundaries don't line up. This terminology and the phenomenon of pan-Asian ethnicity is very much a North American response to North American conditions. In Britain, there is another "Asian" pan-ethnicity which we in North America call South Asian, but there, East and Southeast Asian identities don't cohere. And in the Australian context, Asian refers primarily to the geo-political region and immigrants with backgrounds there; it isn't generally used to indicate a local pan-ethnicity, nor is an Asian Australian (or Asian-Australian) construction commonly deployed to claim Australian-ness with the same insistence that Asian Canadian, or its antecedent, Asian American, does. Put it this way: It seems that Asian Australian/Asian-Australian constructions have a transnational inflection, whereas Asian American has had a definite national(istic) emphasis. But of course Asian American, and its predecessor Asian-American, arose in the highly nationalistic context of the United States, one that is particularly attentive to a politics of language and naming. When I've been in these different contexts—in Britain and Australia, particularly—I've experienced a peculiar disorientation because of these seemingly slight, but crucially substantive, inflections in social and linguistic meanings.

Diasporic national networks usually have some overlap with kinship. For example, my father was Hakka, which is almost like a Chinese minority, and we'd have people staying with us from as far away as Tahiti. There would be responsibilities only because we shared the same surname and had origins in the same cluster of villages in China. Asian-defined communities, on the

other hand, are different because they occur only when people actively come together to produce them through events or infrastructures, and this is usually a response to a social or state context which produces a sense of common interest. In the U.S. there are many infrastructures through Asian American service agencies, Asian American cultural ventures like festivals, and Asian American Studies departments in universities and colleges. In Australia, on the other hand, I was told that such infrastructures hardly exist, despite having large "Asian" populations. As for Canada, it's been sporadic, with little institution building by way of ethnic studies, for example. In the cultural milieu, beyond the ventures I've already mentioned, there are groups like the pan-Asian curatorial Zen Mix 2000, and Asian Heritage Month seems to be gaining more prominence in some cities. I realize this has the ring of official multiculturalism, but the actual programming is generally more interesting than that.

**MKG:** I wonder if we can go back to something we've speculated about before, which was about how artists like Paul Wong, or we could add Roy Kiyooka and Takao Tanabe, for instance, and the Korean American artist Nam June Paik, or Korean American performance artist and writer Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, were functioning in the 1960s and 1970s, within particular kinds of contexts as predecessors to the identity politics of the 1980s and 1990s. They were culturally present, they were visible and producing work. But if we imagine what the conditions might have been for them to be accepted, or what they had to tolerate in terms of a racialized climate in order to participate, I wonder what we would find? It's interesting to reflect on this, because it might give us a broader social sense of what has changed or evolved. Are there increased limitations to what it means to be "Asian" during the 1990s because of identity politics? Or is there actually more freedom than back in the 1960s and 1970s?



Fumiko Kiyooka has made a film about her father, the poet and artist, Roy Kiyooka called *The Return* (1998). She came to Montréal to do research about the period when he was teaching at what was Sir George Williams University in the late 1960s (now part of Concordia University). She was interested to discover more about his solidarity with a group of six black students who charged a biology professor with racism in 1969. When they occupied a computer laboratory and events became violent, Roy had apparently spoken in support of the students, which was allegedly unusual to do at the university. It would of course be important to situate all this within the civil rights movements and student protests against the Vietnam war in the United States. In 1971, Montréal's Black Rose Books published a book on what's referred to as "The Sir George Williams Affair."

**RF:** That incident was big news in Trinidad because Caribbean students were involved, and one of my earliest demonstrations in Toronto was against the deportation of Rosie Douglas, one of the student leaders. I don't think this kind of solidarity is completely unique among either individuals or groups. I earlier mentioned Aiko Suzuki's organizing. Another example is the Chinese Canadian National Council, which not only tries to represent the concerns of ordinary Chinese Canadians, but have been prominent in a range of progressive initiatives around, say, racism and policing, and racism and media. In the late 1990s, they were also crucial in successfully supporting the fight for an inclusive equity policy at the Toronto District School Board, which included sexual orientation, gender and disability (trustees and upper management had been attempting to restrict the equity policy to race and culture).

**MKG:** I guess what I'm getting at is what both you and Andrea Fatona have pointed out regarding anti-racist identifications. In North America, racism is frequently thought of in relation to a dominant whiteness, and anti-racist



solidarities are often not thought of across ethnic lines, but rather, inside racialized ethnic groupings. Roy Kiyooka's example challenges this perception. In an exhibition called *Race-ing Thru Space*, which I co-curated at Artspeak with Andrea Fatona during the Writing Thru 'Race' conference in 1994, we curated a work of Roy's which was a portrait of Malcolm X, made in the 1960s.

I think it's important not to become indifferent to categories of self-identification and how they function. In my essay, "How to Search for Signs of Asian Life in the Video Universe," I was self-reflexive about what I was looking for when I tried to reconstruct a history of East Asian Canadian video. And I realized what presumptions were operating in the particularity of the questions I was asking in trying to write this history. Or how by looking back at history with the specific intentions of finding early videos made by Asian Canadian artists, I was in some senses demanding that events, people or works have characteristics that I was looking for, in order for them to adhere to my analysis.

**RF:** These are longstanding dilemmas for identity-based cultural ventures, whether defined by gender, race or sexuality. Is the work defined by its authorship or its content?

When we look back and situate these earlier artists within an Asian American or Asian Canadian framework, we are in a sense de-historicizing their work. For instance, the notion of Asian American pan-ethnicity was only just being formed when Paik was first working in the United States, so it's unlikely that he would have seen himself in those terms. At the same time, as a Korean-born artist who lived in Japan and was married to a Japanese, artist Shigeko Kubota, Paik and his work can be seen in Asian cultural, if not Asian American racial terms, without doing too much violence, I think. Interestingly, in material associated with *Documenta 11* in 2002, Paik is described as a "Korean," not a "Korean American" artist. Yet, there is a way

in which his work exceeds the national, in any case. This can also be said of Yoko Ono, who is a truly inter-national or trans-national artist. As for Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, however, if we look at her master work *Dictée* (1982), there is a preoccupation with nation and diaspora which dipped a toe in the politics of identity that bubbled up after her death. I see her engagements with identity and theory as somewhat related to the work of Trinh T. Minh-ha, though Trinh of course lived through and responded to this era. In addition, I don't think it gets us very far if we limit what we can say about art to the understandings and ideas of the time and place in which it is produced, nor remain trapped by the artist's own consciousness. Feminist-influenced interest in, and appreciation of artists like Artemisia Gentileschi, Lady Murasaki, Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, Hildegard von Bingen and Frida Kahlo, to name a few, or queer appropriations of Caravaggio and Michelangelo, have been incredibly rich and productive, so why not other re-framings?

**MKG:** In Martha Rosler's social history of video, "Video: Shedding the Utopian Moment," she suggests that there are two histories of video that can be written: there's a social history and there's an aesthetic history. I'm interested in how she talks about Nam June Paik as being a grounding figure for how an aesthetic video history is written, without ever elaborating on his persona as a Korean artist that immigrates to the U.S. Maybe that's what she's getting at—that he's never placed in a social context. I mean the whole mythology of his arrival to the U.S. with the first Sony porta-pack in 1965, is, as she describes, messianic. So I ask the question: What would happen if Paik were reinscribed; what does it mean to recuperate him as an Asian American artist?

**RF:** But we must ask what is at stake and for whom, in deciding to trace such genealogies? Why these avenues of inquiry? Normally, these debates become urgent only when some material advantage is at stake. Writing in the anthology



*A Part Yet Apart: South Asians in Asian America* (1998), Lavina Dhingra Shankar points out that in 1974 the Association of Indians in America lobbied to be classified as "Asian American," changing their 1970 census classification from "white" so that they could qualify for benefits as minorities. Yen Le Espiritu describes a similar material impetus for the Asian American classification in the first place. When we had more identity-based exhibitions and these provided the ticket for younger artists into the gallery or the cinema, there was a debate about exclusion: Who didn't fit into these categories? But with the waning of these in importance, and their dismissal by the critics, you have more complaints now about being ghettoized according to identity, though to be fair, some artists always chafed at being slotted in by a simplistic notion of identity. Given Paik's status as the "father of video art" and an international art star, there wouldn't be much benefit to being included in Asian American art histories. But there might be for others: art students, for instance. I remember doing a workshop on media and racism with youth in Toronto over ten years ago. We went through the usual exercises of looking at the mainstream media, but a group of black kids became incredibly interested when I showed Ayoka Chenzira's *Hair Piece* (1985); they had never seen a film made by a black woman, far less one that spoke to their issues. I think we sometimes forget how important public figures "of colour" can be, especially to young people.

Yoko Ono is an example of an artist being taken up within new terms by a later generation. She was active and respected as part of the Fluxus movement, and became vilified as the woman who broke up the Beatles. The most lethal cocktail of orientalist misogyny was slung her way. But now she's become a heroine for a new generation of Asian diaspora women conscious about gender and race. Korean Canadian writer and actor Jean Yoon produced a highly publicized theatre piece called *The Yoko Ono Project* (1994), which foregrounds race and highlights the interracial aspect of the John and Yoko love story. Interestingly, Ono sent greetings.



**MKG:** *The Yoko Ono Project* was workshopped by a group of young women at the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Vancouver Japanese Canadian cultural festival, Powell Street Festival in 2001. I think it's a work that really speaks to an Asian female audience, especially if you've ever been told you look like Yoko Ono, which it became apparent many of us have!

But you asked, "Why these avenues of inquiry?" I'd say that for Paik and Ono, while they may not care one way or the other, being named as Asian American sheds some light on the kinds of racialization and racism they might have faced in being amongst the few non-white artists working in the avant-garde in the 1960s. I'm interested in how racial difference was negotiated in these earlier contexts, and particularly how we might read evidence of a recognition of racialized or cultural difference through artworks. A lot of people have said that Paul Wong started exploring his personal racial identity in the late 1980s. But when I was looking at Paul's earlier tapes from the 1970s, I'd say this consciousness was there since the beginning, as early as *Seven-Day Activity* (1977), and it comes out very strongly in the tapes. There's a tension in that video which is about his image as an Asian male, and his playing with his mirror image sharply contrasts with the conventional ideas of white beauty and glamour which the voice-over is upholding.

**RF:** The first tapes I ever saw of Paul's in 1975 or 1976 included images of Vancouver Chinatown. But again, these seem more about culture than about race.

**MKG:** You look at that early work, and his awareness of his own difference erupts in these strange moments, which you'd barely notice if you weren't searching them out. In *Confused* (1984), for instance, when he's in bed with Jeanette Reinhardt and a blow-up sex doll, he makes a quick remark about his yellow skin against the doll's white plastic "flesh." It's a self-recognition about difference that could generate interesting discussions concerning the

centrality of white femininity and desirability embodied by this wretched doll. And in *60 Unit: Bruise* (1976), too, there's a sense about the exchange of blood between an Asian and white person.

**RF:** I wrote about *60 Unit: Bruise* for the *Magnetic North* catalogue (2001) for the Walker Art Center. From Paul's description, race wasn't on their minds when he and Ken Fletcher made it. It was about drug culture. Interestingly, now you can't help think of race, and you can't help thinking of AIDS, which wasn't around yet, right? But I think you're right in pointing out the racial reference in *Confused*, which I've never noticed, by the way. Whether Paul thought he was dealing with race or not in that period, what shows in the work speaks of itself. Consciousness of difference doesn't come out of nowhere, after all.

**MKG:** Yes. I find it so interesting to look back at his work and see these eruptions from a different historical perspective. One can detect a sense of his recognition of difference which is not necessarily obvious. I guess what I'm trying to say is that sometimes there are ways in which observations or commentaries about race or ethnicity are not manifest in the ways through which we have now come to think of "race" as being addressed or inscribed. They might be more present as traces. I think the reductive form of identity politics created some complacency in how work was both made and then interpreted in predictable ways. When I was in the archives, and found the 1984 article where Tim Guest writes about notions of whiteness in Paul's *Prime Cuts* (1984), it seemed like a surprising moment. I did a double take. To say 18 years ago that Paul Wong's tape is about white culture seems quite... radical.

**RF:** Yes, but Tim Guest was around activist gay communities.

**MKG:** So you think there were emerging discussions at this time?

**RF:** Well, I made *Orientations* in 1984, which is a documentary about lesbian and gay Asians, and I'd already been involved in race-specific gay organizing for four years. About that time there was also a huge debate within the *Body Politic*, the national gay and lesbian journal, over questions of race, representation and sexual fantasy. Tim had already left Toronto by this point, I believe, but he'd been a member of the *Body Politic* collective.

**MKG:** There's also all kinds of groovy stuff in the 1970s that occurred out of the Western Front, where there were various kinds of art exchanges, as well as out of Video Inn when it was first developing. There were active exchanges with Japanese video artists and culture through Michael Goldberg, particularly. There is a tape by Glenn Lewis I remember watching which was a cooking demonstration of him making Japanese pickles, *tsukemono*. So you have these engagements with cultural difference, but there's no heightened focus on this difference, necessarily. How does one engage or contend with these archival moments? There's a level at which one can do discursive readings, that is, have a sense of a historical context and frames of reference, but there's another level at which you wonder if you can start naming specific works and individuals. I mean, are these just rhetorical questions? Is it unfair to be judgmental from this moment in time? Does something become less racist because of its social frames of reference?

**RF:** Yes, I recently spent some time in the Western Front archives, and I remarked on that eastward interest, not in Asian Canada, but in Asia, through visiting artists and through the Asian references in the work of Front artists, like Susan Britton's *Me\$\$age to China* (1979), Glenn's *tsukemono* tape you mention, or even Kate Craig's *Ma* (1986), which is a very beautiful piece shot



in Asia in the mid-1980s. It does present difficulties discussing that work today, because back then, when much of it was being done, the context was so different. The scrutiny about who could say what, and what could be said hadn't really hit the art world yet. I find myself more fascinated than judgmental, as to me it represents a specific point in time and place. I was particularly intrigued by Britton's work in which she dresses up and impersonates a Chinese woman, as she'd been part of a pro-China communist grouping. I am definitely enjoying the privilege of distance here, as I probably would have found that milieu frustrating to work within. But to put that work in further context, many Asian Canadian artists coming to terms with Asian identities drew—and draw—on similar tropes. It's also interesting to think that this was the context in which Paul Wong was working, as many of his tapes (until a certain period) were produced at the Front. In fact, it would be productive to investigate the impact that visiting artists from Asia had on Asian Canadian artists living in Vancouver.

## KERRI SAKAMOTO

**Richard Fung:** You've been involved with the Asian American arts scene in New York through Godzilla. What, in your mind, are the most salient differences to the Asian Canadian milieu? Can we talk of an Asian Canadian art scene?

**Kerri Sakamoto:** I can only speak by way of my own specific experiences in New York in the early to mid 1990s, but my impression has been that the most salient differences have to do with factors of history, stakes and numbers. By "history," I mean an established tradition of shared pan-Asian political and cultural activism. I came to New York excited by the people I'd met who'd been involved in the civil rights, Black Liberation and Asian American Movements, or at least were very conscious of the legacy of those histories and whose activities were informed by it. This was all very exciting and even exotic to me. Many of the artists I met came of age thinking of themselves as cultural workers, doing murals in Chinatown for example, and using art very directly as a political tool. So the founding pan-Asian group (admittedly all of East Asian descent) that came together in 1990 (I think it was) to form Godzilla included individuals of that generation, along with younger curators and artists who were graduates of art schools and had the latest critical tools under their belt. There was a real sense of solidarity at that point, and strength of purpose within that small but somewhat diverse group.

Which brings me to "stakes," though maybe this isn't quite the right word for what I mean. Being there in New York, arguably the centre of the Western art world, brought goals and objectives into sharp focus; what was accomplished had reverberations. The issue of exclusion was very clear and pervasively apparent. Godzilla quickly fixed on concrete tasks, like sending a letter of petition to MOMA objecting to the fact that the only work by a diasporic Asian (Afro-Asian Caribbean painter Wifredo Lam) in the museum at that time

was hung in the lobby by the coat racks. Eventually, due to Godzilla's protests, the painting was moved inside with the rest of its collection.

And as far as numbers and critical mass go, it wasn't long before Godzilla had almost 200 members. Admittedly, the majority were of East Asian descent, but there's budding contingents of Southeast, South, and in one or two cases, Middle Eastern origin. Within Godzilla, there were a few feisty discussions on the issue of that East Asian dominance, and remedies attempted. For a certain period of time, we were extremely visible, and had a lot of energy and optimism and ideas, and a healthy willingness to be self-examining. We were offered space in alternative venues such as Artists' Space, which had quite a high profile then (higher than now I think), and pedigree (having been an early showcase for artists like Cindy Sherman, Barbara Kruger, etc.). There we mounted a large inclusive exhibition entitled *The Curio Shop* (1993) which, seen retrospectively, definitely had problems, but functioned as an effective springboard for discussion. Godzilla also often invited high profile Asian (and non-Asian) American curators and artists whose projects did not take up Asian American art or artists to address the membership on identity issues, in a kind of friendly challenge. I also do feel that Godzilla—within, of course, the whole context in which race and identity issues were being taken up—helped in some way to galvanize the careers of certain artists and curators.

I suspect this was rather different from the Canadian scene at the time. It has been my impression that a collective Asian Canadian art or cultural "movement" has developed sporadically, albeit in significant patches since the 1970s.

**RF:** It seems that kind of cultural activism erupted in many places during the 1980s and early 1990s, but not always with the same force or resources. Where do you see that having gone now?

**KS:** I left NYC in 1996, but even before that, things had begun to unravel. As some people's stars began to rise and others didn't, the membership and its



leadership got sort of frayed, and we lost our initial zeal and brief shining solidarity. A younger generation of artists started to take the helm as the original members got burnt out, or took on positions within institutions, adapting their goals to those sites. The politics of the younger artists seemed to me to be quite different. They hadn't embraced that Asian American cultural activism of the past, or weren't familiar with it really, and efforts and events became more focused on professional and career aspects of being an artist. And of course the context shifted too, as you know. There was a waning of interest in curatorially foregrounding race, and even a backlash, especially after that Whitney Biennial (1993) which had included a lot of artists of colour.

I'm not sure I can say where that's gone now. There's no Godzilla. When I visit NYC, it's really a changed place in lots of ways. Literally, because all the galleries have moved to Chelsea, and it seems to me to be a cold, hard place of glass and polished chrome. A lot of the alternative galleries have closed down, and I'm told the only place that accepts unsolicited proposals for shows and still functions largely as a venue for emerging artists, is the gallery where I used to work: Art in General, probably the lone wolf still left in Tribeca—formerly the home of many non-profit spaces.

**RF:** And now you're involved with setting up Gendai Gallery, a new pan-Asian space located within the Japanese Canadian Cultural Centre in Toronto. In the U.S. there are a number of large ethnic-specific museums for people of colour, such as the long-established Studio Museum in Harlem and the recently expanded Japanese American National Museum in Los Angeles. Both mount significant exhibitions of contemporary work, and both are situated in urban areas with large concentrations of African Americans and Japanese Americans, respectively. But this is an unusual move for Canada. Beyond the First Nations Woodland Cultural Centre in Brantford, Ontario, I can't think of many similar ventures here. Can you talk about the vision for Gendai?

**KS:** We're conscious of being located at the juncture of art and community. But how do we define those two elements in the context of our space?

The Japanese Canadian community may be visible but it is small—only about 66,000 scattered across the country, with the two major concentrations in Vancouver and Toronto. It's also a rapidly changing community that includes on one hand, a diminishing number of second, third, fourth, even fifth generation Native-born Canadians (including many of mixed-race origin) with a charged, though increasingly distant, history in this country; and on the other, a slowly growing number of recent immigrants from Japan who have little or no stake in that history. To be viable, the founders of Gendai Gallery felt the gallery had to be inclusive in its curating, in terms of the artists exhibited, and in the audiences the programmes address—from those who frequent the Cultural Centre, to gallery-goers. They decided on a special but not exclusive emphasis on artists of Asian descent, meaning from Canada, the U.S. and other diasporic outposts, and also from Asia to address the issue of under-representation in mainstream venues. They are committed to showing a high quality (I use that term self-consciously) of contemporary art, and for Gendai not to be derogatorily considered a “community gallery.” At the same time, there is a commitment to art education, and to making contemporary art more accessible and inviting for audiences who might not otherwise visit an art gallery. The last point is key because the lack of comfort and familiarity with art in the Japanese Canadian community can be traced to a history of exclusion from mainstream institutions of education and culture, and the ghettoizing of “ethnic” culture.

So we have to be sensitive to audiences closely tied to the Cultural Centre, and try to contextualize the shows, making them accessible without compromising the commitment to showing contemporary art that weighs in on the current discussions in art and culture. One of the reasons for deciding Gendai Gallery would reside within the Cultural Centre was the desire to



broaden the idea of culture within the community setting—and likewise, privilege community within a cultural context.

It's a tricky balancing act, first because there is a feeling, understandably, of ownership. With our first show, we decided to go in, guns blazing, with works by five Asian Canadian artists. A lot of people unfamiliar with conceptual or installation art were understandably befuddled. In hindsight, we probably didn't do enough community outreach and education, and this is one of the ongoing problems when everything is done by volunteers. It took all our effort just to get the show mounted; but we've resolved to correct this for future shows. The second show was an exhibition of the early works of Kazuo Nakamura, a second generation Japanese Canadian artist who achieved international recognition beginning in the 1950s. The show included early paintings of the internment camp he stayed in during the war. Now, here was the perfect marriage of art and community. The Japanese Canadian community proudly welcomed people to see a show that depicted some of its history; art critics raved about the early works of this pioneer of Canadian abstract expressionism; and the general public came in droves prompted by the glowing reviews. It was a great success.

I think some interestingly hybrid shows can result from this tension between art and community. For instance, one idea we've been discussing is to bring a conceptual installation artist into the Japanese Canadian community to work with *ikebana* and *sumie* artists and mix it up. For me, the big challenges for Gendai are curatorial: how to address the still crucial questions and issues that persist from the era of identity debates and the under-representation of artists of colour, but in new ways that are inclusive, that illuminate the evolving complexity of what individual artists are striving to express through their work, that compel a range of audiences, and contribute to current cultural and social debates.



## SCOTT TOGURI McFARLANE

**Monika Kin Gagnon:** Can you talk about the Pomelo Project, and how you think that notions of community can operate within broader contexts of global identities?

**Scott Toguri McFarlane:** The Pomelo Project was founded in 1995 as a Vancouver-based Asian Canadian production house for the arts. It has subsequently become simply a production house and I think that some of the reasons for this mutation provide indices of the shifts in identity politics that took place during the 1990s. I say “the shifts in identity politics” to insist on their strange *living on*—even in the face of those that would pronounce their death. It is in this strange *living on* of identity politics that we can begin to discuss questions of community and “global identities.”

Before describing the Pomelo Project, I should explain what I mean by “identity politics” because the term operates differently at different times. On the one hand, identity politics involve the demand by various communities that the state recognize and attend to their histories of oppression. In this way, identity politics are historically related to the civil rights movement, the efforts by First Nations to have self-government and land treaties recognized/renegotiated and later, the redress movements of Canadian communities (Japanese, Chinese, African, Italian, Ukrainian, etc.) that began to proliferate during the 1980s.

On the other hand, while previous movements sought to *consolidate* their history and identity in order to struggle more forcefully against past and present social injustice, identity politics operate through cultural *difference*. What Cornel West described in 1990 as the “new politics of cultural difference” put into play the *différance* of a community’s political representation and its aesthetic/philosophical re-presentation. Thus within identity politics, any community’s political assertion of itself would put into play the question

of its re-presentation. And any aesthetic/philosophical re-presentation of a community would bring into play the question of its politics. Identity politics are therefore strange because they paradoxically assert the history and presence of specific subjects by raising the question of community and the political—as a question. Perhaps this radical questioning of community becomes more evident if we ask, Who would speak in the name of identity politics? Who would address its history? Or give it its final words? Its last rites? From what basis? That is, from what position?

Instead of operating within a civil multicultural paradigm in which each community struggles and competes to have a proper sense of their identity recognized by the state, identity politics operate by making evident the haunting cultural differences that riddle liberal fantasies of a coherent public sphere. While previous movements were forged in relation to the “citizen” and sought justice through rights-based legislation, identity politics emphasize the ghostly “other.” They do not speak in the name of a particular community but rather, in the name of a community that brings forth the question of others. By speaking in the name of *more-than-one-community*, one forged by the forces of race, gender, sexuality, class, etc., identity politics were a direct challenge to the taxonomies of the public sphere. They *overwhelmed* the liberal imagination and its fantasies of a tolerant multiculturalism with a force that was difficult to address and name: the haunting possibility of still others seeking redress. Faced with identity politics, what was *one* to do? So many claimed fatigue, camouflaging the inability to properly engage with the political challenge.

The figure of “the other” deployed by identity politics was drawn from psychoanalysis, philosophy and modernist trajectories of the arts. Thus during the 1990s, the leadership of activists was supplemented with often much more privileged artists and theorists who propelled their sense of justice not through traditionally conceived activist movements but rather, arts events.



And the challenge was not only to the state but also the re-presentation of the nation. Part of participating in these events was to be haunted by the trace of others. I mean, how many times did *participants* call for a more rigorous politics that operate in relation to, for example, not only issues of race but also those of gender, sexuality, class—and their differences? Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's reminder, "Know your privilege," continues to haunt the speaking subject of identity politics. How often during meetings did we hear tentative phrases such as "from my subject position..."? And what about all the ambiguous labelling such as "people of colour" and "queer"? We also saw a type of hesitancy in language and meaning marked by all the use of italics, back slashes and parentheses ((re)presentation, (dis)ease, etc.). This type of hesitancy with regards to a community's sense of itself *lives on*. We see it in the protests against the WTO in Seattle and the FTAA in Québec City. Tentative communities and tentative politics *live on*. Identity politics have not died; they have *mutated*.

**MKG:** What do you mean when you say that identity politics have mutated?

**STM:** I'll try to explain this latest mutation in relation to the history of the Pomelo Project. Briefly, I'm thinking of the difference of the artist/theorist and the protestor/terrorist. First, the Pomelo Project.

I see the history of the Pomelo Project unfolding within the more general, increasingly rapid unfurling of the social in relation the forces of globalization. In 1994, Kyo Maclear and I attempted to start an Asian Canadian magazine out of Toronto and Vancouver. When I pitched the idea to prospective board members in Vancouver, they were more interested in an event-orientated vehicle that could produce art exhibits, artworks and chapbooks but also respond quickly to the needs of activists through the production of, for example, pamphlets, brochures or buttons prepared by artists/designers. In retrospect, the decision to create a production house as opposed to a magazine speaks



to the different roles played by periodic publications and art events in the scene of identity politics.

Magazines such as *FUSE*, *border/lines*, *Harbour*, *Rungh* and *NOW* operated in two ways. Firstly, they documented contemporary events in the arts and registered in their articles the immediacy of social relations that were so pressing within identity politics. Basically, they attempted to construct a sense of transparency to the movement, a sense of “what was going on.” But from early on it became apparent that identity politics resisted this type of historicization. Identity politics were propelled by *events*. These events disrupted the sanctity and *historicity* of a “social context” with the trace of others and elsewhere. They therefore challenged the forces that would organize the moment of their inscription and make their operation more transparent. So from early on one didn’t turn to *FUSE* to keep up with what was happening but instead, turned to it for specific issues, such as the “Cultural Appropriation” issue or the coverage of the protests against *Showboat*. One would then graft the rhetoric and ideas from this source and deploy them elsewhere. Event-driven identity politics were, in this way, part of a general and powerful tearing of “our social fabric” through a questioning of its historicity. Magazines, however, were compelled to operate historically by means of deadlines and the temporality (issues per year) required of funders and advertisers. Issue after issue these magazines quickly became important archives that one would turn to for information about particular topics or events. These archives, however, theoretically couldn’t offer a proper context for the documents they stored—because many of the documents themselves challenged that possibility. They therefore operated more as crucial nodal points for the dissemination of the discourse into other socio-political contexts.

The socio-historical challenge of identity politics is neither destructive nor nihilistic. Rather, it produces a different thought of the social through a persistent questioning of identity. The question, “What about the others?” is

aligned with desires for a more vigilant democracy as a response to the destructive forces of globalization. In fact, groups such as the Pomelo Project created events that put the social into question as a way to combat the increasing sense of disillusion, inequality and alienation from both the state and the nation brought on by the Mulroney, Thatcher and Reagan years.

Against this backdrop of alienation, my experience of politics in the early 1990s was influenced by the production of a slew of catalogues, small art-works and chapbooks. In Vancouver, these artifacts and the praxes of their production were crucial in the forging of an Asian Canadian identity politics. I'm thinking of catalogues such as *Yellow Peril: Reconsidered* (1990), *Self Not Whole* (1991), Laiwan's *Distance of distinct vision* (1992), Roy Kiyooka's exhibitions at Artspeak and the Or (1991), the Or Gallery's *[interruption]* (1992) and the *As Public as Race* (1993) chapbook/catalogue bundle out of the Walter Philips Gallery. Jin-me Yoon's *Postcards of the Self* (1991) was circulating widely in a variety of media. Jamelie Hassan's and Jam Ismail's *Jamelie•Jamila Project* (1992) is a wonderful bookwork whose production was organized by Presentation House Gallery. Ashok Mathur and Nicole Markotic were producing literary chapbooks through DisOrientation Press in Calgary. And on and on. The circulation of all these aesthetic/theoretical works provided indices for the discourse of identity politics and engaged with the unfolding of the social differently than temporally driven forms such as magazines. Many of the producers of these works were, as well, instrumental in the planning of two historic challenges to the arts in Canada that took place on the basis of the question of cultural difference: the challenge of ANNPAC by what was originally one of its own caucuses, the Minquon Panchayat, and the Writing Thru 'Race' conference which was not, as is often reported, organized by the Writers' Union of Canada (TWUC) but rather, a Vancouver planning committee that solicited TWUC to help facilitate the production of the event. The controversy surrounding these challenges suggests the extent



to which the politics of cultural difference were disturbing the institutional and national ideologies that dominate so much of the media.

Members of the Pomelo Project were involved in many of the productions listed above and we sought another vehicle to produce yet more works. I believe that it was artist Michael Tora Speier who suggested the name. Pomelos were known in Asia for centuries. During the colonial period they were crossed with other citrus fruits in the West Indies to produce grapefruits, which were subsequently brought to Florida at the beginning of the nineteenth century. The Pomelo Project then, was initially interested in questions of Asian subjectivity and the socio-political practices of cultural difference as they related to the Asian diaspora.

**MKG:** Can you describe some of the Pomelo projects?

**STM:** In fact, the projects themselves suggest the mutations I'm trying to get at. Our first projects brought "the Asian" into question. Wayne Yung produced a homoerotic chapbook, *Beyond Yellow Fever* (1995). DJ Don Chow produced the techno/house musical cassette, *Ancestral Tracks* (1996). American theorist, Laura Kang, collaborated with Jin-me Yoon to produce a folding chapbook entitled, *The Work of 'Asian Woman'* (1996). And in 1997 Henry Tsang and I organized a series of art exhibitions, poetry readings, public talks and three publications entitled, *City at the End of Time: Hong Kong 1997*. The latter two projects were explicitly engaged with forces of globalization and the moving borders of East and West under pressure of capitalist relations between the North and South.

In 1996, the Pomelo Project initiated "LifeStrains," a project that critically examines socio-political developments related to biotechnology and the effects they are having on our lives. In April of 1996, Presentation House Gallery organized a public talk in relation to Ron Benner's exhibition, *All That Has Value* (1996). LifeStrains distributed information at the talk and arranged



for the participation of Jeannette Armstrong, who addressed the impact of the patenting of living things on indigenous communities. Copies of this talk have circulated in a variety of different media internationally. In 1997, Marnie Thorp of LifeStrains produced a resource guide that was sold out immediately after being advertised on one listserve. It was distributed around the world.

By taking on the question of biotechnology, however, the Pomelo Project brought into question the assumptions of a human biology that provided a basis for its own identity politics. Thus, the identity politics of the Pomelo Project were compelled to change, or mutate. I mean, what does it mean to be Asian Canadian in what many refer to as “the biotech millennium”? The LifeStrains project involved those that were not Asian and brought us into contact with farmers, religious groups, scientists, anti-biotech groups, animal rights activists, non-governmental organizations and a host of others. It is as if the very nexia of our operations and fields of politics had radically mutated with the genetic engineering of microbes, plants and animals. But this does not mean that the Pomelo Project’s identity politics are dead.

**MKG:** It’s as if the forces that produced a democratic imperative shifted when the Pomelo Project started engaging with biotechnology. What are some of the reasons Pomelo Projects turned to biotechnology, cloning and the patenting of life?

**STM:** I believe that the question of biotechnology arrived late on the scene of identity politics. Genetic engineering has been ongoing since the 1970s and the first patent on a living thing was awarded in 1980. Since that time, the patenting of living things—what many call “biocolonialism” or “biopiracy”—has become one of the prongs of globalization. There are many reasons for the omission of biotechnology from much of identity politics—including modernity’s division of the arts and sciences, and the force of Kantian aesthetics which attempt to articulate the interior essence of a *body* of art. But

biotechnology expels the interiority of bodies. The point here is that the “biotech millennium” is itself part of the radical unfurling of the social—if not “the planetary.” Groups such as the Pomelo Project with their strange familiarity with identity politics and its others, can contribute to this unfurling mutation in ways that oppose the destructive, genocidal forces of capital and globalization by reframing the question of democracy. It is worth noting that protests against globalization are now occurring as events in which participants descend on the scene as *more-than-one* community. Unnameable and impossible to properly identify, democratic protestors have been called terrorist groups. They stand for the terror of *globalization*. The forces that maintain governance cannot properly speak to the gathering crowds because they cannot recognize them. Instead, they *justify* and meet with themselves. They make themselves and their meeting both more visible and more discrete, like a frame on a work of art. Thus when world leaders meet, they surround themselves with moveable fences and armed forces. But have they become more visible or have they become fatigued? With governments armed and dressed in various fatigues, the question arises: Who defines and frames the art of terror?

Terrifying, the socio-political fabric has been torn. Identity politics have spilled into the living vessels of the planet. We can learn from them how to speak with our most terrible ghosts. To forget this is to forget that the history of identity politics arrives as a *question* of community. A decade ago, Heesok Chang turned to Jean-Luc Nancy to address the question of community and its relation to art and politics in his article for *Self Not Whole*. Recently, *Parachute* has turned to the same thinker for the same reasons. Identity politics have mutated but they *live on*.

## SPECULATIONS

**Monika Kin Gagnon:** You've talked before about a shift that has taken place from commitments to race and ethnicity, to that of globalization. Could you elaborate on this idea?

**Richard Fung:** Within both activist circles and in the arts, we agree that race and racism seem to be regarded as issues of the past, as having been done. Instead, there is a growing interest in the effects of corporate globalization, the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, NAFTA, and so on. This internationalism is a welcome development, but I'm also cautious about several aspects of this shift. I was involved in the Third World solidarity movement in the 1970s and worked in development in the 1980s. Doing anti-racism work in that context was very hard because people regarded themselves as enlightened and at times there was a defensiveness when it came to looking critically at our own organizations as sites where inequity was present. Most of the people were white, and almost all, myself included, were middle class. When I look at who is being positioned to speak about corporate globalization in Canada today, I see a reassertion of that old demographic. I see a lot of white experts and white activists speaking out against white leaders on behalf of Third World peoples who are mainly absent or silent. There's a systemic



factor here. When groups of Nigerian women took over multinational petroleum plants in July 2002, they were protesting corporate globalization by responding to its immediate effects on their lives. These protests weren't framed in "anti-globalization" terms, however. On the other hand, it is not surprising that it is in wealthier parts of the world, like North America and Europe, where mobilization occurs not in relation to immanent starvation or environmental disaster but to a more abstract sense of social injustice brought on by corporate globalization. In this way, First World people, especially white First World people, end up speaking on behalf of the world's interests.

I'm ambivalent as I make this criticism, though, not only because I share an anti-imperialist politics, but also because I think that people of colour in Canada should be more concerned about, and involved in, a whole range of issues such as censorship, the environment, and the effects of corporate globalization here and abroad. There is sometimes a simplistic element in race politics whereby white is bad and coloured is good, and the Third World is seen through a romantic lens. A wider global vision challenges this perspective because we then have to deal with the decadence of and repression by Third World elites, and it's just not good enough to say it's all the result of colonialism, as true as that may be. It's also the case that the mass media only allows certain images of the "Third World" to filter through—victim images of coups and disasters, mostly. That's part of my concern for the almost exclusive images of white protest against corporate globalization here and in Europe. It inadvertently re-presents the non-white masses as helpless and voiceless, in need of white guidance. That's one reason why Jaggi Singh, the young activist and journalist who was arrested at both the 1997 Asia-Pacific Economic Co-operation forum in Vancouver and the 2001 Québec Summit of the Americas, has been such a beacon, though the brutality he's faced from the state may suggest one reason why more non-white faces, easily picked out by the police, may not be more prominent.

South Africa was easy for many of us here because the enemy was a familiar one: white racism. But diasporic people of colour need to be more actively engaged in what's going on internationally across racial and national boundaries. I'll mention a couple of positive examples. First is *Blah Blah Blah* (2001), a collective project of short videos initiated by John Greyson and Sarah Polley and coordinated by Gisèle Gordon in response to the Québec Summit. This brought together an excitingly heterogeneous mix of makers with a variety of backgrounds and levels of experience. At one of the planning meetings I remember Charles Officer, a young black filmmaker, saying that he hadn't been to a protest of this sort and he was particularly interested in looking at the participation of people of colour. Charles' piece is one of the most striking in the compilation, which as a whole constitutes a stirring artistic response. Another energizing collective effort has been *Creative Response*, which brings together artists, writers and educators for peace and justice in Israel and Palestine, and against the Israeli Occupation. It's an eclectic group that includes people of many backgrounds, including Jews and Arabs, Native people, people of colour and white people. Our activities, which have included screenings, art exhibitions, public art, readings and t-shirts, have been quite successful. *Blah Blah Blah* and *Creative Response* are just two recent efforts I've experienced first hand which bring together the best in art and activism.

**MKG:** You seem to be suggesting a shift away from subjective introspections about race and identity, to examining broader considerations of subjects and citizens moving through specific histories and geographies.

**RF:** Some work that addresses race and identity is stuck in a kind of automatic pilot. But postcolonialism, diaspora and transculturalism do allow for related issues to move ahead. These provide ways other than personal identity



in which questions of race and social power might be taken up. We need a little more imagination. An interesting recent show was *Recollection Project* (2000), the inaugural exhibition at the Gendai Gallery. The organizers asked a group of artists to make work inspired or provoked by the collection of objects stored away in the older Japanese Canadian Cultural Centre. Among the pieces is a fabulous video projection by Louise Noguchi. It's a medium close-up shot that moves across her upper torso. She is dressed in a man's kimono, dark against the sky. She holds up stalks with beautiful white flowers, which are shattered by the crack of an unseen whip. Louise has been working on the Western rodeo arts for some time, and this tape has wonderful references to the relationship between Westerns and Samurai films, like John Sturges' *The Magnificent Seven* (1960) which was a remake of Akira Kurosawa's *Seven Samurai* (1954). I find it resonant in terms of race, gender and nation but it's not, on the surface at any rate, explicating anything about Louise's identity as such. I'm also fascinated by an artist like Karma Clarke-Davis whose work is liminally about race. Then of course there's Stan Douglas whose work often implicates racism but does not refer to the race positioning of its author. These works seem to take us ahead.

**MKG:** We both had the opportunity to see *Documenta 11*, the major international art exhibition in Kassel, Germany, and I'm wondering if you have any reflections on its themes or some of the artworks in the show? I ask you this because it centrally engages artistic production, not only in an ambitious interdisciplinary matrix (encompassing cultural, social and political issues), but also within spatial, temporal and historical dimensions that open up onto a global stage and issues of globalization. As you know, its form consisted of five "platform" events presented over the course of 18 months, *Platform 5* being the exhibition in Kassel. Under the rubric of *Documenta 11*, then, many public discussions, screenings, conferences, workshops and books have



been, and will continue to be, produced. The exhibition situated “art” within complex global culture circuits, with many artists and collectives from all over the world. I was personally quite taken with the inclusion of artworks by artist collectives, as well as the presence of a lot of time-based media work (single-channel, as well as film, video and new media installations). I found this extremely demanding as a viewer, but once I settled into this slower, more reflective pace, I felt that it was perhaps deliberately challenging an easy consumption of the exhibition, or of art in general. Investing time in fully viewing the many films, videos and new media works, enabled many complex resonances to be activated between them. I’m thinking here of undocumented border crossings in several of the installations, such as Fareed Armaly and Rashid Mashawari’s extremely demanding *From/To* (2002), Aman Kanwar’s *A Season Outside* (1997) and Chantal Akerman’s *From the Other Side* (2002).

There also seemed to be an “archival” quality to some of the works, which I found interesting. I perceived this on three levels. In the most literal and formal sense, perhaps, there was On Kawara’s *One Million Years* (1970-2002), in which two readers performed a systematic, chronological naming of a million years. There was also an archival process enabled by various technologies. For example: Nomeda and Gediminas Urbonas *Transakcija/Transaction/Transaktion* (since 2000), which sets up a communication platform of 50 Lithuanian films. And there was a sense of the archival with reference to historical memory as well, in work from The Atlas Group (Walid Ra’ad) and its fictional archive of documents related to Lebanon’s civil wars. Which works did you find compelling?

**RF:** There were several pieces that drew me in, each for different reasons. I particularly liked the merging of content and form in *ID: A Journey Through a Solid Sea* (2002), an installation by the Italian collective Multiplicity, about a ship full of Sri Lankan refugees that sank in the Mediterranean. I was thrilled

by the sheer beauty of Isaac Julien's "post-cinema" video triptych, *Paradise/Omeros* (2002), and I'm also a fan of the speculative histories of Walid Ra'ad and the Atlas Group. What most intrigued me about *Documenta 11*, however, is the way it positioned itself in relation to discourses of the global: the artistic director was Nigerian-born scholar Okwui Enwezor; several members of the curatorial team had expertise in art from non-Western countries; and the pre-exhibition platforms took place not in usual "international" sites like New York and Paris, but rather in Lagos and New Delhi. Much was made of this shift in leadership and direction, and there was a fair bit of anxiety about what this group would come up with, fearing something akin to the 1993 Whitney Biennial referred to earlier by Kerri Sakamoto, I suppose. In the end, the mainstream critics seemed pleasantly surprised, or rather relieved, that the exhibition platform in Kassel featured a large showing of familiar art stars, as well as several new faces from the South. The exhibition communicated a sense of political urgency to the global context. But as Tim McCaskell, my partner and someone outside the art world, asked: What does it mean to show such political work in such an elite context? This may be an unfair question, but I do think that as relevant as it is to bring Third World practices into the centre, it's also important to reconfigure the circuits of cultural power. I'm involved with an art centre in Port of Spain, CCA7, which is trying to build new international relationships. Rather than local artists having to go north, they are, among other things, bringing international artists to the Caribbean. The Canada Council has set up a residency programme there for Canadian artists, which I think is great, as it's about time we looked beyond Paris and New York.

Another question concerning *Documenta 11* has to do with the extent to which these concerns will linger, not necessarily at *Documenta*, which engages different artistic directors and different premises each time, but in the international art scene and in Canada. These aren't completely new



themes, of course—Vera Frenkel exhibited her installation about displacement and exile *From the Transit Bar* (1992) at *Documenta 9*—but I do get the sense that there is a growing interest in identity in European art circles, whereas before it was seen as an obsession of the Anglophone countries. In fact, a discourse of identity has been moving ever closer to the centre of political discussions there, both in relation to a fear of non-European immigrants and refugees, but also because of what is seen as the threat to national cultures from globalization and Americanization; though as was pointed out to me by colleagues in Vienna, these “national” cultures are very much constructions. What’s your prognosis?

**MKG:** As optimistic as I usually like to be, I do think that Tim’s question is an important one, especially if we think about the kind of voracious appetite the art world has, and its constant desire for the “new.” On the other hand, I found the insistence on the interdisciplinary location of art as intersecting with other discourses of culture and the visual, as well as social and political, to be incredibly refreshing on this scale. I think it’s essential for us to locate artistic practices in relation to other forms of visual and cultural representation, whether it is mass media, fine art or film culture. I look at my daughter, Olivia, who is 12 years old, far more technologically literate than I am, and constructing meaning about herself and the world across deeply intertextual circuits. In a cynical way, we could see this as symptomatic of media convergence and marketing strategies achieving a kind of “synergy.” A most obvious recent example of this is the Hollywood film, *Men in Black 2* (2002), and its mutually promotional relationships with Ray Ban sunglasses and Rockport shoes. Or, closer to what we’ve been discussing, for instance, the French fashion designer, agnès b., sponsoring the colour broadsheet posters designed by some of the *Documenta 11* artists, which were being freely distributed at the exhibition.



Within these intertextual, globally-defined, corporate synergistic cultural contexts, what can we say about the continuing role of events organized around racialized or ethnicized types of references? While there seems to be a greater emphasis on the worldly stage, with art and artists on global circuits, I think there is also a counter-response that reconsiders and attends to local contexts. When I was living in Vancouver, it had seemed to me that Asian Heritage Month was somehow redundant, yet I have a renewed sense of its potential usefulness in a Montréal context. I'll be curating an exhibition at Galerie Oboro during Asian Heritage month in May 2003. Some of the questions I hope to explore will deal with what the localized meanings of "Asian" are in Montréal and how they circulate in an everyday way. Will this mean simply looking for the work of artists of Asian heritage? Or will the exhibition be about how social and cultural codes of Asian-ness present themselves? I think increasingly, we have to heighten the emphasis on the codifications of race and difference.

I also wanted to pick up on your point about how the mainstream is in many ways "obsessed with identity," because I find this to be quite insightful. As you stated earlier, one might say that the largest manifestations of identity politics may well be white supremacists, yet such race politics are rarely named as such. Imagine calling the identity politics of white supremacy "politically correct," which would be the logic of political conservatives. In an address following her acceptance of an Honorary Doctorate at University of Toronto in 2002, Toni Morisson reflected on why race continues to matter in our contemporary society. Cast within an American history of black slavery, she said it was disingenuous for non-blacks to now try to suggest that race didn't matter, or to try and uphold a so-called non-discriminating colour blindness. It's disingenuous to say that race doesn't matter, or is not relevant. I think in this sense, it's still relevant for us to think in broader collectivities and solidarities.

**RF:** I want to make a distinction between how I'm using white supremacists and white supremacy. White supremacists are a rightist fringe to mainstream politics, at least in today's North America. White supremacy, on the other hand, is hegemonic and forms a kind of bedrock to Western understandings about the world, along with Eurocentrism. White supremacists are pretty easy to recognize, but white supremacy is so ingrained that it's really hard for any of us, no matter 'race' or 'colour,' to extricate ourselves from its assumptions.

But getting back to your point, the effectiveness of a project is really about context, and exhibitions based on race or ethnicity can still have relevance. As you say, Asian Heritage Month, as innocuous and "multiculti" as it might sound, can push the envelope in certain geographical contexts, as in Québec, depending on what's programmed. It's also important to recognize the needs of different groups with different histories, as Andrea Fatona has pointed out. Terms like "people of colour" can sometimes mask specificities and imbalances; some identities have been more explored—and exploited—than others. In 2001, A Space hosted an exhibition called *Transplanting: Contemporary Art by Women From/In Iran*, conceived by Gita Hashemi and Taraneh Hemami, and coordinated by Gita Hashemi. This is an identity and subject position that hasn't had much space or attention within the art world in Canada, at the same time that the topic of women in Islam or in the Middle East and West Asia is so overdetermined in the popular consciousness. Shirin Neshat has risen to prominence in the last decade, but hers is only one voice, one vision. Not only was the show a rich experience for me as a viewer but it spoke to the building of community among the participating artists and the Iranians who would experience the show in person or through pamphlets or via the internet. In another direction, it's good to remember that Aboriginal artists have long faced a certain racialized commodification of their work. I'm thinking of people like Norval Morrisseau and Daphne Odjig, and the Inuit printmakers. When I was at art school in the 1970s, these were really the only non-white Canadian artists I knew about.



**MKG:** I think what we are witnessing on a broader scale is a gradual shift to more globalized types of cultural events, as well as an emergent sense of “world citizens” whose daily lives are deeply implicated and interconnected, as complex as these relations might be to untangle or link up. Karma Clarke-Davis has an interesting perception of the vanity involved in the curating of global scale exhibitions and its display of the curator’s worldliness and cosmopolitanism. Tim McCaskell’s question concerning the need to be critical of what these “incorporations” could mean, is perhaps what Sharon Fernandez is raising by reminding us of Chantal Mouffe’s “agonistic” conception of democracy that situates struggle and the strangely indeterministic aspects of inclusion at its centre. Interestingly, in his opening address to the conference, *Documenta 11 Platform I*, “Democracy Unrealized” in Vienna, Stuart Hall also makes reference to Mouffe’s sense of an agonistic democracy, a topic she later developed at the conference in relation to the public sphere. Perhaps, what we have been exploring here, however, is how cultural race politics in the 1980s and 1990s in Canada might relate to the staging of such globalized events. These *global events of Canada*, not only brought into question long held liberal assumptions of the public sphere but also the very historicity of their staging.



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### ***13 Conversations About Art and Cultural Race***

**Politics** brings together a variety of recent reflections by artists, critics and curators on ethnicity and racialized difference, as manifested in the visual and media arts. These conversations attempt to illuminate the complexity of the evolution of cultural race politics over the last two decades by engaging its history and formative concepts and by speculating on its future.

What does it mean to continue thinking critically about race in relation to artistic practice and other cultural processes? What has created the situation wherein a recent history of cultural race politics seems to have withered? And what do concepts of “cultural appropriation” and authenticity of cultural forms—concepts that were so critical a decade ago—continue to mean within “global” contexts, where notions of cultural hybridity, syncretism and fusion are now the order of the day?

With contributions by Cameron Bailey,  
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