The Body Issue

Literature and the Body Politic
A conversation with Neil Bissoondath

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Letter to the Editor

I'd like to make a few comments on the article *Leather, Sex and Masala* (Vol. 1 No. 1 & 2). Vinata Srivastava's interview with Srinivas Krishna about his film, *Masala*.

I find myself in the awkward position of being the 'man at the Desh Pradesh screening' of *Masala* in 'Toronto' who Krishna says 'mortified' him. I was the one who stood up during the question period and raised some concerns about the Sikh characters in the movie.

But I never said I was—and I never felt—'offended.' Indeed, I fully share Krishna's evaluation of those whose response is to 'take offense' at things that challenge their static view of the world. They are living in a state of 'closure' as he puts it; I would add 'complacency' for good measure.

What I did say (after pointing out that I liked the film, and could identify with it, having spent my entire childhood in Toronto) was that there is a chauvinism and a lack of trust between the different religious groups that make up the South Asian community in Toronto—not to speak of the situation in South Asia itself—and that it struck me as somewhat irresponsible to have Sikhs cast solely as political agitators (I did not say 'terrorists') who, moreover, pushed their cause through the medium of toilet paper.

By and large, I stick to these concerns. When I made the comments I was a bit shaken—I find the movie quite moving in parts—and there may have been a problem of emphasis and tone of voice here and there. I certainly felt bad for Krishna when I saw the veritable look of gloom and doom that overtook his usual and admirable air of self-confidence while he listened to my remarks and then awkwardly made his reply.

I'm not so childish as to have wanted to 'show him up' in front of the audience. And even if I was, I certainly didn't succeed—the remaining comments from the audience were highly praiseful, verging on fawning.

The really unfortunate part of the exchange came after the public questions and comments session, during a smaller discussion in the theatre. There, I had a chance to explain my concerns more fully to Krishna, once again insisting that they did not override my general appreciation of the film.

Indeed, I pointed out that one of the major strengths of the film was that it brought the Indian community in Canada to life; showing representatives from all spectrums, showing Indians watching *TV*, working at the post office, masturbating, having sex, getting attacked, going to school, running a business, currying favour with government ministers and so on.

In short, it gave the Indian community in Canada a real, rounded personality, and in an irreverent, unconventional way at that. We are real, working, playing Canadians after all.

But I also said that this 'Indian' community wasn't quite complete, that it was actually only the Hindu-Indian community. That is fine. Krishna is from a Hindu background, that is what he 'knows.' But does it logically follow, then that Sikhs have to be portrayed—insofar as the 'Hindu' filmmaker in question feels compelled to portray them at all—as obsessive political agitators (and apart from the taxi driver ("ringleader") as quaint, speechless, head-bobbing ninnies with no other role in Canada but smuggling rolls of toilet paper emblazoned with Sikh history in India?

Is it far-fetched to suggest that this may not be the best way to build communal harmony, whatever Krishna's intentions may have been? This is particularly relevant given that the subtext of the entire film is the bombing of the Air India jet—a bombing which, though unsolved, has been used by every anti-Sikh communalist fanatic to stoke hatred both here and in India.

In any event, I expressed these concerns, and Krishna's response was, "What kind of racial politics game are you trying to play? Are white filmmakers held to the same standards?" and, "Why don't you make your own movie?" He also grouped me in with the conservative elements of the Hindu community who, in his words, is really unfortunate that a filmmaker who has earned his place in the cutting edge of Canadian cinema has the duty to portray them at all—as obsessive political agitators (I did not say 'terrorists') who, moreover, pushed their cause through the medium of toilet paper.

I'll leave it to your readers to decide if my concerns are really as 'mortifying' and 'idiotic' as all that. It is really unfortunate that a filmmaker who has earned his place in the cutting edge of Canadian cinema has chosen to respond in such a hostile and dismissive fashion.

And there is something terribly distasteful about the fact that he has elected to do so in the name of combatting 'closure.'

**Raghu Krishnan**

*Paris, France*

Rungh welcomes letters to the Editor. Please send us your comments, ideas and responses. All letters should include the sender's name, address and phone number. We reserve the right to edit all submissions.
"unwanted Hair problem?"

Struggling to Re-present Our Bodies

Mummy gives me a spoon
Daddy gives me some lovely soft foamy shaving cream

Proudly I remove the hair from my hairless face
just like Daddy

I lock the bathroom door
My shopper's drug mart plastic bag is with me

Secretly
Silently
I read the instructions

The sickening chemicals give me away and scar my skin.

"...naming, like a cast of the die, is just one step toward unnaming, a tool to render visible what he has carefully kept invisible..."
Trinh T. Minh-ha

Gasping and laughing, we women are empathetically, defiantly and jokingly offering a friend responses to the men that yelled, "Shave your legs!" at her. Standing around after work, we are mocking and talking about how others see our ('hairy') bodies, and how we see ourselves.
It's not something we are supposed to do, loudly share these stories in the hallway. When we Western(ized) women remove the hair from our bodies, it is a secret ritual, so that we can pretend we never had any. If we don't shave, then it is supposed to be a trivial or political matter, one we are comfortable with. We're not supposed to admit feeling (or being made to feel) inadequate about measuring up to the images that we are opposing. Certainly, we are not supposed to talk publicly about such vulgarities, or offend, or threaten others with our vulgar, hairy bodies in the first place.

The powerful norm of hairless (white, blonde, skinny, tall…) female body is not as universal, in the West, or in the world, as the images we see lead us to believe. Yet, I (we) do believe the images. And in believing them, I internalize notions of beauty that mean I see my hairy body as ugly, unwomanly, 'anti-womanly': the antithesis of what is defined as 'woman,' or threatening rejection of it.

The relationship between body hair and sexuality is explicit in representations of both women and men. Explicit, yet complex, contradictory, and unclear. Ads push endless products claiming to enhance the sex appeal of our eyelashes, or the hair on our head. Other ads sell us products to make ourselves smooth and sexy by removing the hair everywhere else on our face and bodies. John Berger comments on a 17th century European painting which traditionally does not depict a woman's body hair—even her genital hair:

"This picture is made to appeal to his sexuality. It has nothing to do with her sexuality. Here and in the European tradition generally, the convention of not painting the hair on a woman's body helps towards the same end. Hair is associated with sexual power, with passion…"

Stuart Hood, in his discussion of war and sexuality, also mentions the 'notable lack of pubic hair' in a pornographic cartoon during WWII.

A woman I interview also begins to talks to me about the link between body hair and (male) sexuality:

"It is interesting, how much it has to do with sexuality—men call you a dyke, or ugly—as if that was the worst insult, that they find you sexually unattractive. It makes you think that it really is about patriarchy."

Although hair is associated with sexual power, a woman with body hair is portrayed as (hetero)sexually undesirable. In order for women to be seen as desirable to men, we have been stripped of our own sexuality. And that European image has become so naturalized that it represents not only female sexuality and beauty, but what is (Western) 'woman'.

In discussions and interviews with women, we begin to realize, or have recognized, that the desire to have a woman hairless is a desire to keep her looking like a girl. Body hair is a 'secondary sex characteristic'; it indicates sexual maturity, it is one of the things that defines us as women, rather than as girls.

I am also realizing that there is an unexplored link between animality and body hair. An acquaintance who shaves her legs asks to see mine. I raise my pant leg and show her a hairy limb. She shakes her head and says, "You're wild, Sarita." Her judgment throws me off, and only later can I reflect on her choice of words: 'wild: savage, undomesticated, passionate, unruly.'

In trying to redefine, reclaim my body, my sexuality, I am trying to oppose those images, those norms. Examining, deconstructing them, learning about their origin, is a beginning. Learning they are not universal helps. A woman of African descent tells me about her visiting grandmother who sees her clean-shaven legs, and exclaims with alarm, "She doesn't have any hair on her legs!" Reassured, she says with disbelief, "You shave your legs??!" And my mother tells me that in India, the practice only began in the 60s when all the 'modern, Westernized' girls began wearing sleeveless tops as a rebellion against tradition. Yet now my friend's aunt in India tells her it is only 'backward and uneducated' women that don't shave.

I am concerned with the images of these norms and relations, and their visual and symbolic representation. Photographs are not significant because they necessarily create these norms and relations. Photographers, however, are significant because they do symbolise, 'idealise' (Holland et al 1986), powerfully reinforce, and help to naturalize norms and relations. These images also become powerful because they are both used to sell us an image of ourselves and the products that we need to create that image. For example, an article and accompanying
photographs in a women’s magazine advertise bathing suits, and then tell us exactly which before, during and after products we need to shave that ‘sensitive’ genital area. So, creating alternative photographic images of myself and other women, and talking to these women about their experiences, has become part of my project of opposition.

Yet I have apprehensions, questions about what I am doing. How can any alternative photography avoid reproducing the images it opposes? When I photograph a woman’s leg, my leg, I feel I am using my power as photographer to objectify and fragment her body, my body. And in pretending to counter images, am I consciously/unconsciously reproducing the codes and conventions of those images? I cannot deny that I am still defining myself in opposition to, and therefore in relation to, a dominant image, rather than escaping it. Trinh T. Minh-ha points to the way in which we cannot avoid reproducing the colonialism of the colonizer’s language: “I have wondered time and time again about my reading myself as I feel he reads me…”

But we also need to look beyond an analysis of the ‘inherent’ qualities of the technology, of its conventions, and look as well at the political and social context of both dominant and oppositional images. That means we must ask who creates and controls the image? What is it used for? Who is it made for? Who is photographed?

For months I have been excited about this photo project, discussing it with other women. And yet, when I first get behind a camera and turn it on my own body, I begin to have serious doubts: “I am starting to feel uncomfortable with the idea of photographing women, and especially parts of their bodies. Am I just reproducing their objectification by others in the images all around us? There is something about photography, about the technology itself that seems to be perhaps inherently objectifying. And silencing. It can be used out of context, and most often, out of control of the photographed, but in the control of the photographer.”

Holland et al (1986) focus on this issue of power, saying that, “photography constructs and positions sexuality in the likeness of the beliefs and interests of the institutions which support it.”

So I would like to think the photographs I take (my photographs) are different than dominant images in an important way. I can make the argument this way: Unlike the professional image-maker, keeper and seller, I am a non-white, female, amateur, novice photographer taking pictures of my own community, myself, and my supportive friends. Unlike some ‘political’ photographers, I am not trying to interpret the social conditions of another community through my eyes. I pay to print these photos out of my limited income, and do not sell them. My intentions are to oppose an oppressive norm by making a political statement about our personal lives, not to make a profit.

But I do profit from these images, personally, academically, maybe professionally. I also keep them, manipulate them, and control if and where they get shown or published. To some extent it feels like a reproduction of the power relations of dominant image-making. Perhaps I can resolve this by taking only self-portraits. Or by conceiving of a truly collective project, as Su Braden advocates in Committing Photography.

An oppositional, alternative photography needs to address these issues if it is to truly challenge or subvert the dominant; the power of (hetero)sexist, classist, racist images. But I have also found that even an attempted alternative photography can have several roles in countering dominant images. We must focus not only on product, but on process. As we produce alternative images, the open discussion of our issues of self-representation, as well as our internalized feelings about ‘beauty’ and ‘ugliness’, can be as important as the ‘finished’ work.

Barthes says “…the Photograph’s essence is to ratify what it represents…No writing can give me this certainty!” I realize that is why I photograph women myself, to affirm our/my reality, to say, “We are real, we exist, our reality is silenced. No one can disprove our presence in these photographs.” (I think). It goes further: I am refusing to hide what is supposed to be hidden; I am flaunting it.

In the end, I photograph not to replace the dominant images, nor to influence those who make them. I want my images to be seen by women whose reality is not represented by the dominant images. I want my photographs to be seen by women who have chosen differently, to be seen by me.

Sarita Srivastava is a Toronto activist. She has been involved with the environmental and popular education movements. She is currently a doctoral student at OISE.

1 Trinh T. Minh-ha, Woman, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, Indiana, 1989:48
2 Wendy Chapkis describes not being able to talk about feeling ‘ugly’: “As a feminist, I felt I had ‘no business’ feeling stung by not measuring up. Of course I knew that all my sisters felt comfortable in their skins—whatever shape, colour, texture, or size they happened to be.” (Chapkis 1986:2)
4 Trinh T. Minh-ha, Woman, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, Indiana, 1989
5 Personal notes, October 16, 1992
an interview with Neil Bissoondath

Ali Societies often identify individuals in terms of their ethnicity, in terms of characteristics such as race, religion, and culture. Are you troubled by this in any way?

Neil I am troubled by it when these divisions are used to highlight and therefore to isolate people. I think it is the grand flaw in multiculturalism as we have practised it in this country. I think that the policy, as enunciated, is a generous one. It is an interesting approach to creating a new kind of society, but it may be inevitable that because of the various forces that do try to manipulate society in its constituent parts, people will start finding themselves put into their little ghettos, into lots of pigeon holes created by those who have an interest in creating pigeon holes. Nothing is more convenient for a politician then to be able to identify an ethnic group for an election and turn up with a cheque in his hand. I believe that this is divisive and it is a policy, a way of approaching society, that is bad for society. It is bad for the country because it means that we develop a patchwork of people who do not know each other and fail to engage with each other in society. It is bad for the individual because it turns the individual into a kind of representative, into a kind of exotic exhibit, and that is immediately a narrowing of the human possibility.

Ali You once referred to the Canadian policy of multiculturalism as “a gentle form of apartheid.” Do you see the proposed treatment of aboriginals and French Canadians under the Charlottetown Accord also as a gentle form of apartheid?

Neil I differentiate between the two. The Québec situation; having lived in Montréal for three years now, I am approaching the entire debate as a ‘Quebecker’ and this is a new discovery for me. I understand the situation and the needs of the Province of Québec. I speak French. I have lots of friends who are separatists, nationalists, federalists, both Anglophone and Francophone. I have come to realize that Québec really is, to use the phrase, a ‘distinct society’ within Canada. The Province of Québec is different, it approaches life differently, its attitudes towards life are different. Its reactions are different from the mass of English Canadians. It has special requirements for the protection of its language and its culture, and its culture is a way of life. That is what we are talking about. The way of life is different.

There are similarities between ‘Quebeckers’ and the rest of Canadians. There is a certain larger outlook towards life and an attitude towards politics that are similar. We have a shared history that we cannot deny and that has shaped us in certain ways. Yet these are not all of the differences.
Because Québec is different, because it has special needs, I think it needs special powers to deal with them. I think of it in terms of the family. I am driven to distraction sometimes by this simplistic interpretation that we hear from individuals, from ordinary people, from politicians, as to the meaning of equality. A lot of people seem to assume—and I think this is simplistic philosophy—that equality means sameness. Equality is never sameness. Everyone was to know Québec more, it but differently, because every child has specific needs. We recognize the individuality of those children and we treat them equally but not in the same way. This is only normal.

Ali What about the argument that other provinces should be treated as distinct?

Neil We already do. We already do. The principal of distinct treatment has long been practised in this country, otherwise you wouldn't have things such as transfer payments from the richer provinces to the poorer provinces. We don't treat people the same way in this country. No province is treated the same way. We have to be careful when we start saying this. If we were to be consistent with the idea that every province is to be treated the same, then we must withdraw the transfer payments to the poorer provinces, and we must let every province deal with its economic realities in its own way. That is sameness. We don't believe in sameness for this country; we believe in equality, and we believe in treating people according to their needs, such as they are in their particular circumstances and in their regions and provinces. I fail to see why people—I think it is a kind of ignorance about just how different Québec is—fail to accept that Québec needs special powers. We use such loaded language here. Different powers.

Ali At the root of all of this is a fear; is there not, a sense that by defining a society as distinct we are really driving wedges between communities in Canada?

Neil There is possibly that fear. I don't think it is a fair fear. I don't think it is informed. But no fear is ever informed. I think that if people were to know Québec more, it would make a difference...Too much of what I hear seems to be informed by ignorance.

Ali While you are not a fan of multiculturalism policies, you don't subscribe to the American melting pot theory either.

Neil I always think in and talk in terms actually, of my family, rather than of civilization. This is honestly how I think about it; on a fairly, I suppose, individual level. The only collective I'm comfortable with is the collective of the family. Beyond that, I am uneasy with any kind of larger collective, whether it be religious, ethnic, political. I have never—cannot even—join a political party. I haven't even been able to bring myself to join the Writers' Union. This is simply part of a personal distrust of any kind of collective identity.

Ali And linked with that, I suppose, is a danger in stereotyping that can occur when one thinks in terms of larger groups.

Neil Exactly. The stereotyping by others, but also a kind of theatre in your own personal life. They begin acting their ethnic role. And I have seen this too often. It becomes very sad.

Ali Are you conscious of this as a writer, and do you try to avoid or even expose stereotypes in your writing?

Neil Oh absolutely. Absolutely. I am an enemy of ideology of any kind, political, racial, religious. All ideology depends on stereotypes, and human life is not so simple.

“Multiculturalism constantly throws your ethnicity at you, thereby putting you at arm’s length from society at large.”

Ali In what sense would you say that your own Indian-ness or West Indian-ness has shaped your writing? Has it been a defining factor in your writing?

Neil It is very hard for me to say. And I suppose it is because I have not really thought about my writing in those terms. I am too close to the writing. I tell my stories and I learn from others what is in my stories. I am often asked how much influence, for example, did my uncle have or does my uncle (VS Naipaul) have in my writing, and I cannot answer that question. These are questions for an academic to answer; someone with a greater distance, who can look back and compare things and come to conclusions. As far as my writing is concerned, I am fairly instinctive. There are a lot of questions that I can really not honestly answer.
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to visit the tiger
Ali I would imagine that you would resist labels such as an 'Indo-Canadian style of writing' or 'Indo-Canadian novel.'

Neil I wouldn't reject it, but I wouldn't be sure what it means. I have no idea what that means.

Ali People speak of 'Canadian literature' and 'Canadian novels.' Do you think there is such a thing?

Neil Oh, absolutely. Absolutely, and in fact, it is the only label that I am happy with—'Canadian Writer.' I will tell you why; because it means everything and it means nothing, because it includes Rohinton Mistry, Margaret Atwood, Robertson Davies, Timothy Findley, Neil Bissoondath and MG Vassanji. It is such an open concept: 'Canadian Writer.' Canadian literature now accommodates such a variety that it is very comfortable to be called that. There is no label, there is no stereotype to be attached to it anymore. There was a time when to be called a 'Canadian Writer' was to have elicited groans and, "Yes, tell me once more about your growing up on the damn prairies." That is no longer so. And that makes that label comfortable.

Ali I suppose at some point the group becomes so large that it affords you anonymity.

Neil Exactly. Because I distrust stereotypes so much. Labels will often create a stereotype in the mind of the potential reader. They will come to your work thinking that you are, let's say, an Indo-Canadian writer. People will pick up a book expecting a kind of eastern mysticism or exoticism. They won't necessarily find that in my work. They will judge my work based on its failure to provide them with the expectations that the label had created, and my work goes well beyond them, and so I want to avoid that.

Ali Criticism from a prejudice.

Neil Exactly. You get enough of that from academia.

Ali In your novel, A Casual Brutality, the dilemma of Raj on one level is that he cannot embrace the ways of the past—what you've also termed the 'cultural imperative'—and yet he cannot flee these ways either. He vacillates between different choices of identity. He speaks of 'the theorem of race that informs every attitude of this society' in Casequemada. He instinctively rejects the racial definition of identity that characters like Surein and Madera have embraced, and yet he finds no comfort when he leaves Casequemada to come to Toronto. In Toronto he encounters a racism, and at the same time shrinks away from what you have termed the 'stares of racial inclusion' of his fellow West Indians. Do you believe that for an individual it is possible to escape from the culture imperative?

Neil I like to think that it is possible. I like to think that one can take control of one's own life and of this fear. Certainly of one's internal life, and this is what the cultural imperative is in the end.

Ali But it is not something purely subjective, there is an objective outlook to it as well. You need to be in an environment where you are accepted otherwise you are constantly reminded of differences. It is natural that you will have a sense of being apart.

Neil Which is why I am an opponent of multiculturalism. Multiculturalism constantly throws your ethnicity or exoticism at you, thereby putting you at arm's length from society at large. I believe that an individual can—and I know lots of people who are like this—can be informed of who they are, of their background and the cultural imperative can be part of them but it doesn't necessarily control them. It's a wonderful freedom. You are not manipulated by the past, and this frees you to create your future as much as any society can allow an individual to create a future. But you haven't got that baggage or, at least, the baggage is a comfortable one.

Ali There is an issue here of entrapment and the need to be detached. To what extent do you feel that we build the prisons that we live in? There is a tendency for people in life to hold onto things, to try and control things, rather than to let them evolve. Could you comment on how you explore this theme in your writing?

Neil I basically come to it, whether it be questions of the Third World, to use that phrase, or of immigrants to this country—it seems to me that all change has to start inside. On the level of Third World problems, for example, a corrupt society—and there are many of them—will not stop being corrupt until the people of that country decide that they will in their personal lives stop practising corruption. It is not enough to be horrified at the politicians' corruption if you live a corrupt life yourself. And so the change has to be internal. And I think the same is true for immigrants.

Ali That's right. I get the impression that you would lean more towards freedom rather than towards responsibility.

Neil More freedom and less responsibility?
Neil Absolutely. The reason being that traditional societies impose their concept of responsibility on the individual. I believe the only responsibility that is worthwhile is the responsibility the individual is prepared to accept. In order to do that, you have to have the freedom to question everything and then to decide for yourself what is important. There are rules, there are certain limits of course, but I would rather take the chance on excessive freedom than excessive shaping.

Ali And what aspects of oneself does one call upon to give the right balance, to achieve the right balance between the two?

Neil Everything that makes you human, but most particularly, your critical sense. Having the courage and the strength to question everything, even your most basic senses of yourself, who you are, what you acquired and what you think you know. I think it is true to say that we almost always know a great deal less than we think we know. That's what you've got to keep in mind.

Ali The two quotations at the beginning of A Casual Brutality suggests me two different extremes. The quotation from Brel suggests helplessness, an inability to shape one's destiny. The other quotation from the interrogator of Timeerman suggests an inflated sense of one's power to shape one's destiny. Between these two extremes lies hope, which in the first line of your novel you refer to as, 'but a synonym for illusion.' In a sense, I think the book is about a struggle against the 'illusion of control.' The threat of the casual brutality emanates from the pervasive presence of fear and greed in the various characters and communities that you have described in the book. When you consider human nature and the forces that underlie society, are you an optimist?

Neil That is a very good question. I consider myself to be an optimist. But not on the level of society. On the level of the society, I am a pessimist. I think society will inevitably always corrupt. But it is up to the individuals. I think that is where I am an optimist. I think individuals can go a long way in creating options for themselves. It seems to me that the thing we must try to create always in life is options. To have no options is to have no hope. And to surrender to that is to surrender to life.

Ali And, at times, too many options can paralyse.

Neil Too many options can paralyse, but that is only if there is a lack of courage. But to have some options and to be able to decide which of those options you will try—because there is no guarantee of success—is part of the essence in life. And just to get back to the quotes at the beginning for a moment, I think that the novel is an exploration of the perilous path between those two extremes; of the dangers of trying to control, of seeking that control, but also at the same time the necessity of having it, because either extreme is perilous in some way or another.

Ali I just interviewed Rohinton Mistry and suggested to him that one of the themes that I saw in his novel Such a Long Journey is the theme of detachment. Yet I found that in his book, what was suggested by the resolution of Gustad Noble's dilemmas was very much a sense of compassionate detachment. On the one hand, a kind of detachment drove one to escape from the world, and on the other hand, compassion anchored one down in the world. There seemed to be a balancing involved between the two. Do you explore the same sort of themes in your writing?

Neil I suppose I do but in a very different way of course. I mean these are all the basic questions of human life. That is one of the reasons I like Rohinton Mistry's writing. I think he does explore those themes, and in very gentle terms. Also, I like Gustad Noble. I remember him very well from Noble. I remember him very well from his book, written about. In small places, it is very hard sometimes to escape and to live a kind of detached life. Everything has an impact on you, a very direct impact. It is not easy to step out of the way of a roaring train. I think that is one difference, but I consider myself to be an optimistic writer.

Ali A few moments ago, you talked about Third World countries and that brought to mind the way you deal with the issue of colonization of Third World countries in A Casual Brutality. The character Grappler in this novel describes Casequemada as 'a failed experiment in nationhood.' Has the 'politics of greed' created a new type of colonization for Third World countries, moving from colonization by the outsider to a colonization from within?

Neil Precisely. Because the essence of colonialism was rape—rape of these lands that the colonial powers took over. What seems to have continued beyond independence in so many of these countries is the attitude of rape, the attitude of enriching oneself. No idea of contributing to a country, but taking from it. This often always has been the case for many of the politicians who led these countries to independence, who pretended to be sacrificing their lives and their ideals for a much higher ideal—the ideal of freedom. And yet, when you come right down to it, you go through the countries of the Third World, so many of them have simply become the treasure house of their so-called leaders. And that attitude has transmitted itself down to the people of these countries, too. I mean, corruption is not exclusive to the political masses.
Corruption in a corrupt society goes down to the lowest, meanest levels. That is part of my despair for these places.

Ali But in a sense the old colonial powers in the West are also to blame.

Neil Of course. I have never said that they are not to blame, although there are those who have claimed that I have said this. Not in the least. Of course they are to blame. They agreed to the situation in the first place.

Ali And they create a sense of dependency rather than self-reliance.

Neil That is it. People have grown accustomed to this, it seems to me, so many generations after independence in so many countries. This is where the internal revolution is necessary, what I started talking about in the beginning—the change that is necessary inside for people to say “we have had enough of this” instead of continuing, as so many people do, to simply blame Britain, blame France, blame the colonial powers. That is not good enough any more. That is simply not good enough any more. You must start taking a look inside yourself, at yourself, and until people are prepared to do that nothing will change.

Somalia is a wonderful example of the kind of thing that makes you despair. Where you have got children starving in the streets, you have got aid agencies flying in tons of food, and you have got other Somalis with guns stealing that food for themselves. You have got other Somalis with guns taking blankets from dying children, pulling them off. These people are doing it to their own people. You cannot blame anybody else; only the internal situation in that country. These Somalis with the guns have to start thinking of their attitude. Until those attitudes change and raping their own country or stealing from their own people stops, nothing will change.

Ali Could you speak about your new book, *The Innocence of Age*? What are the themes that you deal with in that book?

Neil The primary theme is the relationship between a father and his son. The relationships between parents and children is one that has interested me for the last little while and this novel grew out of that, grew out of my father’s death and my own becoming a father. Lots of questions; it was a strange time. A lot of questions came out of that. And a fair amount of work has also come out of those two events. One of them is the novel. It is a story of a father and a son, people very different from myself, who have appropriated white, WASP faces. It is a difficult relationship, as so often. It is a search for what unites them in all their differences, I suppose. Which, in the end, seems to me to be often the struggle between parents and children.

Ali Does your having recently become a parent enable you to appreciate your own parents a lot more?

Neil Yes, it helps me see my parents more clearly. It also raises more questions about myself, about my parents, about the kind of life that we lived. Questions that cannot be answered any more because my parents are dead.

Ali What sort of questions?

Neil Questions about, I don’t remember what life was like when I was five. I don’t know what my parents were particularly doing. I want to know where some of my insecurities come from, what might have created them. I tried sitting down with my father and discussing these things, and he couldn’t answer my questions. He wasn’t the kind of man to communicate on that level. My mother would have been, but she died at the age of fifty. And it would be wonderful to sit down with her over a glass of wine and simply talk about what life was like for her when I was born, when I was growing up. The years of struggle that they went through—because they did go through years of struggle financially—and simply what it was like. I know almost no stories of my childhood. Things that many young people don’t think about. I suppose part of it is I am seeing my own insecurities and trying to deal with them and hoping I don’t pass them on or procreate them in my daughter. I suppose in wanting to be as good a parent as possible to my daughter, I need to find out what was the background that created me as a son, as a boy, as a young man. But there are no answers now because my parents are dead.

Ali The theme of the relationship between my parents and children is also one that you explored, as I recall, in one of your short stories called *The Power of Reason* in the collection *On the Eve of Uncertain Tomorrows*. There is a kind of love there that is submissive and open to abuse. And another that is more directed, more demanding. Could you speak about this?

Neil It is difficult for me to speak about it because it is all part of my learning process, I suppose, exploring this complex relationship that takes so many forms. I am still learning. I am looking at myself and my reaction, I am looking at my daughter and the changes that come to her by the day.

Ali This again calls to mind the passage in Rohinton Mistry’s *Such a Long Journey*, where there is a tension between Gustad Noble and his son, Sohrab. Gustad obviously has certain aspirations for his son, and his son resists these. I suppose in the years ahead you will probably feel the same sort of tensions as Gustad.

Neil Probably. I am already anticipating them... My father was a businessman and in his family they are business people, doctors, lawyers, that kind of professional life. My paternal grandmother wanted me to become a doctor—it would be wonderful to have a title—and none of this appealed to me. I am not sure if my father understood my desire to be a writer. My mother did, coming from a literary family she understood that drive, and she, while never actively encouraging me, quietly encouraged me by, I suppose, in a way helping resist the demands of my father’s family... There is a kind of link between us, an unspoken link that we both knew was there, that we never spoke about because I was too young, and because we were living in different countries. But that was there, and I would like to be able to ask her how she recognized that.

Ali What about future projects. I understood that you were planning to write a book on Spain.

Neil I started writing a book on Spain, but other things keep intervening. I had planned, in fact, to write a book on Spain when we got back from a trip to Spain a few years ago but instead what happened was this novel, *The Innocence of Age* started writing itself so I had no choice but to follow. I have, since then, started writing a book on Spain but I found that in the last couple of months or so, a new novel has begun to take new shape in my head. I have taken notes and there is no time right now to start writing on the road, so I will probably write that while continuing to work on the book on Spain. That is an ongoing thing. I have no particular deadline for it.

Ali Lakhani is a lawyer and a writer living in Vancouver.
Dear Sona,

The referendum is over, and we can go back to our normal everyday lives. I am going to miss the intense discussions we used to have across dining tables and in classrooms. For once, we felt intensely about federal and provincial politics: there was a fear over what could happen.

Since most of the the people in the country voted NO, the Charlottetown Accord didn’t go through. It’s good that it has happened this way. Even though the reasons for voting NO were never the same from province to province, from group to group, or even from person to person, one thing came out loud and clear: the majority of the people didn’t like the Accord. At least there was this common ground to stand on.

I wonder what would have happened had Québec voted NO against the rest of the country. That would have left us indisputably divided. It’s ironic nevertheless that the radical differences that divide us finally resulted in one resounding voice—the voice of NO! Alors on commence encore!

Where do I stand in all this? I don’t know. I have yet to build my history here. How do I feel? Numb and displaced. Also I feel tired, tired of the debate. Jobs are scarce. I see frustration written over so many faces. Those of us who have jobs feel, in a way, guilty of being lucky ones. When I think of the hundreds of millions of dollars spent on commissions, ad campaigns, publicity, and all that it took to get this referendum going, it makes me very tired. How will we stand accountable to the future generations? People ask for bread, they are being given alternatives for a constitution! No wonder many decided not to vote at all or to spoil their ballots in protest.

One is satisfied that at least for now there is welfare and Medicare for survival. But if this recession continues, tax payers may not be able to afford the basic social benefits we take for granted today. The day after the referendum, when ad campaigns were suggesting that a NO vote would change the entire face of the country, we woke up to a mere nothing. The referendum is over! The Accord is dead! Let’s go on with it! Let’s find the jobs! The referendum is over! Who cares anyway?

Of course the leaders are aware of what people want. For everyone today, the word is economy. But we are waiting. Thousands of jobs are going to be lost at CN and Pratt and Whitney. We are scared. “Am I going to be next?” is the question most of us ask ourselves. The referendum is over. Welcome to the real world!

Nilambri Ghai
Montréal, PQ

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Dear Sarah,

When I walked in, I thought I’d be directed to the voting booth—just like everyone else. Instead, I waited. And waited. Men and women, ahead and behind me, all of whom were white, stood patiently. I don’t even know if they were all francophones. People behind me were being directed where to vote. I think that the ‘usher’ (for want of a better word) had decided that a voting booth for South Asians had yet to be constructed because I was directed nowhere. I guess he figured I didn’t have a vote or that I shouldn’t—I don’t know which is worse. I was shocked. I shouldn’t be shocked any more by the latest bullshit these fuckers come up with, but I was shocked. After about ten minutes of just standing there, like a cheeky mis-read brown street sign, fixed as if in cement, I managed to open my mouth just as he was about to direct yet another person standing behind me. “So where do I vote?” I asked him loudly, in English. I felt like asking him in Punjabi and throwing in a few haram zhadas to spice it up a bit.

When I walked into the polling station, I had no idea as to how I was going to vote. This usher-type sure helped me make up my mind fast. For once, there was something I could do about being treated as if I don’t even exist. I could vote YES. And I did. For a few minutes, that felt like some kind of victory, an empty one at that since I figured la belle province would reject the (Charlottetown) Accord. After that it felt pathetic. Was this the best I could do?

Nothing was as clear as in 1980, and yet the dreaded stakes still loomed in the same shadowy spaces. This time around, however, the stakes seemed bigger and weightier, having grown in the intervening decade. This was the result ten years later. No matter what else had shifted and been irreversibly altered, the ‘usher’ and his attitudes had not. I for one didn’t need to vote in a referendum to find that out.

A friend of mine once told me that the sweetest revenge is to ensure that the abuse never happens again. Within whose reach is that revenge waiting—mine or the ‘usher’s’? And what form will it take?

Molly A.K. Shinhat
Montréal, PQ
Rungh Cultural Society presents

SIX writers

TRAVERSING REALITIES reading

Saturday, January 16  8pm
Octopus Books East
1146 Commercial Drive  253.0913
Admission by contribution

Rienzi Crusz was born in Sri Lanka and came to Canada in 1965, and is presently the Reference and Collections Librarian at the University of Waterloo. Mr. Crusz has published extensively in magazines and journals in Canada and in the U.S. His poetry collections include Elephant and Ice (Porcupine's Quill), Singing against the Wind (Porcupine's Quill) and Still Close to the Raven (TSAR). He will be reading from his latest work The Rain Doesn't Know Me Any More (TSAR).

Steve Lundin was born in Toronto. An archaeologist by training, he has travelled extensively in Central America, and holds an MFA from the University of Iowa Writers' Workshop. He lives in Ganges, BC, with his wife and son. Mr. Lundin will be reading from his story cycle A Ruin of Feathers (TSAR).

Yvonne Vera is a doctoral student of English Literature at York University. She was born in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe and currently lives in Toronto. She will read selections from her first novel Why Don't You Carve Other Animals (TSAR). She has recently completed her next novel, yet to be published.

Sunday, January 17  8pm
Vancouver East Cultural Centre
1895 Venables  254.9578
Admission $10  $7 un/deremployed

Himani Bannerji was born in Bangladesh, and presently teaches at York University in Toronto. A scholar, social activist and feminist, Ms. Bannerji has been published in numerous journals and is well known for her poetry and critical writing. Ms. Bannerji will be reading poetry from The Geography of Voice: Canadian Literature of the South Asian Diaspora (TSAR).

Sadhu Binning has published two collections of poetry, and has been anthologized in East of Main (Pulp Press) and Paperwork (Harbour). He has completed his MA in Sociology at SFU, and is currently the co-editor of Watan, a Punjabi literary magazine. Mr. Binning is a founder of Vancouver Sath Literary and Cultural Society, which produces activist theatre, and publishes Ankur (A New Beginning), a magazine of Indo-Canadian contemporary writings.

Yasmin Ladha spent her childhood in Tanzania, and emigrated to Canada in 1978. She is currently completing her master's degree in English at the University of Calgary. She has one previously published book, Bridle Hands on the Maple (disOrientation), and has been featured in numerous periodicals and anthologies, including Alberta ReBound. She will be reading from her latest short story collection, Lion's Granddaughter and Other Stories (NeWest).
An interview by Sonali Fernando

Alistair Raphael's photographic installation, *Invasive Procedures*, maps biology onto buildings to revise age-old metaphysics—ideas of the infinite reproduction of the human body in macrocosm and microcosm, of skin and institutions as bulwarks of means of access—but with a new history and a different consciousness. Excavating the vocabulary and imagery surrounding AIDS as a source material for work that considers surveillance, freedom, invasion and privacy, he asks us to take full stock of an old puzzle, "Where does my skin end and yours begin?"

Sonali *Invasive Procedures*, you hang massively inflated photographs of blood cells in the ground-floor windows of a building; inside, rows upon rows of microscope slides printed with words like 'Innocent', 'General Population', 'Risk Group' stick out from the walls; why did you make these images and objects part of the building, rather than just exhibiting them conventionally, as in a gallery?

Alistair I wanted to do it in a double kind of way: to use the format of photography to create a window display and at the same time allude to the whole building having some kind of fungus—or virus; physically representing the institution as diseased. The word 'diseased' interested me, and who names whom as 'diseased'. I was very much thinking about who commissions images and the repercussions of this—you can flip through *Cosmopolitan* or *Elle* and come across pictures of the virus but on further investigation you'll find that the magazine doesn't engage with any other aspects—just dissects an element and prints it. It's about the way institutions condition information.

Sonali The blood 'window display' refers to an institutional trafficking in AIDS that disowns responsibility and disacknowledges the subjectivity of its values in the act of defining. In a similar way, the slides inside, pre-prepared with words instead of blood, seem to refer to an 'objective,' scopic process of 'scientific' investigation. The scientist who has given us these loaded concepts remains absent and anonymous. What happens to the shopper who is enticed in by the window display?

Alistair I wanted people to be conscious of entering in a penetrative way, on a conceptual level. I printed words on the slides to implicate viewers more fully in the physicality of the process of using language. I wanted to sensitize them, make it a 'risky' practice, in a sense, to be involved in the use of words and images. Once they have entered that building, they've entered an institution, and they have to form some relation to it—they could be alien in somebody else's space or they could join in. I wanted people to be aware of the glass slides themselves in relation to their bodies—there is the constant risk of grazing yourself on these sharp glass lines. You become aware of the vulnerability of the skin, the edges of your own body, and where those remain edges, as opposed to breaking and flooding.

Sonali Boundary and invasion, barrier and flooding: your imagery bears traces of other metaphors of deluge, of Asians flooding the country (the UK), 'rivers of blood' and invasion by a 'gay plague'—and yet you've reversed the positions, pivoted these images on themselves. Now it's the body being invaded by the institution. And it's the 'outsider's body'—because the virus is now indelibly codified in the West as 'gay' and 'male,' despite lame after-the-event protestations that the 'virus has no prejudice'—being invaded by the 'insiders.'

Alistair And there's this whole idea of 'carriers,' as in the context of drug-trafficking stereotypes and the idea of an 'alien,' the virus as alien: it's been transported and infiltrated the system. All the same metaphors are there when you talk about race.

Sonali Did you intend to produce fear in people? The idea of entering a bloodstream could be terrifying.

Alistair No, not necessarily fear. I wanted to convey an obsession I had with 'edges,' which would seep into every aspect of my life. The edges of my body, my thoughts, my identity—be that as a gay man or as a (South) Asian person—and also with my sex life and sexuality: where do you allow the edges still to remain drawn? I wanted to examine where that obsession had come from, and how I had aligned myself to these ideas. Through photography and through works one constructs oneself, yet the vocabulary that had been selected for me as a gay man had become specific. Let us look at the question of invisibility because of being 'other': once there's a reason for the power structures to make you visible, you're made visible within a very particular context, and over the last...
ten to fifteen years, there’s been almost a repeat performance of what happened at the turn of the century. Gay men’s bodies have been returned to the medical gaze, but this time they’re being examined for signs of physical deformity, malfunctions if you like, innate signs of something that marks them as ‘other’, on a microscopic level. Whereas before they were looked at for signs of mental illness and so on that would mark them as ‘different’. What has been identical both times has been this absolute right over the gay male body, for the sake of the ‘general population’, ‘humanity’ or whatever. In that process a modern idea of the homo­sexual has been constructed. And because it has been constructed by a disease and by a medicine, not only has it taken on that medical vocabulary, it has also taken on a kind of austerity, and the fear that hospitals generate. You become the patient on a conceptual level as well as potentially on a physical level. It’s as if that’s the price of visibility, which begs the question of who has the power to ‘make visible’?

**Sonali** It’s as though your cells are turned inside out by the scientific/media gaze, as if your cellular privacy has been invaded in a particular way, for particular ends. But do you feel, on the other hand, that in some way this introduction of a public discourse related to gay men has given you a conceptual language in which to speak about the body?

**Alistair** Yes, in a way. I don’t think there’s been a school of thought that’s geared to men having knowledge about their bodies, either on a physical level, or in terms of how their bodies have become not-their-bodies and been overruled. It’s made me really aware of how those edges of the body have been penetrated; it has, in a sense, given me a metaphor of invasion that I can use in other scenarios.

**Sonali** What I find interesting in the whole network of visual metaphors about ‘penetration’, for instance, is a photographic image of a drill with fire and sparks coming from it which burns into another space. The notion of penetration is associated with danger and violation. Do you feel this rendering of institutional violence in a physical, bodily way overlaps with women’s experience in feminist art?

**Alistair** I think there’s a danger in finding too many similarities between women’s experiences and gay men’s. But a lot of the awareness of this politic around the body has come from feminist critique over the past fifteen years, the same fifteen years that I’m talking about. I have had criticism because of the nature of the work that I make.

**Sonali** From women?

**Alistair** There have been many allusions to an ‘appropriation’ of women’s language in the visual arts. I find it problematic, though I acknowledge where it comes from: I’m not willing to give it up. People can get too precious about it being their language. I like Jenny Holzer and Barbara Kruger’s work which looks at vocabulary and text as actuality. And Helen Chadwick. But languages don’t exist in sealed containers for pre­ordained user-groups. They feed into each other and we inhabit many different ones.

**Sonali** How does your notion of ‘penetration’ contest or reinforce all the edicts around now for gay men about not penetrating, about maintaining an invisible zone or barrier around the body, about celibacy?

**Alistair** It’s tricky when you have the state telling gay men not to penetrate each other. I think when I’m using the word, even in terms of a ‘penetrative gaze’ or in the imagery, I’m referring to the idea of the state, the designer; the power structure. Yet at the same time we all have the potential to penetrate and be penetrated. The work comes round full circle: a lot of the imagery is based on blueprints and architect’s plans, suggesting that everything has been thought of. It’s in the way that our whole society is constructed: different buildings are designed for different reasons. You couldn’t live a domestic life in an office. We are designed, the way we socialise is designed, with ‘reasons’ for those designs. I’m using that as quite a crude starting point, but going further: not only do we design the buildings for our bodies to enter, we actually design our bodies. If you take the human body as the nought line on a graph and extend outwards, you go through plumbing systems, sewage systems, electrical systems, ventilation systems, rooms, buildings, big architecture, there’s the body reproduced in macro, and then going down from nought into the body, you find this exact mirror. When you start to look at it in terms of disease, when you do things that weren’t ‘designed’ to be done (according to this normalising opinion), use buildings in the ways they weren’t meant to be used, build­ings fall down. The same is being inferred in terms of what happens within the body as well, in terms of ‘unnatural practices.’ My main interest is this idea of looking inside the body at the same time as being the body inside another body…like Russian dolls.

**Sonali** How do you refer to this construction of ‘unnatural practices’ without censoring them yourself?

**Alistair** With the No Entry image, it’s a complete play on works and images, a man-hole cover; man-hole, the underground network of fluid-transporting pipes, the No Entry sign made with a superimposed image of HIV. Medical examination has involved all these sorts actually into the body, all this equipment that can actually photograph you inside.

**Sonali** How do you personally participate in or resist that as a photographer with your own scopic project?

**Alistair** The work has to be photographic, but I find taking photographs problematic: a lot of my images are actually other people’s —borrowed from hospitals, manuals, textbooks, anatomy books, data and so on—familiar images. It’s almost as if they have a function before they become my function. It’s as though these images were the fall-out, already part of a familiar vocabulary.

**Sonali** Mainstream imagery ‘about’ gay men seems to be sharply polarised between, on the one hand, enlarged ‘scientific’ photos of the virus and, on the other, eugenic body-photographs. How do you site yourself between those?
Alistair I ask why these two? Why such a small selection of images, so polarised in their content? I think it's very important to look at that: it doesn't take much imagination to see the connection between the two, because there's a conception of 'other' sexual beings as Bodies. By isolating, photographing and publishing this viral image you have a very dangerous situation where you have something that people think they can recognise: then you start to ask questions like, "What is the purpose of having images everywhere of this virus that you can only see though a microscope if it's enlarged at a certain point in its life-cycle by several billion times?" It relates to an obsession with 'identifiable' visual signifiers—the KS scars, weight loss, the hair loss—almost like the Handbook to Depravity. The moment it is photographed it is no longer a microscopic virus: it becomes ideas, it becomes technology, fodder to be used in a very particular way. In the installation Strike gently away from the body, a huge 25' x 12' photopositive is laid over the slanting glass roof of a studio. The image is of lungs taken from an anatomy book, with key numbers on it labelling different parts, but without giving the viewer the key to access the information it is obviously collecting; these numbers appear again at ground level, burnt into the floorboards.

Sonali Why lungs?

Alistair It was a little bit of romanticism—breathing, primal things—and it connects with the ventilation system in the building, which I noticed afterwards and quite liked!

Sonali What reactions did you get to the work?

Alistair To see that image you had to penetrate the building. The act became charged. The room not only had images grafted on, there was also an excavation of the floor: I'd scraped off twenty years of paint and routed a grid structure across the floor into which I'd lain tubing. People had to enter the whole work, and were 'scooped up' by these grids. I wanted them to be aware of the building as something that was carrying fluids around, sewage, electricity, that had internal membranes, and structure, brickwork and glass clad on top of each other. And by juxtaposing that with a human image that had gone through a process of exfoliation to the point where its internal muscles were visible, like being shown on an x-ray box, connections were made. Many people wanted to find a corner of the room from which they weren't viewed but could look... interesting in terms of scopophilia.

Sonali Is your work pessimistic in asserting that there is no privacy, no place in which we can be free of being looked at and encoded?

Alistair I see it more in the sense of exposing something, in the photographic sense as well, of acknowledging something that does go on, and it is only by acknowledging the levels at which you are invaded that you know where privacy starts. Where you can start constructing relationships which aren't subject to that same kind of gaze.

Sonali What's interesting is that it's not emotionalized in any way. The power of it lies in the way you make conceptual and structural oppression physical. The numbers on the glass, anatomical key to the lungs, brand the skin with shadow, just as you have charred their shapes into the floorboards.

Alistair One of the most important things for me when I make work is that there should never be any signs of making, that there should be no sign of my humanity in the work. It comes not from this cold pessimism but from wanting to use the materials that I perceive being used in certain ways socially against themselves, wanting to steal the signifiers and re-juxtapose them, changing very little in fact. We face these impressive, huge photos everyday on billboards, yet are visually complacent when we see them in advertising or social publicity.

Sonali Could you tell me what thoughts of containment and invasion brought about the other part of the Invasive Procedures installation, where a transparent rubber strip-curtain containing an image of a building site divides a room?

Alistair It's to do with isolation in medical terms: in hospitals that are different areas where things happen differently, as if in different spaces there were different atmospheric pressures and different temperatures. The rubber doors are used in factory warehouses that forklifts can drive through, but you also see them in hospitals. I was struck by how much they were like skin, but an industrialised skin, the building's skin, and they're also this demarcation of space which is penetrable by specific personnel only. They acknowledge their accessibility but at the same time they're quite clear about it being a boundary. It was interesting, in the case of hospitals, in terms of contamination, quarantine, isolation. I wanted to return to the idea that a building is designed, and to make people really aware that they were inside this building, by creating another structure inside the first, a skeletal building in the process of construction, which involved scaffolding, and raw materials. There are quite positive things about penetration, the building is made to be entered after all—but I want to talk about taking responsibility for the act of going inside a space. And how that changes in different contexts: if you walk through those rubber doors in the hospital you're aware of what you're doing. You think, "Should I have a mask on? Should I be in here? Am I in danger?"

Sonali You say that acknowledging the possibility of invasion is also recognising that one needn't invade or be invaded: so in the very same moment of challenging enforced quarantine, the piece maps a radical claim to privacy.

Alistair And in this piece you can choose not to enter it. The space was divided cleanly in half and a lot of people didn't choose to go through this gap that was accessible. What I like is the idea that you do have the choice.

Sonali Fernando received her English degree in 1989 from Oxford University. She is a writer and filmmaker currently residing in London, England. Scaffolding of the Bone House also appeared in Bazaar, Issue 22.
Picture this: a village called Lamayuru situated somewhere between Srinagar and Leh: in this village a stone two-storey with the words "Medical Clinic" painted in red on the side: in this stone two-storey a man, a doctor, a brahmin, squatting in a cluttered kitchen area, smoking a bidi to pass the time: In this image of a smoking doctor of a stoney clinic of a midway village: Is this is there a body that we know about? Does tobacco smoke stray off the page and infiltrate viewing lungs? Does hard cement in the summer warmth cool viewing ankles? Whose hands are these entextualized and quadrupley focused upon? Does his gaze graze on these hands or do these hands graze grate grind over his body's image? A story a story a story a store he the subject and me the viewer, the photographer cannot hear the photograph.
No such thing as a photographic self-portrait, no such thing as a photograph which is not a self-portrait, no such thing, perhaps, as a definitive line between the front and back of a lens. Especially when the south asian subject clashes with the south asian viewer, emulsion turning brown. This is the head space.
The head looks up, turns up, toward, taken in the image already taken. This is the disconnection, the disarticulation, the place where the head is taken off. A barren (not barrel) chest, cut off from parts extreme. In here is a south asian story of south asian experience in (and not in) a south asian world. A south asian body tall. The viewer is clothed in darkness, hands in warped content, and in the text inscribes itself around the body, the south asian body, clothing the body in words unauthored. The movement comes from the groin, clothed itself in jeans, not pyjamas, and hands clap unclasp silently between gazes. Still a still glance from below unaffected by rising bidi smoke or by errant window light or side-by-side residing hands still. He looks up on he, he looks upon he, and up to legs flexed in mid-rise, legs floating between words. The south asian body is diasporized, say they, the body of southasianness dispersed. But here is the immediacy of the body, south asian, conflicted between the rise and fall of a shutter, captured and transposed into silver-based brown.
"Customers have moved from being faceless elements of market share to a powerful force that can pick and choose as they please. Let me give you an example of the first wave of the trend."

—George Harvey, President of Unitel Communications

1 Sometimes waking up at night I hear the ripping of flesh. But its only the sound of me grating and grinding my teeth. Is that what wakes me, or is it the dream? I want to remember what I’m dreaming, what I don’t say when I clench my teeth at night. Does it stop me from screaming, from talking out the names that I’m afraid to speak. I am so tired of lying, so tired. Afraid that they will know. My body fills up with unspoken words.

I find myself crying at night, sobbing, when its been a beautiful day. Happy. Laughed all day so why do I cry at night? Even the laughter cannot fill those empty spaces. Alone at night, untouched, alone. Muffle the tears, stuff blankets into my face, crying alone.

You aren’t here. I miss... inane conversations. One of the few times I feel normal, when we’re having those ridiculous conversations. Inanity prevents insanity. The left hand of sanity. My clenched sore teeth.

2 Sometimes she wakes up at night smelling fried eggs. In a few seconds the smell disappears into the humming of the clock. Into that insistent green glow telling her its five in the morning. What wakes her up at five? Click, she imagines that the sun has just risen when she awakes. Towards the window there is only darkness, not touched by sun. Fried eggs. She remembers not to stretch. Awaking too much fragments the memory of the dream.

What smells? The oil, the butter, not the eggs. A smell that gets into the skin, into the hair, into a leather jacket not hers, a car not hers. Sitting in the passenger seat, smelling. Long black hair. Not her. A hand resting on a gear shift, long fingers, white touched with black hair. Driving where? Her eyes do not see the road, all she sees is fingers touched with black hair. So small this car, so closed. If she leaned over to touch the radio, her nipple would caress the arm. Stretching her tongue, she could touch the ear. The lobe at the tip of her tongue, flicking the earring, moving inwards, making clicking flesh-flesh sounds. But she doesn’t. Silence and the smell of fried eggs.

Slowly her hand reaches out into silence, touching on the white hand. Pleasure at seeing skin against skin so different. Brown over white. She grasps and turns over the hand, brings it to her mouth, gently tracing curves. Long fingers, soft palm. Tongue pressing circles in the centre, pressing.

The dream disintegrates. Desperately she searches for the essence, but it goes no further. The strain of trying to push it further gives her a headache. Defeat, at five in the morning. She cannot sleep.

3 It is night. Alone in her room she listens to ghazals whose words she does not understand. Voices and music that provide the same comfort that her doll did when she was young. Lying in her bed she would place it by her side in the langa and kurta her mother had made for it, and it’s eyelids would drop closed.
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Beyond the Body Project

Art and the Interaction of Communities

The Body Project originated in discussions we had about the level of interest shown both by the arts and academic communities in issues concerning the representation of the human body. We decided to try to bring together performance artists, visual artists, and academics sharing these interests in order that they might share their insights with each other. We are now at the end of the project, and as a result of the issues raised, are beginning a process of re-examination of our initial conceptualizations. At this point, we want to present a preliminary overview of how our understanding of the issues has changed.

One of our initial organizing ideas was simply to present a variety of viewpoints on how people come to be embodied in the way they do; by 'embodied' we mean the struggles, pains, and pleasures provided for and by their bodies. It was obvious to us right from the beginning that people are not only embodied in particular ways, but that they organize themselves in 'communities of embodiment,' groupings based upon how this embodiment is perceived.

We thought the main questions that would arise from such an examination would be: How much 'choice' do people have in the communities of which they are a part? Do they choose to join communities? If so how and why?

On a simple level it appears communities can be divided into voluntary and involuntary associations. One voluntarily chooses, more or less, to be tattooed, or to join a weight loss program. One doesn't choose race or body type.

But the question of apparent choice is actually more complex than that. Some examples of this complexity may be reflected in questions such as: how much choice does a woman have about getting a breast implant? There is usually no overt force used to make a woman surgically change her body. But there is an undeniable and powerful pressure on women to conform to certain ideal body types. How much choice does a woman really have if she has been convinced she will have a better life with bigger breasts?

Conversely, why are racial characteristics such as skin colour such a powerful organizing element? On one level, the answer is obvious: because such an organization is a convenient conduit for the dispersement of power in our society, benefitting some, and disadvantaging many. But why do these powerful interests operate through race? Why not hair colour or height? How does race get established as a major means of distributing inequality?

With these questions of race and identity in mind, we invited two South Asian artists, Sherazad Jamal and Chris Creighton-Kelly, to participate in The Body Project. In both cases we tried to pair the artists with academics working on what we felt were related issues. For example, Creighton-Kelly's performance of <<P.C.>> dealt with how racial issues are addressed in our society, and we tried to pair him with Phil Vitone, who researches the communicative aspects of social interaction. In the same vein, Sherazad Jamal created an installation on the constituent elements of her identity as a South Asian woman, and we placed her work alongside a presentation by Norbert Ruebsaat exploring how males are represented in contemporary advertising. As we expected, all these participants showed different aspects of how people come to be socially constructed, and explored how much real choice people have in that construction.

But the pairings didn't quite work out as well as we had hoped, in part because of our inexperience as producers. We failed to get Vitone and Creighton-Kelly connected at all, and the connection between Jamal and Ruebsaat came off clumsily at best.

But notwithstanding problems in production, we believe a more fundamental reason underlay why these connections weren't entirely successful. It's all very well and good to say we wanted to bring together people from different communities with their varying perspectives on the body, but the fact is that, for the most part, people from one community aren't necessarily interested in the viewpoints of another. To a great extent, the mostly white, academic, straight audience that came to see Ruebsaat's presentation paid only polite attention to Jamal's work, and people from the South Asian and women's communities who came to see Jamal's installation seemed to sit through the presentation only in order to have more opportunity to look at her art. To describe what occurred between the two groups as a meaningful exchange would be a misrepresentation. In fact, dialogue between various communities consistently arose as an issue throughout The Body Project. So, the question now arising for us is, specifically how and why should members of different communities be brought together?

We believe the answer to this question lies in the way individuals operate within and between communities. Every individual nego-
“On a simple level it appears communities can be divided into voluntary and involuntary associations. One voluntarily chooses... to be tattooed... One doesn't choose race or body type.”

tiates their relative position to more than one community. For example, Sherazad Jamal’s installation was structured around four poles of identity: her race, her class, her sexuality, and her gender. Each pole has a corresponding ‘community’—the South Asian community, the middle class, heterosexuals, women—and furthermore, through her artwork she places herself within the ‘arts community.’ Like Jamal, everyone operates within a constellation of communities. A gay male South Asian multi-millionaire would probably share some of Jamal’s interests, but not others.

As members ourselves of a particular constellation of communities (white/male/academic/artist), our programming for The Body Project was informed by the values of that constellation. By starting from the attempt to bring together the arts and academic communities, the Project necessarily was informed by the concerns of those communities. One of the fundamental concerns that arose during the series was the question of normative or transcendent values. We’d like to now briefly describe our understanding of how this question is debated within the art and academic communities and then critically assess this debate in light of our experience producing The Body Project.

Both the arts scene and academe tend to valorize communities that make claims transcending their own perceived self-interest and address the interests of other communities as well. So, overall, academe, as a ‘community’, tends to support principles of freedom of speech, or rational argumentation. Whether or not this support actually benefits other communities in fact, or merely provides a hegemonistic or legitimizing mechanism for perpetuating the values of a small group (usually white, straight, male), is a matter of considerable debate among academics. But for all their attempts to deconstruct or decode in various ways how values are in fact interests, few academics or artists question the need for transcendental values. Instead, various competing groups within academe or the arts debate whether or not their values are truly the most genuinely transcendent ones.

For the most part, players in the academic and artistic systems who question the need for transcendental values are relegated to marginal positions. For example, some feminists in the Eighties began to conclude that men are socialized so thoroughly in ways antithetical to women that as a gender they are incapable of accommodating the authentic interests of women. In other words, these women deny the possibility of both men and women finding common values that authentically serve both their interests. As a result, some ‘essentialist’ work seeks to exclude men as completely as possible, both practically and theoretically. By and large, their work is not taken seriously because of a concern that, in deciding to eliminate the considerations of a significant group, radical feminism creates a ‘closed loop’, with a weakened ability to affect its social environment. Unable to respond to new input, critics feel it cannot develop new strategies reflecting changing circumstances. Whatever its merits at present, eventually such a ‘closed’ loop is in danger of becoming academically irrelevant.

The same scenario plays itself out in the arts. Ultimately, the reason big-eyed girls painted on black velvet are so abhorrent to the arts community is that they signify an apparent lack of any mechanism to respond to the needs of anyone other than the relatively small group who find big-eyed girls significant. Lacking that input, big-eyed girls get painted the same way, over and over again. Being so programmatic in concept, they fail to carry any expressive content.

After our experiences in The Body Project, we’re not sure this reasoning about ‘closed’ groups is in fact correct. For example, Sandra Lockwood, who is a white performance artist, did a presentation on her appropriation of Japanese culture. On the second night, some of the people of colour in the audience vigorously denounced this show as perpetuating racist stereotypes. After some heated debate, they declared their refusal to educate whites, and left. In subsequent discussions the classic argument about closed loops was raised: the refusal to continue to engage in debate meant neither side learned anything. On the contrary, we feel there was considerable evidence that
Therefore, the first task we face as producers of future projects is to seek artists and academics who share similar research interests. The most disappointing moments for us in The Body Project were when presenters offered simplistic, black and white analyses. They were disappointing precisely because they threatened to alienate people from outside the academic and artistic communities, who don't share the presenters' parochial language and concerns.

The second challenge we face is to organize projects such as this one with a more specific focus. We now feel our failure to bring together an interchange of different work and audiences was in large part a failure to clearly articulate goals for the project. Ideally, we would have worked with the presenters earlier in the series to determine mutually agreed upon, substantive goals. Subsequent claims for attention by presenters could then have been evaluated in terms of whether or not they contributed to that end. For example, if we had more clearly identified the problems of cultural stereotyping as a key concern in advance, then we could have perhaps presented Sandra Lockwood's performance next to Sherazad Jamal's installation, followed by a performance by Heavenly Alarming Female, a group of lesbian women of colour. A follow-up panel on cultural stereotypes could then have been organized. A clearly articulated project goal would also allow for a more focused audience orientation, so that people would arrive with at least similar expectations. The Body Project brought together people both audience and presenters with such varied agendas that many were inevitably disappointed.

The third point we have come to recognize is that 'communities' are not monoliths; they are fractured by a number of competing forces. The 'art community' exists in many ways in name only. People who use that phrase often do not include Toni Onley or Amir Alibhai or Henry Tsang. The same appears to us to be true of the South Asian artistic 'community,' which fractures along lines such as traditional Indian artists, artists doing traditional Western forms such as landscape painting, or those such as Jamal and Creighton-Kelly in The Body Project who do hybrid innovative work incorporating Indian and Western ideas. Again, a clearer idea of the goals of the project would help us have a better sense of upon which levels the various communities might interact.

We hope we have been sufficiently clear in our comments that we are not presenting our views here as some kind of final or complete analysis, but rather are attempting to negotiate the difficult terrain of opening artistic and academic work to broader audiences. Obviously, critical response is essential to this negotiating process, and we welcome feedback on whether undertakings such as The Body Project offer the possibility of exploring the dynamics of community expression.

Norbert Rubesaat and the representation of men in advertising

Richard Pinet teaches in the Communication Department at Simon Fraser University. Areas of interest are media studies, cultural studies, and new communication technologies.

Derek Simons is the Director of Basic Inquiry. He is a visual artist who works in painting, installation, and performance art.

Basic Inquiry Centre for Figurative Arts is devoted to art exploring representations of the human body. It runs life drawing sessions, courses, a gallery, and performance art events.

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oppression. Her indictment of patriarchy through
the words of the goddess, a language that is bold,
cutting and liberating, is an unleashing of
individual power.

There is no exoticizing in this exploration of
ritualized healing. There is the agony of suppressed
anger in every nuance. Vachani frames Shanta's
narrative only to make it a part of a larger,
feminist outrage, an identification from different
womanly subjectivities. Vachani's may be a privi-
leged gaze, a scripted, edited and re-recorded re-telling. And Shanta could be silenced again.
But this song is a chorus. Shanta is Vachani's
Bhankya Mata.

Yes, frames within frames. Growing in number,
gathering force, strong enough to exorcise and
explode the Master-frame.

Opening Frame 2
Something Like a War Director: Deepa Dhanraj
A group of women sit around a white,
larger-than-life paper canvas.
These are my hands; says one.
These are my legs; says the other.
These are my breasts; says one.
This is my womb; says the other.
This is my body; they say together.
This is creation.

Deepa Dhanraj's Something Like a War is a
hard-hitting expose of India's failed Family
Planning Programme. With startling restraint,
Dhanraj critiques the involvement of multi-
national institutions like USAID (United States
Agency for International Development) in the
testing of debilitating contraceptives such as
Norplant, on the bodies of Third-world women.
The testimonies are haunting. "Birth control and
population control are not the same thing" is the
text that underscores every frame. The former
is a woman's right and the latter, institutional
might. The only commonality between poverty
and population is that they happen to be words
that begin with the same consonant. Third-world
women are paying with their bodies to prove
Malthus right. And Malthus was, after all, a man.
The testimonies are assaulting. This critique is a
form of tokenization. An allowance by the
institution. This is how all oppressive power
structures redeem themselves. Dhanraj is aware
of her co-option here. She is also aware that it
will be some time before she is permitted to
point her finger once again. Her narrative is
funded by BBC's Channel 4. She is not uncomfort-
able in this irony. Yugantar, the name of her film
collective alludes to that transitory moment
between eras. Dhanraj knows that transition is
an on-going process.

The reportage is ruthless. Every aspect of
India's patriarchal family planning programme is
unmasked. The bureaucrats, the doctors, the
middlemen and women, the clients...Layer after
layer. Victim after victim. Frame after frame...
From the sophistication of Levi-Strauss'
insight into the victimization of the weaker of
the species by the strong, which opens the
documentary, to the simple, straight forward
and brilliant conclusion when Gyarsi Bai's
question:

"But why are they so interested in me?" is raised
in opposition to the words of the chairman of the
Ford Foundation. Something Like a War is
something of a turning point. As a call to women
to take control of their bodies it is a narrative of
empowerment...24 forceful frames per second.

Opening Frame 3
Kamlabai Director: Reena Mohan
What happens when an actress of silent films
speaks?

Contra-diction. Accepted absolutes are
challenged. Conventional history is fractured.
Truth ceases to be singular. Re-vision

Reena Mohan's Kamlabai is a meta-
documentary. A cinematically self-conscious
re-construction of turn of the century Marathi
stage and silent film actress Kamlabai Gokhale's
life, which deconstructs official hierarchies and
delights in the possibility of alternate truths and
realities.

Here memories and facts merge. Here old
sanctities are demolished. Here conflicting texts
come together. Kamlabai's life is the story of one
woman's struggle against the social currents of
her time. A story about voice. About silence.
And voice again.

Still, life. Kamlabai's family stands around her.
L to R. Front sitting back row standing. This is a
photograph. You can almost hear the person
behind the camera say, "Smile, please!"

Instead you hear the man sitting to the far right
say something. Somebody from the top left
calls another incident. Kamlabai breaks many
such frames.

The camera is a character here. Subversion has
a face here. One woman's life constructed by
another. Yes, this is a kind of privileging. This is
also historic denial. How many Kamlabais has
history denied?

But what are you going to get from re-making my
life? Kamlabai asks Mohan. One more version.
One more chapter. One more volume.
To un-make history. To make herstory.
Yet this is a man's view of woman's work. But
not a re-view. Not convention. Not co-option.
Celebration, yes.

ResistingClosureOpeningFrames

I am grateful to Marilyn Iamns, Yasmin Jiwani and Scott McFarlane for
sharing their views on these documentaries with me.

Ameen Merchant is pursuing studies in
Postcolonial Literature at the University of
British Columbia in Vancouver.
to visit the tiger held at the Community Arts Council in Vancouver in October, 1992, was the first exhibition in British Columbia of contemporary visual art by artists of South Asian origin. As a representation of a community that has had little exposure within the 'mainstream,' white arts communities, this was an important project and a historic act of affirmation and self-definition. Here was the first 'public' presentation of artists who identified themselves as South Asian, although for some, the ethno-specific framework was not a comfortable one. Nevertheless, this was a repositioning of their work in order to facilitate a dialogue concerning issues of cultural identity, displacement and racism.

Curators Shani Mootoo and Chris Creighton-Kelly chose twelve artists who work in painting, printmaking, and installation. The forms presented were limited (media-based works such as photography and video were absent), and all of the pieces showed strong connections to western historical art practices, whether they be straightforward representational painting or politicized avant-gardist installations. The artists selected reflected to some degree the diasporic histories of South Asians, with differing birthplaces (such as Zaire, Uganda, Kenya, England, India, and Pakistan), historical arrival periods in Canada's immigration history, and religious backgrounds. The wide age spread of these cultural producers is evident in the work presented. They offer varied, sometimes antithetical, relationships with their heritage; for some, especially the older artists, cultural identity is not an issue in their art practice.

Badru Jamal's small, subdued watercolours of a landscape, a cabin interior, and a desk with various significant personal objects, are painted in a restrained manner. There are subtle references to importance of his faith in his personalized view. Ranjan Sen's four-panel painting The Animals, The Flower, The Fish, The Land is vivid, looser, and technically more proficient. Sen's broad strokes and bold use of colour depict fauna and flora in separate spaces, juxtaposed but not intersecting. A tenuous allegorical relationship exists, alluding to the fragility and delicacy of the balance in nature as we see and attempt to control it.

For some others, especially younger politically-sensitized cultural producers like Sherazad Jamal, Amir Ali Alibhai, and Sur Mehat, the investigation of personal, cultural, and national identities becomes a focus, along with the problem of defining one's cultural hybridity. Their works show the influence of postmodern, postcolonial discourse in their approach to subject matter as well as form.

Jamal's sculptural installation consists of a chest of drawers in front of a rich golden sari fabric backdrop. The drawers are lavishly painted and layered with lasercopied images of herself in poses of entrapment and frustration. On top of the chest sits typical bedroom paraphernalia; the tools for making one presentable in 'public,' including a hairbrush, handmirror, a jar of vanishing cream, and a small framed memo to the colonizer. The private domestic sphere becomes a site of resistance from the erasure of racial otherness, rejecting assimilative pressures to cosmetically whiten oneself up and down. She affirms her heritage as
Artists' statements excerpted from the catalogue

Amir Ali Alibhai
As an artist I have been concerned with the search for self and home by reclaiming themes, media, techniques and the history of my South Asian/Ismaili roots. I present and re-present these through my experience as a western-educated and 'assimilated' Canadian. And like my ancestors, I also have a taste for storytelling, decorating, adorning and exaggerating... The basis of my aesthetic is that 'there is no empty space'.

Ameen Gill
For the past five years my predominant mode of artistic expression has been stone lithography... I'm attracted to the older parts of town where the buildings show signs of decomposition, of being weathered-of-time. We often say that these neighbourhoods have character and that is a human quality. That these buildings show signs of decomposition makes them feel, to me, full of energy, full of life. In my prints I try to convey these feelings.

Badru Jamal
Painting becomes a form of meditation, of contentment. There is an excitement, a satisfaction he feels in being able to work solitaire, absorbed by his subject, his colours and by the very act of putting paintbrush to paper... (He) chooses subjects that speak of contrast: old and new; decaying and growing; detailed and obscured. He is interested in colour, light and shade, capturing the details in layering...

Sherazad Jamal
I am keenly aware of being culturally schizophrenic... The only time I feel 'at home' is when I am creating. It means that I define the boundaries—boundaries don't define me... The fissure that exists in Western theory between art and everyday life concerns me... I think that art comes from life, from experience, from context... My work is to be touched, felt, utilized... And when it leaves the sacred setting of the gallery, it integrates back into my everyday life.

The large lithographs of streetscapes by Amir Ali Alibhai's painting-installation also employs sari material, but not as a cultural backdrop; they are front and centre, functioning as translucent scrims in front of his paintings. Draped from ceiling to floor, the three delicately patterned fabrics form an ethereal wall, filtering and mixing in with the patterns of the three paintings behind. On the floor are dyed green rice grains forming lotus petals (life and rebirth) and swastikas. The richly textured paintings are mystical and enigmatic, a stillness and solitude.

Shamina Senaratne's quilt Lands, Seas & Resources contains elements and fabric materials from Canada, Sri Lanka, Kenya, India, Pakistan, and England. It is a combination of influences from the displacement she and her family have experienced thus far in their journey to find a home.

Parminder Mann's triptych incorporates photos and texts into the painted surface. Images of a female figure wrapped completely in muslin are surrounded by quotes from The Book of Dead, giving off an eerie sense of otherworldliness, as if she is attempting to find the middle ground between this reality and elsewhere.
two very different strategies for survival. One fractured and polyperspectival is the result of outside, resisting divide-and-conquer. The pressure to propose a single, unproblematic view of what is usually of responsibility to present positive imagery. A statement requires contextualizing.

Printmaking appeals to me because of its long tradition and its ritualistic nature...I do not like my subjects to be anchored in time and space. I prefer them to be light with a timeless quality about them...I seek to create a dream-like atmosphere in my images, similar to the state of dream-like, mystic contemplation evoked by Sufi poets. My Indo-Persian roots are apparent in my style which is sometimes ornate, sometimes calligraphic, sometimes both.

"This type of proclamation is not so much a reflection of a community of artists who merely want recognition, but rather the inequity of the present system in which they live."

Surjit Mehat's acrylic on wood paintings are abstracted formal depictions of women in traditional garb. His smaller two pieces almost leave representation behind, and in so doing, with a clearer palette, move toward a bolder graphic quality.

Kausar Nigita's woodcuts, drypoint, and etchings refer most directly to classical Indian art history and mythology. Her dream-like illustrations place women in various poses in fantastical landscapes, infused with a feminine essence.

Paul Pahal's loud paintings, with shiny stones and cloth imbedded into the bright paint, point almost to a decorative tradition of whimsy, if not for the references in his abstractions to the American Formalist tradition. It is a fusion of cultural influences.

On opening night, the speechmakings, poetry readings, and supportive audience created a sense of community. And there was the feeling of completion. "I wish this had been done long ago," sighed an exhausted Shani Mootoo in conversation that evening: such a statement requires contextualizing.

As the first of its type, as a community-building project, there is inevitably the burden of responsibility to present positive imagery. The pressure to propose a single, unproblematic view of what is usually fractured and polyperspectival is the result of two very different strategies for survival. One is to present a front of solidarity to the outside, resisting divide-and-conquer manoeuvres from institutions and the status quo. The other is to maintain the sufferance and traditions of silence that non-white, non-anglo peoples have utilized to endure the racism they have faced in Canada. Hence the need exists to present a general overview of South Asian art, to present an image of a community to the outside, where the construction of that larger 'public' is still generally perceived (regressively, I believe) to be 'white.'

Chris Creighton-Kelly, in the catalogue introduction, writes that the exhibition 'does not represent itself as exhaustive.'

Such first shows from the 'marginalized' are invariably surveys, and are seldom coherent or consistent. They are held together by the sheer will to work together in order to refute their marginality. They constitute a coming-of-age, demanding mainstream exposure because it is their right and should be their privilege as well.

Meanwhile, the diversity and accessibility of traditions, religions, and ethnicities are concomitantly displaying to the communities within. This reference, again, to the inside and outside is not to set up a dichotomy, but to argue that they occupy separate states. Rather, these spaces overlap, and more so, they contain each other. The view of the outside is just as fabricated as the inside, and both are constructions of the other. And so the artists in to visit the tiger occupy these spaces simultaneously. They have experiences so unique that no comparison can be made. Together in this exhibition, their...
Paul Pahal

...My work over the past few years has concentrated on the colours and patterns of our culture. More recent work incorporates silk saris and other fabrics...The main influence in the manner of painting is abstract expression with definite focus on Hoffmann, Pollock and Kline...Utilizing my heritage and upbringing, my pieces should convey two points of view:...my South Asian background, (and) my Western influences.

Ranjan Sen

Attraction to nature is obvious to my recent works. I want my paintings to be subtle, subliminal reminders to the viewer of how fragile and precarious the balance in nature is. These works are a witness and a reminder so that we don't spoil it all but at the same time I want the viewer to enjoy and revel in the magic of movement, colour and aroma and wonder how and where one wants to fit in the scheme of things.

Shamina Senaratne

This piece grew out of the realization that I am only able to direct my life with ease and grace when I recognize who I am and where I come from. What cultures do I come from? What countries have I come from? What religions have influenced me the most? What perspectives flow from this collage and patchwork that makes up my background? What perspectives flow from my lands, seas and resources?...The patches, motifs and fabrics that make up this work come from Canada, Sri Lanka, Kenya, India, Pakistan and England. Inspiration for the designs came from Canadian heritage quilts, the work in Lahore Fort and Sri Lankan temple border patterns.

Waheeda Tejani-Byron

During one particular art education course we were asked to draw a house we once lived in. This assignment triggered a series of drawings, paintings and prints based on my memories of Africa. I was able to recall...happy childhood memories without reference to the political conditions. My Indian cultural heritage was still absent in my work. Then after my trip to India in 1985, this aspect of my identity started to manifest itself in my art, either through memories of my visit or imaginative interpretations of its folklore.

...as gender-specific shows in the Sixties and Seventies with women's art indicated feminism's rising influence, so too does (to visit the tiger) harken to a stage of development in which issues of representation, access and aesthetic sensibility dominate.
be it therefore resolved...

The Writers’ Union of Canada and cultural appropriation

Whereas we resolutely affirm the freedom of imagination and the freedom of expression of all writers everywhere;

But whereas cultural misappropriation exists as a form of oppression;

And whereas cultural misappropriation is understood to be taken—from a culture that is not one’s own—intellectual property, cultural expressions and artifacts, history and ways of knowledge, and profiting at the expense of people of that culture;

And whereas cultural misappropriation is among the factors which have contributed to the exploitation and misrepresentation of cultures and the silencing of their peoples;

But whereas there has always existed among peoples an interchange and sharing of ideas and cultural forms, usually referred to as “influence” and “teaching”;

And whereas human rights work depends, globally, on people giving accounts, fictional or journalistic, from countries not their own, and none of the above shall be construed as an interference with that process;

And whereas censorship is a growing world-wide problem for writers, and none of the above shall be construed as an endorsement of censorship, or as an attempt to imprison writers in cultural ghettos, nor to encourage racial or ethnic segregation;

Be it therefore resolved that The Writers’ Union of Canada recognizes and affirms the responsibility and accountability that attend the freedom of imagination and freedom of expression.

June 6, 1992 at the Writers’ Union AGM, Toronto, Ontario
issue, ethnicity in content based on language), reviewing standards, and sexism. Important needs to be addressed were communication, education, funding, marketing and distribution, publishing sources, reception, support groups, and technology.

Between the 21st and 24th of this May, 1992 in Orillia, Ontario, the committee held what it called the Planning Session, which was based on a First Nations' consensual problem-solving model. About sixty-five writers, editors, and some small publishers attended. White writers were not included in order to allow concerned visible minority writers to speak frankly and openly about their pent-up frustration with the white mainstream publishing industry. "This was most successful," Rode says. "People felt comfortable expressing themselves."

Highlights of the Planning Session included recommendations that small presses be supported (since these presses publish the vast majority of visible minority writers); that the Racial Minority Writers Committee be disbanded to be replaced by a steering committee comprised of ten members; that the process be continued; that a newsletter be started (Ashok Mathur and Fred Wah volunteered to produce this for one year); that equality in funding be fostered by having more visible minority writers on jury panels; and, finally, that a motion be put forward to the Writers' Union on cultural appropriation. The latter was done June 6, 1992 at the Writers' Union AGM in Toronto and was passed—a historic, emotional event, according to Rode.

The wording of the resolution put forward at the Writers' Union AGM was altered under considerable duress. "Lenore and I were fine tuning the wording of the resolution at the breakfast table." States Rode, "When Union members Margaret Atwood, Michael Gilbert and Candice Savage came along. We started collectively working on the resolution, discussing it word by word, making sure the modified version would not go against the spirit of the original resolution passed by the minority writers at Geneva Park. It was past noon before we had a resolution which we thought would be acceptable to both minority and white writers."

The most notable addition was on human rights work. This particular issue is close to Rode's heart: Rode, whose writer friends in the Punjab have been murdered because of what they wrote or said, was persuaded by Atwood's argument. "I myself," Rode says, "could become a target if I condemn human rights abuse in Punjab. It became clear to me that if something happened to me or a friend of mine and a white colleague went to India to write about it, I would not consider this an act of appropriation." When the final resolution was presented, many white writers who had prepared speeches in argument against the resolution, withdrew their objections.

In short, says Rode, "We cannot limit a writer's imagination. However, writers must use their imaginations responsibly."

How will the motion and work of the Steering Committee change things for visible minority writers? "The motion and the recommendations of the Steering Committee of the Racial Minority Writers Network," he says, "will change attitudes and effect the current mainstream stereotypes. Visible minority writers are becoming more aware and confident and I believe this will reduce ghettoization and entrench the emerging confidence. Canadian writing will become more colourful—not coloured."

Sanjay Khanna is a Vancouver-based writer who just completed his MFA degree in Creative Writing.
writing with an accent

how to decentre the imperial "I"
— possibly with a "P" for politics...

by Kirsten Emiko McAllister

English with a capital "E" is an imperial language, an infrastructure of invasion and domination. As Roy Miki says, it is the language of government, power, law, fear and intimidation. Those of us who are not narrated by the imperial "I", not centred in the white, malevolent, homophobic, bourgeois assumptions of the Anglosaxon world, live ambivalently in some sort of Eng-lush. I wouldn't say we're swooning lushes, blissfully intoxicated, but rather incoherently drunk, slurring sharp cornered words, tripping over packed up participles—all that verbage, with so many tenses. A tense tongue is needed: at-tention. Elsewise, as Fred Wah says, words like the 'soup' slip to 'sloup', and we fall from our momentary flight in the language of the Law and Nation into humiliating silliness. But do we really want to tense our tongues, attempt to situate ourselves in what Betsy Warland calls, "the land of angles": Angleterre, the land-usage of terror?

Perhaps the strategy should not be to tense the tongue but to build the ambivalences, slippages, to inhabit English with transgressive activities, to 'fake it' as a Fred Wah, to 'perform' from a position of interlanguage as Jam Ismail demonstrated at *Inglish: Writing with an Accent*. *Inglish* was a series of readings and talk sessions that took place at the Western Front in Vancouver, November 20 – 21, 1992 organized by Roy Miki. It was to be a meeting ground for "immigrant and Canadian-born writers from diverse ethnic and racial backgrounds" to speak about issues that concerned them as "writers who have experienced denial, discrimination, and marginalization within Canadian society...and [who] have grown up with a troubled and problematic relationship to the English language..."

Many of the writers directly addressed this relationship. Aruna Srivastava and Betsy Warland presented the inability of English as an academic discourse/discipline and as god's word/truth to address what Julia Watson calls the "unspeakables": the assumed whiteness and heterosexuality in our language with its implicit racism and child abuse. In particular, Aruna Srivastava presented how the English as a discipline narrates her on the one hand, as a professor in a position of neutrality and decorum within the academic institution; and on the other, how it painfully silences and isolates her as a South Asian woman and as someone with unbearable past experiences. Ayanna Black and Marie Annharte Baker spoke from culturally and historically grounded communities struggling against political violence. Pointedly, as well as with wit, they explained how this positioned them against what Baker calls Canada's "settler lit": alias "apartheid lit/a part/a part hate literature". But both writers also made it clear that they were not just stuck in a position of defence. As members of their particular communities, they also participate in the continual development of their people's languages and literary forms. Likewise, Ashok Mathur and Jam Ismail discussed their innovative approaches to writing and publishing in terms of generating new forms that slide over the frames locking English as logic, as located in the book.

This seemed like a promising day, but somehow it dissipated into a strange silence. While it was apparent that many discussions were many, despite the fact that they spoke with weight and complexity. Was this because we didn't know how to address the "unspeakables" they presented? Perhaps it was the difficulty of speaking out when the gathering's configuration of power was not explicit—or perhaps too explicit. Was it because the poetic word was too mesmerizing?
"Our difficulty in realizing the complexities, problems, and... 'elegances' presented by the writers was due to our inability as a group to accept the brute fact of power differentials: the mean retching side of reality."

Or had the stranglehold of academia, the one that Aruna Srivastava named, somehow managed to creep into the Western Front?

Informal discussions during and after the conference seemed, indeed, to point to the underlying layer/layer of academia as the problem. Robert Kroetsch, Aritha van Herk and Smaro Kamboureli, each of them established academics, seemed oblivious to the particular way in which English narrated them within the dominating discourses. For example, Kroetsch constructed his autobiography around a literary investigation/pursuit of a woman, apparently a "brilliant" writer, who, he explains to us, mysteriously disappears... after which he enters her home and continues to search through/pillage her private writings. Was he aware of the latent misogyny/ voyeurism in operation? Aritha van Herk and Smaro Kamboureli dominated the open discussion, struggling to come to terms with the fact that some of us refused to accept the underlying implications of their statements: that the oppression of ethnics is parallel to the systematic violence imposed by racism, homophobia, genocide and sexual abuse in Canada. It was an unpleasant affirmation of Aruna Srivastava's struggle within and against the capital "E" of English.

Inglish offered a much needed forum to discuss the various anti-hegemonic writing strategies being developed by innovative writers along our cultural front. Our difficulty in realizing the complexities, problems, and to borrow Jamil's terminology, the "elegances" presented by the writers, was due to our inability as a group to accept the brute fact of power differentials: the mean, retching side of reality. Unless we recognize that this work is more than an aesthetic movement, that it is a political project, our discussions will continue to dissipate into silence. No doubt it is clear that the "E" of English is quite firmly enthroned — but if we try to, as Roy Miki said, keep "ing-ing" maybe we can make it totter, then tip then, do you think—fall? The "I" of Inglish for me is about a critical self-reflective politics of Empowerment with a capital "E". It is about reducing and decentralizing the "I" of institution to small mobile and multiple i's located in histories, economies, self-determinations... about finding ways to break up and build across.

Acknowledging myself as a guest writer, I want to thank Rungh for asking me to contribute to this edition.

Thanks to Shafraz Jetha and for critical feedback.

Appreciation and acknowledgement of discussions with Shafraz Jetha, Scott McFarlane, Charmaine Perkins, Ameen Merchant, Wendy Plain, Roy Miki and Jerry Zaslove.

Kirsten Emiko McAllister is a Vancouver writer.

2. ibid
Video in review

**A Sari Tale**
Directed by Premika Ratnam
Written by Premika Ratnam
TVOntario Productions, 1991

**Hair Scare**
Directed by Premika Ratnam
Written by Ali Kazimi
TVOntario Productions, 1991

With 'voice' and 'cultural appropriation' the most controversial topics in the arts scene these days, filmmakers Premika Ratnam and Ali Kazimi have made two brief, dramatic videos for TVOntario's timely *Many Voices* series. Both videos beat the educational-drama trap of neat endings, goofy plots, and what I call the sermon effect, in which the targeted audience solemnly remembers the film's politically-correct message one moment—and casually forgets it the next.

The 'voices' in *Many Voices* are the voices of visible minority youth living and being schooled in today's 'multi-cultural' urban Canada, and the films, each approximately 14 minutes long, tell two different stories from two contrasting and very important perspectives.

**A Sari Tale** is the story of a twelve-year-old Hindu girl whose white elementary school teacher wants her to wear a sari to a costume party because women in the girl's culture "dress that way, don't they?" **Hair Scare** is about a Sikh boy who endures racism in the schools and at a local swimming pool.

Gita, the protagonist of **A Sari Tale**, doesn't like it when her friends call her 'Indian' or when people stare at her sari-clad mother in shopping malls. She's embarrassed about some aspects of her background and resents her teacher's assumption that her Indian roots necessarily make her feel comfortable wearing a sari to school. The solution? Her parents ingeniously drop hints that she might learn about festivals of light—including diwali—that occur all over the world when "it begins to become dark earlier." Gita persuades her teacher to allow her to make a presentation to class about these festivals. While this temporarily solves Gita's problem, the film's closing scene, in which Gita celebrates diwali with her parents, is fraught with inner conflict. Will the students make fun of her presentation? Will they understand that she's a Canadian and a Hindu?

**Hair Scare**'s protagonist, Amar Bhalla, switches schools. As in his former school, he's taunted about his patka (the partial turban worn by Sikh boys), has to deal with bullies, and try to make friends. The central dramatic injustice occurs when he's excluded from a swimming pool by an ignorant swimming instructor, who believes Amar's patka is a health risk. Through his own sense of justice and his father's help, he regains admittance to the pool and swims with a bathing cap over his patka. He also receives an official apology from the pool's director (and an unofficial one from the aforementioned instructor). Problem: winter's coming soon, Amar's patka's getting soaked from swimming, and he's embarrassed about revealing to everyone the scary stuff we know is underneath the patka. What will he do as it gets colder? Will he endure a winter of head colds? Will he dry his head after each swim and be able to cope with the bullying and the shame?

There are fascinating sequences in both films. In **A Sari Tale**, we see a mother empathizing with her daughter's embarrassment with Indian culture—and, yet, feeling palpable, profound sadness about it when her daughter is out of view. In **Hair Scare**, the nagging question "What's underneath the turban, eh?" is answered. We see Amar, after he's had a shower, combing his long hair, gathering it and tying it with string; we see his father help him with the cloth that is tied around the bunched hair; we see the father and son discuss their common experience with turbans and being teased. Both videos have aired repeatedly on TVOntario and on the Knowledge Network in British Columbia. Deservedly so: they tackle the wide ranging issues of racism sensitively, facing head-on the stereotypes that all Sikhs are terrorists and that all Indian parents are insensitive to their Canadian children's needs. What is more, they portray youth issues in a way that the widest possible audience of children and parents can relate to. And, best of all, the avoidance of neat endings: the filmmakers acknowledge that, by definition, dilemmas never afford an easy way out.

Sanjay Khanna is a Vancouver-based writer who just completed his MFA in creative writing.
Asian artists working in the west and will be curated by Ian Iqbal Rashid. A series of panel discussions, Exhibition/screening/writing series Racy Sexy

We are seeking submissions for a performance/exhibition/screening/writing series dealing with inter-cultural conditions for the construction of sexuality in contemporary Canadian society. These commissioned or curated pieces will deal with issues of sexuality, sexual orientation and sexual practices in the context of race, culture and socialization. We are also inviting artists, organizations and individuals to be a part of a new data base of cultural workers and producers. We are the newly formed Chinese Canadian Contemporary Projects Committee. If you are interested, send information to

Centre for Developing-Area Studies, McGill University
Special issue of LABOUR, Capital & Society/TRAVAL, Capital & Société, Fall 1993 “Contemporary Perspectives of Women and Work in South Asia.” We are looking for Research articles • Research reports • Interviews • Review essays • Book/film/video reviews • Book notes • Select biography • Deadline: February 15, 1993 Contact for guidelines Dolores Chew Centre for Developing-Area Studies McGill University, 3715 Peel Street Montréal, PQ H3A 1X1

Call for Photographers
EN FOCO, INC. encourages culturally diverse photographers to submit slides to our Slide Registry. We are interested in photographers who have a high quality body of work to present. Our registry is an ongoing library open to critics, curators, collectors and all who are involved in exhibitions and publications. We have been supporting such artists for over 18 years and wish to continue our efforts to include more Native, Asian, Latin and African-Americans. We would like to extend this invitation to culturally diverse photographers. Please call or write for more information.

Miriam Romais, Program Associate EN FOCO INC.
A Community Visual Arts Agency 32 East Kingsbridge Road Bronx, NY 10468 212 584.7718

Invisible Colours Video Project
We are looking for young women of mixed parentage, ages 14 to 19, grades 9 to 12 to participate in a video making project entitled Seeing Ourselves and Being Seen by Others. Please submit written proposals no later than January 31, 1993 to

Racy Sexy
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2814 Trinity Street
Vancouver, BC V6E 4L2
604 682.1116

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Invisible Colours
115 - 119 West Pender Street
Vancouver, BC V6E 4L2
604 682.1116

Upcoming Events
New Directions in Indian Dance—Assimilation of Tradition, Innovation and Cultural Transplantation
February 10 – 13, 1993 at the Harbourfront and Premier Dance Theatre, Toronto
February 14 – 15, 1993 at the Betsy Oliphant Theatre, Toronto

Presented by Kananidhi Fine Arts of Canada, this international dance festival and conference provides and opportunity not to be missed! For the first time in Canada, Indian dance is being represented in all its range at an international level in the form of Public Performances, Workshops, Lecture/Demonstrations, Scholarly Presentations, Panel Discussions, Exhibition and Videos. This is the environment in which the dancers, choreographers, teachers, dance scholars, critics and presenters of South Asian dance traditions as well as other traditions such as Ballet, Modern Dance, Spanish, Chinese, African etc. will come together to share common perceptions, issues, concerns and insights born out of working in new and possible converging directions. For more information please contact Nimmi Nagothu, Administrator 321 Sheppard Avenue East Toronto ON M2N 3B2 416 229.0369/ fax 416 250.1871

SAWAN is raising funds for the creation of a South Asian Women’s centre in Vancouver and welcomes new members. Please call Sunera at 604 872.9420 or Yasmin at 604 669.6241 for more information.

Erratum
Vol 1, No 3; p31 Premika Ratnam was the President of the Independent Film & Video Alliance at the time of About Face About Frame. p32 Photo credit in About Face About Frame belongs to Shirley Claydon.
Rungh is pleased to support the Women in View Festival. Congratulations on your 5th anniversary.

Fifth Annual
Women in View
Festival

January 22 - 31, 1993

Firehall Arts Centre, Station Street Arts Centre, Vancouver East Cultural Centre

- Theatre • Dance
- Music • Cabaret
- Workshops • Comedy
- Storytelling • Readings
- Symposium

Re-Presenting Woman: New Constructions of Female Gender
Saturday, January 23
SFU Harbour Centre, Joseph & Rosalie Segal Conference Centre
515 W. Hastings St.
10:00 am - 5:30 pm,
Admission $15.00

A co-presentation of Women in View and SFU School for the Contemporary Arts, Continuing Studies at Harbour Centre

View for tickets and information
Cover Art  Amata, 1992
Woodcut by Kauser Nigita